

## ***Aunt Mary: The Dialectics of Desire***

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### **Abstract:**

This paper seeks to analyse the roles of the three transgendered characters of Pam Gems' play *Aunt Mary*. Sinfield and other western metropolitan theorists' 1990s discovery via Other (mainly Eastern) cultures that there are "radically different ways in which [gay] people can conceive their subjectivity and focus their desire" is an issue pre-figured by Pam Gems in *Aunt Mary* by nearly a decade. Written as far back as 1982, the drama anticipates much of the gay, transgender and transvestism theorizing of the 90s and the present day. Gems is on the pulse of cultural iconology by having written this piece so early and what is interesting is that the characters escape easy definitions and tidy categorizations. This is a performance of the identity of drag and queer framed by a play: the shifting and fluid space in which the identities of the players locate themselves is a study in the psychology of transgendering, transvestism, and transsexualism.

"[T]o take sex out of transvestism is like taking music out of opera" (H. Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*).

"It is not the reader's 'person' that is necessary to me, it is this site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire, of an *unpredictability* of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can still be a game" (Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*).

1 A dramatist as prolific and talented as Pam Gems ought not to need an introduction. Her plays have been celebrated feminist additions to English drama in the Long Twentieth Century.<sup>1</sup> In *Breaking the Bounds: British Feminist Dramatists Writing in the Mainstream since c. 1980* (Godiwala 2003), I introduced the work of Pam Gems. Unlike the other feminist dramatists who were the concern of my previous work, Gems is cannily on the pulse of the cultural moment and she proves it time and again in her work. It was once said of Marina Warner that she was able to spot cultural pre-occupations before they became part of the cultural zeitgeist. Gems' dramaturgy pre-figures many such cultural moments, now reified by prolific academic theorizing on the subject.

2 *Aunt Mary*, first produced in 1982, anticipates by more than a decade the prolific output of queer theorizing in the Anglophone world. The triad seems to be an appropriate answer to the destructive potential of the nuclear family as theorized by Deleuze in the 1970s: "Oedipus is the figurehead of imperialism, 'colonization pursued by other means, it is the interior colony, and we shall see that even at home ... it is our intimate colonial education.'

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<sup>1</sup> The Long Twentieth Century extends the twentieth century into the present day, continuing the influences of the late twentieth century in terms of ideas, style and form. See my book, *Breaking the Bounds: British Feminist Dramatists Writing in the Mainstream since c. 1980* for the multiple transgressions wrought by feminist dramatists on patriarchally inherited forms and styles.

[...] Oedipus is everywhere" (Deleuze xx).

3 Gems' white mythologies are *herstories* but also histories:

Metaphysics - the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the *white man* takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own *logos*, that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason. *Which does not go uncontested.* (Derrida 213)

Contesting the *logos* and *mythos* of male reason, Gems creates characters, both women and men who debunk the stereotypes of western culture. Significantly, she also challenges the domination of *white man* as she brings in the Other. Not only is Woman cast as the Other, Freud's dark continent of otherness, but Other cultures, eastern and western are brought into play with characters from "home." White man too is rendered in all the shades of his beingness: straight, gay, transgendered, bisexual.

4 To say that *Aunt Mary* is a play about three gay people would be misleading. The transgendered identities and triadic domestic arrangements of this 1982 drama challenge the notions of traditionally gendered space and the nuclear family. Pam Gems is on the pulse of the gender theorizing of the 90s well before it happened: she pre-empts the transgendered spaces of gay and queer theory in the early 80s when fledgling lesbian theory had not given way to queer and gay theorizing quite yet. Gender here is set against a heterogeneous social background to give us "Aunt" Mary, a middle-aged gay man, Muriel, a bisexual middle-aged woman and Cyst, an aging transvestite male, who star in this three pronged drama about love, sexual relationships and privacy. When Alison who works for a media mogul wants to take the eminently saleable lives of this threesome into the glare of the public eye of television, they refuse to give up the privacy of their provincial lives. Indeed, the subtitle of the play is *Scenes from Provincial Life*, making the metadramatic statement of performing exactly what Alison the media person wants: putting the three transgendered people into the frame of the stage and bringing into confrontation the difference from the normative in contemporary Britain. This is a performance of the identity of drag and queer framed by a play: the shifting and fluid space in which the identities of the players locate themselves is a study in the psychology of transgendering, transvestitism, and transsexualism, which perform versions of a variously gay identity space.

