

Queer Identities in a Commodified World: Mark Ravenhill's *Mother Clap's Molly House* and the Rise of the (New)

Queer Family

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Abstract

Ravenhill's theatre insists on the contemporary commodification of not only sex, but the whole realm of human feelings and social interactions, a preoccupation that appeared in his frequently-discussed *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) and returns, as a kind of leitmotiv, in *Mother Clap's Molly House* (2001). In the latter play, the body becomes a battleground (to use Barbara Kruger's slogan) where one can read all kinds of sexual practises, identifications and even identities in the form of transvestism, transsexuality, homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality. This profusion of 'deviated' bodies (all of them engaged in carnal business and trade) resists any notion of stability and normalisation precisely in a moment (the eighteenth century) when reason and order were imposed by the emerging bourgeoisie on both individual and social bodies. The play, then, makes use of a historical setting in order to problematize any totalizing understanding of the modern individual and to celebrate the freedom provided by contemporary queer sexualities. The frequent changes of gender behaviour and sexual partners present in this work break any attempt to control the individual through norms and laws and function as a liberatory practise in which the usual expectations are never accomplished, but, on the contrary, are continuously turned upside down and presented in a rather unfamiliar way.

The publicity poster used in the play's first performance at the Lyttelton (Royal National Theatre) —a poster that later became the picture in the cover of the published script too— shows a woman looking directly at the camera as she tightens the corset on a muscular young man exhibiting his backside to the viewer. This picture is, in itself, disturbing from a traditional perspective: femininity takes here an

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active role over an erased masculinity that, in a rather unconventional attitude, passively accepts the constrictions of the corset and becomes feminised in rejecting the gaze (that the woman directly challenges) and shaping his body for being consumed as (feminine) object of desire. This way, the picture disrupts the conventional association of femininity-passivity, masculinity-activity, male gaze and female object of desire. Besides, the young man in the picture shows us his buttocks, and not his penis, in what becomes a neutralisation of sex and sexuality in a body that, even though clearly male, tends to emulate the female. This reading leads us, necessarily, to a queer reading of sex and society that is, precisely, what this play proposes.

With this problematization of gender differences, the poster really highlights what is going to be one of the central concerns of *Mother Clap's Molly House*; namely, the ambiguous nature of (sexual) desire and the disciplines imposed on bodies in order to make them accommodate to hegemonic social discourses in an attempt at regulating the polymorphic and anarchic tendencies of a subject that tends more to multiple and flexible identifications than to a stable and fixed identity. Thus, the body is conscripted in a particular garment while simultaneously struggles to reject its own appearance in favour of something much less defined and socially orchestrated.

The title of the play is quite relevant in this sense with that clear reference to molly houses as sites of gender fuck where maleness and femaleness blur in a kind of third sex that is not the one and not the other. Molly houses, for those unfamiliar with the concept, is a term coined in the 18th century to refer to those places where homosexual men and transvestites met in secret in order to have sexual intercourse, since same sex relations were prohibited by law and rejected by society at large. It is in this context of both sexual liberation and economic profit where Ravenhill has chosen to set part of the action in contrast (or perhaps should I say in connection?) to our contemporary gay scene where total freedom apparently prevails allowing homosexual men to express themselves.

By choosing the eighteenth century, the author tries to explore the roots of our present situation precisely in a moment when, according to voices such as Jean François Lyotard or Michel Foucault, notions such as order, balance and reason attempted to explain the world in terms of totalising narratives and discourses that necessarily

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implied a mapping of practices, behaviours and identities that became either sanctioned or demonised by the social fabric of power depending, to a large extent, on the practical and pragmatic uses these practices could bring back. In other words, it is precisely then when capitalism started its development and finally imposed itself as the great economic, political and ideological system in the world.

The play shows first the moment when Mr. Tull, the owner of a tally shop, dies, presumably of syphilis contracted in his frequent visits to prostitutes, and then the subsequent life of his widow who, with the help of young Martin and Princess Seraphina, a transvestite, will maintain the shop open and even transform it in a very profitable molly house. This plot is complemented by a second one about contemporary gay life epitomised in an underwear party where drugs, cam recording, leather and other signs of consumerism proliferate. The only discordant note in this atmosphere is Tina, Charlie's girl, who is fond of piercings and is most of the time bleeding due to her last attempt of piercing her labia.

