A close reading of *Loot*

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Joe Orton was a working-class, gay playwright whose outrageous black comedies scandalised theatre audiences in the 1960s. Emma Parker examines Orton’s satire on social and sexual convention by showing how the opening of *Loot* establishes the play’s central themes and dramatic techniques.

First performed in 1965, *Loot* was Joe Orton’s controversial second stage play. The title, a synonym for plundered goods, refers to the money stolen from a bank by Hal and Dennis. Their loot is coveted by Fay, a nurse who marries and then murders men to inherit their wealth. It is also pursued by Police Inspector Truscott, who pockets a share of the ill-gotten gains in return for allowing Hal and Dennis to avoid arrest. Thus, two central concerns of the play are criminality and corruption.

Having spent six months in prison for the defacement of library books (a particularly harsh sentence for a literary prank that he considered indirect punishment for his homosexuality), in *Loot* Orton queries what constitutes criminality. As a colloquial term for money, ‘loot’ also signals Orton’s focus on the everyday lives of ordinary people, and follows the ‘Angry Young Men’ of the 1950s (such as John Osborne and Arnold Wesker) in a move away from the traditional middle-class drawing room drama. Known as ‘the [Oscar Wilde](#) of Welfare State gentility’, Orton satirises social pretence and the greed and materialism of the post-war ‘Age of Affluence’. The play’s resistance to convention is indicated by the ambiguity of its title. Simultaneously a noun (meaning money) and a verb (meaning to steal), ‘loot’ highlights the instability of meaning, in turn expressing Orton’s desire to subvert established truths or certainties about the world.

Rehearsal script for *Loot* by Joe Orton (1965 production)
A comedy of horrors

Originally called *Funeral Games*, *Loot* is a black comedy that exemplifies Orton’s signature style, a blend of the comic and the grotesque. The humorous treatment of death in his ‘comedy of horrors’ is epitomised in the opening scene by McLeavy’s shocking but amusing explanation for not having considered a second marriage three days after his wife’s death: not that a hasty second marriage would be unseemly but that he has been ‘busy with the funeral’ (196). Despite the recognisable domestic setting suggestive of a traditional ‘well-made play’, later scenes involving the comically outlandish and macabre treatment of Mrs McLeavy’s corpse, glass eye and false teeth make clear that *Loot* abandons realism in favour of farce. Aware that farce is often dismissed as frivolous and exaggerated, Orton insisted ‘I write the truth’.

Hal, full name ‘Harold’, reflects the play’s engagement with the real world by referencing policeman Harold Challenor, Orton’s inspiration for Truscott, whose vicious and unethical methods of detection destabilise the boundary between those who break the law and those who are meant to uphold it.

**Letters from Peggy Ramsay on Joe Orton’s *Loot***

In spite of *Loot*’s farcical elements, Joe Orton and his agent, Peggy Ramsay, tried to persuade producers to avoid ‘a regular old fashioned farce approach’.

**Interview with Joe Orton, from the programme for *Crimes of Passion***
In this interview, Joe Orton discusses *Loot* and his personal take on authority and the police, describing them as 'a necessary evil' who 'interfere far too much with private morals – whether people are having it off in the backs of cars, or smoking marihuana [sic], or doing the interesting little things that one does.'

**False faith**

Religion is another major theme in *Loot*. ‘McLeavy’ is a common Irish Catholic surname and Fay is short for ‘Faith’. He is a ‘Catholic layman’, and she knows Mother Agnes-Mary and The Fraternity of the Little Sisters (196). Fay’s assertion that she needs a ‘Papal dispensation’ to dust Hal’s bedroom likewise suggests a woman who upholds religious principles (197). However, the initial scene immediately points to pretence and hypocrisy. When Fay outlines the kind of woman that McLeavy should marry, he recognises that she is describing herself. Yet the notion that she has a ‘consistent attitude towards religion’ (196) is compromised by her status as an ‘ex-member of the League of Mary’ (197, emphasis added). Fay’s departure, or expulsion, casts doubt on her piety. The clichés, slogans and platitudes that pepper Fay’s speech suggest that she is superficial and insincere: ‘We must keep abreast of the times’; ‘Realize your potential’ (197).

Furthermore, despite aligning herself with St Paul when she complains that Hal is ‘a thorn’ in her ‘flesh’ (197), Fay is soon shown to be a sinner rather than a saint. Even before she is exposed as an avaricious mass murderer, doubt is cast on Fay’s religious principles by her theft of Mrs McLeavy’s slippers. The later revelation that ‘Fay’ is an alias augments the impression that her faith is false.

The theme of false faith is echoed in the ‘informal get-together run by a Benedictine monk’ (196). Since followers of the strict Order of St Benedict lead pious, isolated lives of spiritual contemplation, it is unlikely that a genuine monk would throw a party or do anything ‘informal’. Orton’s irreverent attitude to religion is underlined through a humorous inversion of the traditional death bed conversion in which individuals adopt a religious faith just before they die: ‘With her
dying breath Mrs McLeavy cast doubt upon the authenticity of the Gospels’ (196). The formality of Fay’s speech typifies how Orton’s characters often employ elevated language to mask their depravity or to create the pretence of respectability. Moreover, the opening scene of the play highlights the power and authority of the Church, specifically its ability to shape perceptions of reality. As far as Fay is concerned, Protestants do not have feet until the Holy Father rules they do. However, the authority of the Church is satirised in the exchange about Mother Mary Agnes, who treats washing her feet ‘as a specifically Catholic problem’ (197). Here, religion and those who follow it are made to appear absurd.

Photographs of the original cast of *Loot* by Joe Orton

Geraldine McEwan as Fay in the original 1965 production of *Loot*.