5 The play avoids the easy exclusions that the new identity positions place on people named gay, bisexual, lesbian, and transvestite/transsexual (TV/TSS) As Alan Sinfield theorizes, the notion of the subject as defined by these, albeit fairly new, cultural terms, is a constraint. He notes that these terms may prove a hindrance to activists and analysts rather than an aid (Sinfield 150). Although the term "transgender" is currently used to encompass

the subjective identities of all TVs and TSS, Jay Prosser explains that "transgender" was used initially to denote a stronger commitment to living as a woman than "transvestite" or "cross-dresser," and without the implications of sexuality in "transsexual" (Sinfield 163).

6 Cyst, Mary, and Muriel defy definitions of constraint through this play by occupying different positions within exclusivity and difference. Although certain behaviours sound conventional in the play such as cross-dressing (Cyst enters from within, wearing a half-made dress. Mary follows, tape measure round neck. Sc. iv), so-called "effeminate behaviour" in the literary space of their café and a manufactured masculinity (Mary with a cigar and in trousers) tempers gay behaviour to be socially acceptable in the triad of wo/men.

7 Alan Sinfield and other western metropolitan theorists' 1990s discovery via Other (mainly Eastern) cultures that there are "radically different ways in which [gay] people can conceive their subjectivity and focus their desire" (Sinfield 164) is an issue anticipated by Pam Gems in *Aunt Mary* by nearly a decade.

8 Transvestism (TV) and transsexualism (TSS) were traditionally diagnostic terms for categories of mental disorders (Docter viii and Chapter 2). More recently, in "self theory" where the self is a hypothetical construct, the concepts of identity, gender identity, and cross-gender identity are conceptualized by Richard F. Docter as "subsystems of the self." Docter et al hypothesize that the self has a capacity to "share control, and even [...] be 'overthrown' by subordinate units of the self" (vii). One approach to transvestism is the *intrapsychic/psychodynamic* model. According to R. F. Docter, the best of psychoanalytic models of transvestism "describe this as a disorder of the self stemming from major difficulties in early object relations. Women's clothing are said to be symbolic ties with the mother and to serve as transitional objects providing security and anxiety reduction." Docter opines that "this theory seems more in harmony with the developmental behaviour of a transvestite than the earlier 'phallic woman' model that drew mainly on castration anxiety and the oedipal complex as explanatory theses." The *developmental/learning* model "attempts to explain transvestism and transsexualism based on the principles of learning and the process of socialization. The idea is that these behaviours are acquired through classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and modeling and imitation, just as are so many other behaviours." Since the different models explaining TV and TSS conflict with each other, Docter devises four thematic constructs in order to view these behaviours conceptually. He seems to ignore the *biological* or medical model entirely and favours developmental psychology. The four constructs are: *sexual arousal* and sexual excitement at cross-dressing; the *pleasure* associated with cross-dressing in the sense of its mood-altering power; *sexual scripts* which

guide complex behaviour; and *cross-gender identity* which is switched on and off by the act of cross dressing (Docter 1-3).

9        There seem to be two main explanations for transvestism: one is that it is a means for achieving sexual pleasure and arousal; the second is that transvestism is part of a personality struggle stemming from trauma and conflict. Docter aims to go beyond these two theories to question "how identity and gender identity are formed, how arousal and pleasure are generated, how sexual scripts are learned and rehearsed, and how intense envy and fear of women may contribute to becoming a transvestite" (Docter 6).

10      It does seem that even contemporary analysts see transgendered behaviour as abnormal or problem behaviour though their terminology is couched in a more progressive and acceptable language of analysis. The formation of gender and sexual identity, the generation of pleasure and the playing out of sexual scripts are not peculiar to transgendered people, and these can be as differently and variously constructed and enacted as there are gender and sexual identities. In the play we see the three transgendered wo/men play out these various sexual scripts. The female impersonator in *Aunt Mary* is "Cyst." Her favourite impersonation is the character of Blanche DuBois, a favourite of the cross-dressing community, perhaps because in *A Streetcar Named Desire* she symbolises the dichotomy between inner and outer self, the core of self and the façade of self, lending the cross-dresser the "magic" of Blanche's outward coy femininity masking the "realism" of the impersonating male self. Here we see the self has a capacity to share control, and even be "overthrown" by subordinate units of the self: transsexualism.