These two historical contexts (the eighteenth and the twenty-first centuries) are useful for Ravenhill to comment on first the rise and then the final triumph of capitalism in the western world implying with this the dehumanisation and commodification of human existence in an empty environment where economic transactions dictate our lives. In this vein, it is very symptomatic the lyrics of the song that opens the play:

Chorus
When at first Our Father mighty
Made the Earth and Sea and Skies
Then Our Father great and mighty
Made Man and gave him Enterprise
God
Enterprise, shall make you human
Getting, spending – spark divine
This my gift to you poor human:
Purse celestial, coin divine. (Ravenhill, 2001: 6)

The whole creation seems to be under the control of money in what can be interpreted as an extremely satiric vision of globalisation with a

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God that is basically a tradesman that moves human beings in his own circle of profitable enterprise.

Bodies, in this context, are just then objects to be sold and bought in a rather mechanical way, and sex, again, is just that, a commercial activity that fuses and equates sexual and economic pleasure. That seems to be clear for Tull's customers, all of them prostitutes that hire fancy dresses there. The case of Amy is particularly significant in this sense, since she arrives at London just to sell her body and become rich. She belongs to a family of shepherds with fourteen children, a reason why, according to her, she won't be missed but, on the contrary, her absence will be welcomed by her parents, since that will mean a considerable reduction of expenses with one child less to feed. For her, London means prostitution, money and having a good time:

Amy: ...For I shall be a whore in London and make my money and ride through here in a carriage and gob on you.

Amelia: Maidenhead too? Oh Lord, in't He smiling down on me today. Got a Sir Somebody willing to pay twenty guineas to feel a hymen snap and see the blood come.

Amy: Twenty guineas? Fuck me. Twenty guineas. In't it a marvel what a body's worth? (Ravenhill, 2001: 13)

No space for feelings left here, just a commercial transaction that will make Amy happier and more powerful over the rest of the world. In this context, the notion of a family is not something connected with social relations, caring, and love. It has rather more to do with economic survival and then, the fact that one of the members decides to leave the family is more a liberatory practice than any other thing. It is significant, then, to see the family as a kind of microcosm of society, in the sense that what happens to the family is really a mirror of what is going on in society. In the published script, several quotations discussing the role of the family are included, but there is one taken from Karl Marx that is absolutely relevant in order to understand the

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intimate connections between the economic forces, the family, society and the political fabric:

Assume a particular state of development in the productive facilities of man and you will get a particular form of commerce and consumption. Assume particular stages of development in production, commerce and consumption and you will have a corresponding organisation of the family, of orders or of classes, in a word, a corresponding civil society. Assume a particular civil society and you will get particular political conditions which are only the official expression of civil society. (Ravenhill, 2001: n.p.)

That is, the social construction of the individual is inextricably linked to the shaping of a whole society so far as society is nothing else than an addition of the particular individuals composing it. In other words, if the economic forces guide the subject, those same economic forces will guide politics and society at large. This clear reciprocity between both realms is useful in the sense that we, the audience, can extrapolate what is going on in the play to the whole society since both, families and society, are one and the same. Because of that exact correspondence it is not surprising the constant tendency to create alternative families when the natural ones are missing, in the same way as the individual tends to socialise as part of his natural instincts.

That is precisely the case with Mrs. Tull that becomes Mother Clap for her mollies in a relationship that, as the one of Amy with her parents and siblings, is just based on the economic profit she can get from them hiring clothes and letting them her rooms to play and make love. Alternative families, as the case of this group shows, are not then a solution for that absorbing consumerism that guides western societies in the same way as the contemporary gay family seems to be, according to Ravenhill, not a way out. On the contrary, both the contemporary gay scene and the mollies just reproduce the modes of behaviour prevalent in heterosexual couples and families paying no attention to sentimental interconnections or any other kind of human feeling or understanding for the other. Just a few exceptions seem to cancel the

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pessimistic view the author offers as it is the case with Phil that, even knowing he cannot expect any reciprocal understanding on the part of Edward (that is HIV positive), still maintains a certain kind of love and sympathy for him and decides not to abandon him even though no real amorous bond seems to unite them:

Phil: Sorry about him. He's always like that. But you get used to it.

Josh: Yeah, right

Phil: I say I'm gonna leave him. But I never do. He's positive.

Josh: Right.

Phil: And, well, you don't like to leave them when they're at death's door, do you?

Josh: He doesn't seem like-

Phil: A few years ago he was like this little old stick man. I had to feed him, clean him up. And then these new medicines come along and now look at him, running around like a fucking kid. I could move on but I'm sort of stuck with him now. It's alright. We have a laugh... (Ravenhill, 2001: 82-83)

In his showing sympathy and caring for his lover, Phil recovers certain humanitarian principles and, even though in a rather degraded form, maintains care and love as the quintessential features of humanity in an otherwise absolutely waste human landscape.

