

Edyta Lorek-Jezińska

Nicolaus Copernicus University

### **Gender/Genre Disruption in Bryony Lavery's *Her Aching Heart***

**Abstract:** The objective of the present paper is to examine the two contrastive yet interconnected processes activated in parody: conservative and revolutionary. The conservative drive is associated with the continuation and reinforcement of the parodied original while the revolutionary drive refers to the transgressive and critical potential of the parodic text, often realised in mockery, satire or deconstruction. *Her Aching Heart* by Bryony Lavery, a parody of a Gothic romance, displays both of these tendencies, which in their interplay and opposition lead to the point of the cultural disruption in an attempt at lesbian representation.

The parody of the Gothic historical romance in *Her Aching Heart* is performed through exaggeration, replacement and experiment in gender roles distribution. With the Gothic romance's heavy dependence on clear gender oppositions, Lavery's exploration of the same-sex casting, multiple role-playing, and cross-dressing necessarily and subversively redefines the genre's formula, leading to the point of its disintegration. In this respect, the play can be classified as self-parodic and self-referential. Its interest lies in questioning the possibility of representation of alternative forms of love within as well as without the convention of romance, and thus indirectly searching for the possibility of formulating alternative lesbian dramaturgy.

Bryony Lavery's *Her Aching Heart* (1990) was described by Lizbeth Goodman as a lesbian play addressed to both heterosexual and homosexual audiences, offering both entertainment and political commitment, experimenting with traditional theatre and literary forms, and presenting serious themes "lightly through comedy" (143). *Her Aching Heart* is thus a non-separatist play (Goodman 121) whose main focus is parody and theatricality explored through cross-dressing and role transformation. The level of lesbian commitment in the play can be best represented by Lavery's playful admission in the introduction to the published text that having "discovered a mutual addiction to romantic fiction" with the director of the performance, they "decided, courageously, to Come Out" (xii). The playful use of the expression of coming out in relation to popular romance problematises its cultural status as both popular fiction for women and the subject for academic research, which still, in the early 1990s, remained, according to Kim Clancy, questionable (131). In relation to lesbian identity the expression of coming out highlights the significant confrontation between the traditionally heterosexual form of the romance parodied by Lavery and the same sex relationship which is central to the play.

Despite its common connotations with mockery and satire, parody both transgresses and sustains its referent. Its subversive liminal potential of breaking or transcending the norm or convention paradoxically celebrates and perpetuates the parodied original. As Linda Hutcheon asserts: “[P]arody is fundamentally double and divided; its ambivalence stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression” (26). Furthermore, Hutcheon stresses parody’s reliance on the acknowledgment of the rules prior to their transformation in parody:

[P]arody posits, as a prerequisite to its very existence, a certain aesthetic institutionalisation which entails the acknowledgement of recognisable, stable forms and conventions. These function as norms or as rules which can – and therefore, of course, shall – be broken. (75)

But this transgression, like the liminal stage of rituals, is a temporary and, in fact, limited suspension of the rules in this particular text, leaving the general idea of the parodied genre or text untouched. As Hutcheon further argues:

The parodic text is granted a special licence to transgress the limits of convention, but, as in the carnival, it can do so only temporarily and only within the controlled confines authorized by the text parodied – that is, quite simply, within the confines dictated by ‘recognizability.’ (75)

In order for the target of parody to remain recognisable, particularly if it is concerned with a genre rather than an individual text, the formula of the genre, which in some cases, like in melodrama or popular romance, is quite rigid, has to be preserved.

### 1. The Conservative Drive – Continuity

Although the parody of the romantic melodrama with Gothic elements constitutes the most ostentatious layer of *Her Aching Heart*, the play itself has a two-level structure: that of a contemporary relationship between two lesbian characters presented through telephone conversations and that of the historical romantic melodrama depicting the relationship between the two characters from opposite social backgrounds bearing the same names as the characters in the play proper. Both discuss relationships in the pre-engagement period, the one on which popular romances tend to focus. Because of multiple role-playing the two levels constantly interweave with the visual and dramatic domination of the play-within-the-play. The embedded drama can be additionally split into narrative passages and theatrical scenes, evoking a mixture of genres and modes: melodramatic, romantic and Gothic. It is at this level that Lavery’s play

functions as a parody and is dominated by the comic and tragicomic mood. The play proper represents a rather realistic and minimalist plot preserving some features of the romance, ending happily in a declaration of love between two women. It is very reticent and hesitant in building an engaging romantic plot. Doubt and uncertainty felt throughout the play proper are faintly exteriorised. However, when received as it is when watched or read, entangled with the plot and peripeteia of the play-within-the-play, it represents a similar latent structure to the popular romantic genre, the difference being that the conflict, uncertainty and intensity of the pre-engagement period are relegated to the embedded drama while the happy ending occurs only in the play proper.

As a parody of a Gothic romance and melodrama, *Her Aching Heart* is both a critical deconstruction of the genre as well as its continuation. Despite its transgression of the rules of the parodied genre, *Her Aching Heart* rewards the basic expectations of the Gothic romance and melodrama to deal with romantic love. The essential formula of the romance presented by Ann Barr Snitow in her study of "Mass Market Romance" – that "all tension and problems arise from the fact that the Harlequin world is inhabited by two species incapable of communicating with each other, male and female" (134) – seems to underlie the whole play, albeit in its same gender realisation. The genre formula also demands for the story of endless conflicts to end in a marriage (Snitow 136). *Her Aching Heart* offers a happy ending of an established relationship; its fulfilment, however, occurs on the level of the play proper, leaving the embedded melodrama unresolved and unfinished both to the contemporary characters and in relation to the genre formula.

The parody of the Gothic historical romance in *Her Aching Heart* is performed through exaggeration and replacement. This is done primarily in the field of gender roles distribution. While the Gothic romantic melodrama is a genre heavily dependent on gender opposition and clear gender distinction, Lavery's play employs the same sex casting, multiple role-playing and cross-dressing. These gender transgressions subvert both the order of the genre as a literary category as well as character definition based on the binary oppositions of male/female and masculine/feminine. However, the degree of this redefinition is restricted by the convention in which even a change of gender cannot discard the polarity of masculine and feminine forces represented by a villain and a maiden. The two female characters of Lady Harriet Helstone and Molly Penhallow are polarised around the melodramatic figures of the villain and a pure country girl. The former is introduced as "rich and lovely, ardent and wilful, the impetuous Lady Harriet Helstone" (Lavery 89) while the latter as "simple, untried eighteen-year-old village maiden" (93). Like in a conventional melodrama, the characters are divided into good and evil without explaining the origin of this polarisation: "Melodrama's mode is Manichaeism, the conflict and

confrontation of characters offering polarised moral values, of good and evil, light and darkness” (Docker 252).

Lady Harriet’s every action ends in some kind of disaster or suffering as she accidentally kills a fox and a deer loved by Molly, and murders two men in a fight, one to escape the man’s advances and the other to gain a disguise in order to flee from the country. Molly, on the other hand, loves all the creatures and has a strange ability to breathe life into them. However, Lavery plays here with the convention making Harriet as much a victim of circumstance as the other characters are while giving Molly a power to cause harm by magic manipulations with a corn doll. A combination of destructive and healing powers creates a number of conflicting comic scenes in which both animals and humans die to be revived by a different character, often to lose their lives in another accident. The plot thus develops around constant conflicts and sudden changes of fortune and mood typical of classic melodrama, which, as John Docker argues, “exteriorises conflict. It makes visible psychic structures at work in relationships and situations. Characters represent extremes and they undergo extremes, passing through ‘peripaties’, changes of fortune, from heights to depths or the reverse, almost simultaneously” (252). This might be illustrated by the numerous descriptions of the characters’ states of mind: “. . . Molly’s mind was a turmoil of emotions . . . of heartbreak for the fox, of yearning for the baby roe-deer . . . but most of all . . . there was burning hatred for Lady Harriet Helstone . . .” (Lavery 115). Poetic affection on one page: “Your kiss lights up the sky with fiery rays. It fills my ears with birdsong” (130), turns into “a furious rage” on the other: “You stupid bloody PEASANT!!! Why couldn’t you keep your villagey snout out of the business of your high-born betters?” (132).

Such secondary but obligatory elements as travel and the ritual of dressing (Snitow 135) are also present in Lavery’s parody, yet either exaggerated or employed for the sake of irony and satire. The complicated rituals of dressing and toilet are an occasion for confronting the social position of the upper and lower classes and its relation to romance. When Lady Harriet, disturbed by the turmoil of emotions experienced after seeing Molly, asks her servant girl to tell her about love, the latter admits that “we servants are not gentle enough for love” (104) because they have to attend to their lady all day and, apart from that, give their sexual services to all the male residents in Helstone Hall, including the landlord. Lady Harriet’s comment: “Ah Betsy . . . it is so much harder for we gentry” (104), which touches upon social satire, ironically exposes the class context for the romance: in order to experience a real emotional hardship one has to be in a relatively comfortable economic and power position (cf. Snitow 138).