I don't want realism. [...] I'll tell you what I want. Magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth. I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! - *Don't turn the light on!* (Blanche in Williams 204).

Cyst hates the real light of day as does Blanche, perfectly in character and also quite apt psychologically as she is an agoraphobe who never leaves the environs of the house and the garden. Cyst enjoys women's clothing which serves as a transitional object providing security and anxiety reduction. Cyst is the impersonating wench.

16      Barbin's memoirs were written as a study of what Michel Foucault saw as the essentialist position of the "*true sex*."

Do we *truly* need a *true sex*? With a persistence that borders on stubbornness, modern Western societies have answered in the affirmative. They have obstinately brought into play this question of a "true" sex in an order of things where one might have imagined that all that counted was the reality of the body and the intensity of its pleasures. (Foucault vii)

Foucault brings into question the persistence of the Western practice of perceiving the sexes as a duality. "[I]t was a very long time before the postulate that a hermaphrodite must have a sex - a single, true sex - was formulated." Sexuality for Foucault was always constructed within matrices of power as Butler reminds us (97). In the play we have Cyst as an indefinable space in the text, the gay cross-dressed actor or indeed a transsexual actor who responds to Aunt Mary's masculinity but also provides a female/feminine power of "his" own. They function in a two-pronged matrix of power relations as they finally include Muriel into a triadic domesticity which is, in a subversion of the Deleuzian oedipal-nuclear triad, a benign power relation. In a metadramatic twist we see the characters of Cyst and Mary "perform" for us, as they reject in a final gesture the beckoning materialist temptation of media celebrity and exposure. They are not, in the play, public impersonators but privately, a gay couple leading a "provincial life." As in *Franz into April* their life unfolds in a theatrical space, as the theatre doubles as a private (confessional) and public (performative) space which contains the flows of their desires. An understanding of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* sheds light on the central gestus of this play. The triadic arrangement which closes the play is a line of flight from heteronormative institutions of repression; it is also a flight from gay sexual constraints by the acceptance of bi-sexuality, deemed "natural" by some essentialist theorists such as Hélène Cixous. The triadic union of male impersonator-as-woman, a gay man and a woman in a legitimized marriage is the triadic answer to Deleuze's critique of the nuclear family (and capitalism) as source of all repression as well as a solution to the repressed feminine of the male-male bonding of conventional gay sexuality. It is the realization of "freedom in difference and through differentiation, the principle of permanent revolution made possible in the universal history inaugurated by capitalism" (Holland 121). The rejection of society's bad organizations, capitalism and the nuclear family is achieved by this Deleuzian triad by rejecting media exposure and entering into a bonding which defeats both, the nuclear family as well as homosexuality's rigid sexual apartheid. The media seeking to undermine the stability and force of free-form desire is rejected as they achieve their status as the Deleuzian schizos emerging at the end-of-history as the principle of freedom in permanent revolution. As Holland points out, schizophrenia [Deleuze's schizo] is not merely the principle of permanent revolution: it is also the process of revolution itself. It is the *modus operandi* of subject groups, subjugated groups (here, the triad of Mary, Cyst and Muriel), whose very existence and form of operation subvert the dominant mode of organization (in Gems' play it is the nuclear family, gay binary coupling and capitalism, as there is a consensus to reject materialistic public exposure in the media). As

Holland puts it, "the chances for realizing permanent revolution [...] stem from neither individual lines-of-flight nor the operation of subject groups occurring in isolation, but from the intersection and assemblage of individuals and groups into a critical mass whose combined effect it would be to lift the mortgage of the infinite debt and finally liquidate capital and the barriers it poses to freedom and enjoyment" (Holland 123).

17 *Aunt Mary* then is a performance of this permanent revolution acted out in a private provincial space occupied by three people who form a beneficent triad which replaces or supplants the Deleuzean Oedipal triad. We have here the Barthesian "*unpredictability* of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can still be a game." The refusal to play the game (of media exposure and capitalistic exploitation) and the risk of the game of triadic arrangement (a line-of-flight) puts Gems on the pulse of cultural iconology here as her dramaturgy predates the prolific theorizing on gay, bisexual and transgendered bodies in the 90s.

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