The hostile environment in which all the characters (both in the eighteenth and the twenty-first centuries) move makes them invent new ways of escaping reality and creating a more comfortable or at least reassuring realm. And it is the reinvention of one self and a personal history and story the only way to transcend the apathy the world seems to wrap them in. This creation of small narratives clearly connects with the Lyotardean analysis of the postmodern condition where the grand narratives of the Enlightenment (precisely those of the eighteenth century) do not work any more since they cannot explain and justify our own world. In a space deprived of the shelter of those grand narratives, the subject has no other possibility but to create his or her own provisional and unstable story trying to grasp a meaning that is

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continuously elusive. That is precisely what the young boys (Martin and Orme) do along most of the play when they disguise and become Susan and Kitty two girls that fall in love with each other and create an invented life where they are married and have a child in an attempt to get hold of the family they never had. These attempts at finding normality, however, are always unsuccessful and the alternatives will finally be destroyed as it is the case with these two boys/girls. It is as if, following Foucault, any attempt at resisting power and normative discourses were immediately swallowed by those same forces making it absolutely useless. In fact, at the end of the play, Martin (Susan) will go with his queer family to live in the country, while Orme (Kitty) will stay in London pursuing her life of sex, parties and fun.

Summing up, we can say then that life seems to be only endurable through what Jean Baudrillard would call simulations; that is, unreal fantasies that are taken for reality when a real reality has been completely lost. That seems to be the only possibility for the postmodern self, since our contemporary world is just a simulation with no trace of authenticity. That's why Martin, Orme, Mrs. Tull and the other characters have to reinvent themselves as a final attempt to make sense of their world, in a process thorough which both their bodies and identities will suffer a sort of mutation aimed at fitting within the new realities created by the successful business of the molly house. This complete loss of a human essence is what justifies the role of Tina, a woman who has all she wants having a man, Charlie, continuously giving her what he considers she needs. She, however, is tremendously unhappy and her only way of showing her unhappiness and rebellion against a male world is perforating her body with piercings that remind her of her authenticity and mortality in opposition to the artificial and simulated atmosphere created by the economic and commercial dictates of our postindustrial and postmodern society (Charlie, by the way, earns his living selling drugs, thus insisting on the idea of a total commodification of life and sentiments).

Against this whirlwind of false identities, recreated subjectivities and accomodating bodies, the character of Princess Seraphina represents, perhaps, the only way out for Ravenhill. His change of generic role from male to female is not due to a homosexual desire, but just to a certain attitude towards life. As he says: "See, when I'm dressed in trousers I get awful vicious. I think the

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whole world's against me and I strike out with my fists. But in a dress—” (Ravenhill, 2001: 9). That is, he fuses in his own self both the conventional male and female traits, identifying masculinity with violence and femininity with care, domesticity and love. In this way, Princess Seraphina stands for the queer subject that is both male and female without being any of them in a fixed and permanent way. Seraphina is then a mutable body that preserves traces of both genders, a feature that allows him to take care of others while simultaneously being dependant of those others for his own growth as a human being. He, falling in love with Mrs. Tull, will reject anything for her and will become anything she wants him to become:

Princess: See, Mrs. Tull, I'll be anything for you. Just tell me what you want me to be and that's what I'll make myself. I'm a blank and you can choose. Ain't no dignity in it, is there? I know that. Where's his dignity? You're saying. Well, I say: bugger dignity and bugger pride. Cos what's pride when love comes a-calling? And thass what I got for you, Mrs. Tull – love. (Ravenhill, 2001: 78)

Love, then, is the only authentic feeling that can defeat our dehumanised, commodified and tremendously individualistic society, but this love is not a conventional one between a man and a woman that decide to create a family and have children. Ravenhill accepts that traditional concept of family but with a difference. Princess Seraphina will be a man, a woman and a hermaphrodite for Mrs. Tull who, although biologically a woman, is the one assuming the male social role providing for her family through the rent of her house in London. This queer couple will go to live in the country carrying with them two children: Amy (a woman) as their son and Martin, who still maintains part of his female attitude in the role of Susan.

The play's end, then, celebrates alternative bodies and alternative families in these characters while simultaneously criticising the accommodative attitude of a bourgeoisie (both gay and heterosexual) that accepts uncritically the global power of economic forces and favours a radical individualism where no social action seems to be feasible. This way, bodies here are just that, battlegrounds where

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new possibilities are tested and where a way out of this postindustrial turmoil seems to be envisaged in the celebration of ambivalence, flexibility and inclusive paradigms that allow for the development of the different traits a human being carries with him/her. Queer politics, in this vein, are here vindicated while identity based ones such as gay politics are criticised as just a reproduction of heterosexual society where everything and every-body can be sold or bought, and where life seems to be just a commercial transaction without any moral value.

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