The strong melodramatic structure and character construction found in *Her Aching Heart* are disturbed by several shifts, repetitions and modifications. Following the original pattern found, for example, in the melodrama of *Maria*

*Marten* (Shackleton 146), Lavery's play should present a story of Lord Rothermere's seduction and abuse of a pure and simple country girl (Molly) who naively prefers the rich lord to her simple country lover (Joshua), and who then is abandoned to make way for Rothermere's marriage with a rich and well-born lady (Lady Harriet) to save Rothermere from bankruptcy. In a lesbian and substantially feminist revision of this pattern, Lord Rothermere's role partly overlaps with Lady Harriet's function. Lady Harriet appropriates the role of the villain taking over its power and disturbing clear gender distinctions. At the same time, she resists the role of a victim of Rothermere's machinations defending herself in a duel in which, to a certain extent, she also performs a melodramatic function of Rothermere's competitor, the function which is absent in the play. Similarly, Molly's part resists the pattern of a harmed country girl because of her power and education which parody the original weakness and naivety of melodramatic characters. She is not even brought into direct relationship with Rothermere (apart from a narrated event of saving his life) because his role is taken over by Harriet. Thus the pattern of the parodied original is clearly visible beneath the revised text creating tensions, humour and absurdity, and questioning the validity of the genre formula for lesbian representation.

## 2. The Revolutionary Drive: Transgression

The structure of conflict that controls melodrama and is visible, albeit as a parody, in *Her Aching Heart* is redefined through multiple role-casting and cross-gendered acting. On the one hand, multiple roles attributed to one character polarise the play's structure even more effectively in oppositions organised around each performer. On the other hand, as some of the conflicts seem comic rather than serious because of cross-dressing, the melodramatic structure is presented with a critical Brechtian distance (Brecht 101). This is reinforced by the stage directions which seem to be designed to be read aloud. The introduction of each new character enacted by the same performer is preceded by a similar comment of the following kind: "*Although in these penurious times it may seem that **Granny** looks not unlike **Lady Harriet**, she is in fact a completely different character, being a cheery, nut-cheeked, wise old villager who, unlike her granddaughter, speaks in simple peasant vernacular*" (101) or "***Lord Rothermere** enters with many starched neckerchiefs. He is trying to tie one round his neck. Although in these penurious times he may bear a passing resemblance to **Molly** in a curly black wig he is a completely different person*" (119).

Despite comic effects of multiple role-playing and cross-dressing, the speed with which the performers often have to switch roles creates the impression of instability of identity, multiplicity of possibility, but also inability to match the changing requirements of role transformation. For the first half of the performance, the actresses constantly change costumes to enact different fictional characters while in the second part, as the same characters, they primarily disguise as somebody else because of the changing circumstances and complications of the plot. The theatre's potential to experiment with identities, including gender, here also points to the incapacity to fit into the prescribed roles. In this respect, the melodrama formula imposed on character construction generates a sense of misfit and discrepancy. This comic and dramatic play with identities is problematised in one of the songs, which in a Brechtian style, interrupts the performance:

On the seventh day God said  
 'Well, that's everything  
 Except I haven't had a laugh all week'  
 And he started chuckling . . .  
 'I'll create sex,' he said  
 'And I'll create love'

'And I'll stick them both together  
 And watch from above . . .'  
 It's a suit that won't fit  
 It's a hat that's too small  
 It's a pair of big baggy pants  
 It's the world's funniest joke. (133–34)

The relationship between sexual identity, gender and costume can be further connected with the tendency of lesbian writing described by Bonnie Zimmerman to be fascinated with costuming "because dress is an external manifestation of gender roles lesbians often reject" (91). Theatrical cross-dressing in this context exposes the flexibility of identities, the multiple possibilities and liminal potential – "that slippery sense of a mutable self" (Ferris 9) – in which lesbian identity might be defined.

Lavery's transgressive replacement of genders, reshuffling of roles and reversal of conventions of love representation, destroys the possibility of the emergence of heterosexual romance. It signals – but also questions – another possibility: the possibility of representation of a lesbian love story. When considered independently, the two levels of the play seem to refrain from offering the expected completion or satisfaction: the level of the historical romance offers no formulaic resolution while the play proper offers no sense of conflict to be resolved. When put together, the two plots are simultaneously

radical and conservative, disturbing the pattern but finally completing it. Major effects arise from the interaction between the two levels of the play.

What strikes the reader/viewer in the confrontation between the two plots is a manifest inarticulacy of the dialogue in the play proper contrasted with the excessive expressiveness of the embedded scenes, as in the following example:

#### Contemporary

HARRIET. Oh yes, hello, how are you?  
 MOLLY. Oh . . . you know . . .  
 HARRIET. Oh yes.  
 MOLLY. So. What you up to?  
 HARRIET. Oh me. Well . . . I'm *reading*.  
 MOLLY. Oh no! Me too! (115)

#### Historical romance

HARRIET. Listen to me peasant!!! I will not have it! Will not have this hate for me! [. . .]  
 I am the wilful, spoilt, impetuous Lady Harriet Helstone of Helstone Hall and I always . . .  
*always* Get Whatso'er I Want!!!  
 MOLLY. And mark this . . . Lady Harriet Helstone . . . [. . .] I am Molly Penhallow of Penhallow Hollows . . . and I never . . .  
*never* . . . Give In To Anyone!!! Here . . . [. . .]  
 Now go! (113)

The crisis of communication pervades the whole play: on the level of melodrama because of constant shifts in mood, repetitive misunderstandings and unhappy coincidences and on the level of the play proper because of social constraints on the expression of same sex affection, at some point reinforced by coincidence:

MOLLY. Hello?  
 HARRIET. Is that you?  
 MOLLY. Hello . . . I can hardly hear you. . . [. . .]  
 HARRIET. . . . I miss you.  
 MOLLY. What? The line's crackling . . .  
 HARRIET. I miss you!!!  
 MOLLY. I miss you too!  
 HARRIET. I love you!  
 MOLLY. What? You are very faint!  
 HARRIET. I love you!  
 MOLLY. I can't hear you [. . .]. (135–36)

However, the two fictional levels split towards the end of the play: while the melodramatic one ends unhappily “and they never saw each other again. The End” (140), the contemporary story culminates in a simple declaration of love. Although here one might argue that instead of the direct declaration, the character repeats what she wanted to say in their telephone conversation. In addition, the final scene seems to take over from the embedded melodrama its sentimentality as a final reference to “their aching hearts” in a parody of a love song.

The failure of the embedded melodramatic romance to end happily, which is also a failure of the romantic structure to deal with a lesbian theme, partly results from the rejection of the active/passive dichotomy defining the role of male and female characters in the genre. Although polarised in their parodied natures, Lavery's characters cannot be divided into submissive and masterful, nor can the structure be defined as coercive and aiming at subordination of women. The same-sex casting makes it impossible to consider the genre as an instance of patriarchal ideology (cf. Light 140–41), while the strength and resistance of the character representing the female part in the romance erases the traces of the original imbalance of gender and power relationships. Without this imbalance, the formulaic union of opposites, which originally was supposed to bridge contradictions, to change brutality of men into romance, to reward the conventional and passive behaviour of women, to finish the war between the sexes "in truce" (Snitow 139), cannot succeed or even come into existence. While in patriarchal culture romance might be seen as "one socially acceptable moment of transcendence" (Snitow 139) for (heterosexual) women, it is difficult to find the equivalent possibility for a homosexual reader unless one takes into consideration the observation made by Janice Radway that "in ideal romances the hero is constructed androgynously" (72), combining masculine power and feminine tenderness and nurturance. In this sense, as Radway further argues, a romance problematises both the possibility and inability of satisfying women's desires in heterosexuality (72). However, the structure of the embedded romance cannot offer this androgynous possibility and satisfaction of the need for nurturance, as the plot fails to reach the point of discarding the fury, anger and stubbornness to reveal affection underneath. The lack of completion of the historical romantic plot, in fact, exposes one of the thematic traditions of lesbian literature, "that of unrequited longing of almost cosmic totality because the love object is denied not by circumstance or chance, but by necessity" (Zimmerman 91). It is upon this tradition that the contemporary plot is constructed, drawing from it for conflict, interest, intensity and humour. The play's major interest seems to lie in the deconstructive and self-referential comment on the possibilities of expressing a lesbian theme, a possibility of disrupting the heterosexual romantic representation.

### 3. The Question of Disruption

According to Jill Dolan, the only possibility for subversion and transgression in representation of homosexuality appears in pornography – in the visual and shocking representation of sexuality instead of the exploration of identity. All the other representations yield to dominant ideologies either



supporting the latent heterosexual norm or falling into invisibility. Representations of homosexual life-styles and identities are seen as “neutralizing assimilation into the dominant discourse on sexuality” (Dolan 264). Texts containing such representations are called assimilationist lesbian texts in which a mild disruption may occur in “‘lesbianizing’ the familiar” (265). If we follow this argument, we might consider the representation of sexuality and even lesbian identity in *Her Aching Heart* as highly assimilated into the heterosexual norm. There is only one moment that can be regarded as an on-stage representation of sexuality, or rather eroticism, which is conveyed through a convention of a dream:

*They lie there. They both have a disturbing dream, or so it seems. The disturbing dream makes them toss and murmur and throw themselves into each other's arms. [. . .] They lie there. They pull each other closer and closer. They begin to toss from one side to another. They swap places. (128)*

The suggestion of lesbian eroticism in the play is thus detached from the representation of the fictional reality (which, we have to remember, is the embedded fictional reality within the play proper). This triple distancing certainly takes away the subversive potential from the scene. In other places, the moments of declaration of affection are presented with a dose of irony and humour which diminish both sentimentality and any potential provocation. For instance, in a verbal combat at the beginning of the play when the two characters fight over a fox, suddenly both express their fascination for each other:

HARRIET. I will beat you until your rough holland gown is as thin as silk!  
 MOLLY. I will bite you until your magnificent riding habit hangs in tatters and rags! And so will the fox.  
 HARRIET. I will take you to my opulent bed and there on the fine satin sheets I will kiss your lips with such intention that I will kiss out your soul . . .  
 MOLLY. I will take you to my truckle bed and there on the simple cotton sheet I will touch your body with such intention that I will bring forth your soul . . .  
 HARRIET. What?  
 MOLLY. What?  
*Surely they both misheard.*  
 HARRIET. I misheard.  
 MOLLY. I misheard. (97)

The direct expression of lesbian fascination is filtered through comedy and withdrawn by being relegated to misunderstanding. This impossibility to communicate non-heterosexual desire contributes to the central theme and organising principle of the play: the failure of expression of lesbian love and identity and the deferral of communication visible in attributing transgressive expression to dreams, nightmares, accidents and ultimately to a different text and

convention being quoted in the play proper, highly reliant, as we have already seen, on the heterosexual polarised structure.

The underlying heterosexual norm visible in the distinct polarity in the construction of characters could be connected with the convention of a butch-femme relationship. The relative acceptance of the butch/femme opposition in cultural representations weakens its potential for representation of lesbian identity as different from heterosexual polarities. According to Dolan, enacting butch-femme relationship on the stage through costume and role-playing focuses on identities which reaffirm heterosexual dichotomies (267). At the same time, however, the characters in the play both express their desire for the other, thus rejecting the polarity between the butch and the femme, in which the former stands as a taboo of “the desire for the other woman” while the latter aims “her desirability at the butch” (Case 43). Similarly, as far as the notion of the gaze is concerned, the play presents both characters as having access to the subject position; as Lizbeth Goodman argues: “[I]n the context of performance, [Harriet and Molly] alternate taking subject and object positions in relation to the gaze” (122). This might be seen as an attempt to find a quality of the female gaze that is alternative to the male gaze power position. Such an attempt is exposed in the context of the play’s imbalance of the social and economic status of the two characters, in which it would be more than natural for Lady Harriet to take the dominant subject position in relation to Molly.

Jill Dolan’s argument that “homosexuality’s assertion of the same can hardly be accommodated in bourgeois realism, for example, which asserts moral and sexual bipolarity – right/wrong, good/bad, and male/female – and maintains heterosexual difference as its organizing principle” (267) seems to imply a need for a redefinition of lesbian theatre aesthetics. Referring to Dolan, Lizbeth Goodman suggests that in lesbian dramaturgy oppositional structures of conflict and difference, which form the essence of traditional theatre, are “not workable” (141). The proliferation of polarities in *Her Aching Heart* seems to maintain a typical oppositional structure characteristic of heterosexual drama. However, the minimalist plot of the contemporary story consisting of telephone conversations emphasises similarity, sameness, parallelism and connection. However, because of its relative lack of conflict, the play proper cannot function independently from the parodied heterosexual form of the embedded romance. In this sense, what Lavery’s play presents is not an alternative identity to the norm but rather, as Elaine Aston argues, “lesbian defined as an act of appropriation” (103). Yet, the appropriation of the romantic and melodramatic heterosexual structure can be perceived as a strategy deflecting the tendency to merge homosocial and homoerotic aspects in women-to-women relationships (cf. Castle 535; Sedgwick 508). The polarity of relationships in the melodramatic structure cannot be subsumed into the general notion of female bonding as a continuum embracing

all aspects of relationships between women. It is ostensibly a homoerotic bonding. Thus, in its problematisation of the possibility of finding a proper dramaturgy for expressing a lesbian love story, *Her Aching Heart* uses the critical aspect of parody to go beyond the comment on the genre and examine the cultural construction of gender identity and the suppression of representation of the same sex love.

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