Marriage

The play mocks the institution of marriage alongside the Church, and romantic love is shown to be as insincere as religious devotion. Emotional sterility is indicated by McLeavy’s reference to his wife as ‘Mrs McLeavy’, rather than by her first name. Fay is just as devoid of affection, making her real name, ‘Phyllis’ (255), ironic since it invokes a woman in Greek myth who dies for love whereas she murders for money. The mention of Mrs McLeavy’s inheritance suggests that Fay’s wish to wed McLeavy is motivated by greed, and she swiftly attempts to manoeuvre him into marriage. Fay’s appropriation of Mrs McLeavy’s slippers implies that she wishes metaphorically to step into her shoes, that is take her place. From the start, Fay is dominant and in control. Her first words to McLeavy are a command: ‘Wake up. Stop dreaming’ (195). In contrast, McLeavy is weak and passive: ‘McLeavy follows her’ (197). Fay’s desire to marry McLeavy is further conveyed when she pins a flower to his coat, a gesture associated with a wedding rather than a funeral.

Appearance and reality

Much of the play’s comedy stems from a yawning gap between deeds and words, as when Fay’s crimes contradict her claim to be ‘a nice person’ (195), or when McLeavy’s reverence for authority and desire to be a good citizen render Fay’s assertion that he is a dangerous ‘free thinker’ deeply ironic (197). McLeavy’s social obedience makes it extremely unlikely that he will ‘complain to the Society’ or ‘disagree with the rules’ (196). The discrepancy between appearance and reality is further established by the exchange about Mrs McLeavy’s slippers: the ‘fluff’ on her slippers looks like ‘fur’, but is not (195). This conversation also illustrates Orton’s desire to debunk social pretence. ‘Fur’ connotes wealth and luxury, but any impression of glamour is immediately undercut by the revelation that the ‘fur’ is actually ‘a form of fluff’ manufactured in ‘Leeds’, an industrial city in (what has historically been depicted as) the grim north of England.

Rehearsal script for *Loot* by Joe Orton (1965 production)
"It's fluff. Not fur": Orton plays with appearance and reality in the opening scene of *Loot*.

Gender and sexuality

The distinction between fur and fluff introduces the theme of nature versus culture, categories highly relevant to Orton’s critique of gender and sexual norms. In a historical moment when the Church, the law and the medical profession all condemned homosexuality as unnatural, Orton’s questioning of the concept of nature subverts the grounds on which same-sex desire is denounced. Likewise, Fay challenges essentialist gender norms that present women as innate nurturers and ‘the gentle sex’. Despite the connotations of her nurse’s uniform, Fay is a killer not a carer. At a time when homosexuality was regarded as a sickness and gay men were subjected to ‘aversion therapy’ and other so-called ‘treatments’ that amounted to torture, Orton’s satire on medicine and the ‘caring profession’ is particularly pointed from a queer perspective.

Lord Chamberlain's report and correspondence about *Loot*
In this report and correspondence for *Loot*, the office of the Lord Chamberlain – who exercised theatre censorship until 1968 – notes various objections to the play, including its references to homosexuality.

The locked ‘cupboard’ also reflects Orton’s concern with sexuality (197). According to George Chauncey, the closet emerged as a metaphor for hidden homosexuality in the 1960s, making the cupboard a trope that alerts members of a gay subculture to the presence of same-sex desire in the play. Since homosexuality was not decriminalised in Britain until 1967 and theatre censorship was practised until 1968, Orton had to be subtle in his representation of homoeroticism. Nonetheless, there are hints that Hal and Dennis are lovers: Hal repeatedly calls Dennis ‘baby’; it soon emerges that they have shared a bed; and Fay later exclaims to Hal, ‘even the sex you were born into isn’t safe from your marauding’ (200). Hal’s habit of combing his hair throughout the play endorses the theme of pretence and propriety; he is keeping up appearances, as when Fay ‘takes a clothes brush and brushes him [McLeavy] down’ (197). Yet Hal’s use of the comb is also part of a system of non-verbal communication developed by homosexuals in a context where ‘the love that dare not speak its name’ was still socially taboo. Orton challenges the institutions that force homosexuality into hiding when Hal – who cannot lie – hides his loot in the cupboard rather than his relationships with men, implying that greed, not same-sex desire, is wrong.

Rehearsal script for *Loot* by Joe Orton (1965 production)
A scene from the original 1965 version of *Loot*. Although the censor has deleted explicit references to Dennis and Hal sleeping together, Orton was able to retain subtle allusions to same-sex desire and relationships.
Whilst affirming same-sex relations, *Loot* simultaneously complicates the binary categories of identity and desire through bisexuality. The reference to the ‘family-planning equipment’ in Hal’s bedroom indicates that he has sex with women (197). Similarly, Dennis, who is responsible for several pregnancies, is desperate to marry Fay. According to Marjorie Garber, bisexuality is best understood not as a third category between heterosexuality and homosexuality but as a sign of ‘freedom and transgression’. Reflecting this, the name ‘Dennis’ is derived from ‘Dionysius’, the Greek god of wine and revelry who represents liberation from sexual inhibition and social mores. Associated with homoeroticism and transvestism, Dionysus’s dissolution of gender and sexual boundaries stands in marked contrast to the norm of sexual development established at the end of the 19th century. As Michel Foucault explains, this norm labelled homosexuality a ‘dysfunction’ that society sought to ‘manage’ through ‘pedagogical controls and medical treatments’. By invoking the spirit of Dionysus, *Loot* rejects the pathologisation of same-sex desire and celebrates sexual freedom. Already evident in his first stage play *Entertaining Mr Sloane* (1964), Orton’s Bacchanalian assault on social and sexual convention reaches its full height in his final play, *What the Butler Saw* (1969).

Footnotes:


