

GENDERED SPACES AND THEATRICALITY IN PETER ACKROYD'S *DAN LENO AND THE LIMEHOUSE GOLEM*

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This paper examines theatrical acts of performance in Peter Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994) and looks into how the author engages the Victorian world of music hall with the Ripper murders. I will focus on how the protagonist Elizabeth Cree uses her performatory skills to commit murders in terms of theatricality by turning the city of London into her stage. By stepping into the footlights and later transfer the spectacle off stage, Elizabeth Cree destabilizes gender and space as fixed categories by bending limits and crossing boundaries. In doing so she depends on the performatory condition of the city. In my study the protagonist's interaction with the city I will examine how she approaches it first as a *flâneur*, an urban stroller and observer, and then, look into how she steps in from the margins to enact murder on the centre-stage of London.

Keywords: Theatricality, gender, neo-Victorian fiction, Peter Ackroyd, London

Peter Ackroyd (b 1949) has established himself as one of the most popular London writers, alongside Iain Sinclair, as he shows a certain predisposition towards the city. Ackroyd has repeatedly insisted on the inherent performativity of the capital and in *London: A Biography* (2000) he argues that theatricality is London's single most important characteristic (152). In his neo-Victorian novel *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), which evolves within the Victorian music hall, historical accuracy and literary authorship are at play. This paper examines Ackroyd's interpretation of London as a stage in the aforementioned novel by looking into how the music-hall star Elizabeth Cree makes use of her performatory skills off stage to commit murder in terms of theatricality in the role of the Limehouse Golem, and consequently destabilizes gender and space as fixed categories.

The novel is set in the area of London East End in the 1880s and connects the Victorian music hall to the Ripper murders. Peter Ackroyd plays on the still unknown identity of Jack the Ripper, re-imagined in form of the Golem, in recreating the search for a serial killer in nineteenth-century London. The historical music-hall artist Dan Leno is a key figure in the novel, however, he is not the protagonist as the title suggests. Instead, the protagonist is Elizabeth Cree who is accused and tried for the murder of her husband John Cree. A special characteristic of Ackroyd's writing is to ignore fixed categories and blend fact and fiction, the past and the present by intersecting and intertwining different genres or narrative voices. This novel unfolds through a series of different narratives: third-person narrative, transcripts from Elizabeth's trial, her husband's fake diary and her autobiographical account in first person and they are all interspersed in a disrupted chronological order. Through these texts the reader is able to follow and reconstruct the development of the Limehouse Golem who is embodied by Elizabeth. The narrator both leads and misleads the reader as he hides and reveals the secret identity of the murderer. In Elizabeth's progress from orphan to music-hall star

and male impersonator, and later into respectable wife, failed playwright and finally Limehouse Golem, the author encompasses themes such as gender, identity and sexuality.

In *Dressing Up: Transvestism and Drag: The History of an Obsession* (1979) Ackroyd points out that the culture of cross-dressing can be traced as far back as to classical drama and remarks that transvestism is “deeply implicated in the nature of illusion and spectacle” (89) themes which the author takes up in the novel. As Marjorie Garber considers space, acceptance and visibility in the context of cross-dressing in her book *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1992) and points out that the stage was a secure space where transgression of categories such as class and gender was permitted (35). In the Victorian period, cross-dressing became a two-edged tool of subversion for female music-hall performers as it both questioned gender roles and claimed her presence in the public sphere. In the 19th century the music hall became a site of gender transgression and interchange. This popular entertainment form became an important scenario for cultural interpretation and social comment. Barry J Faulk remarks that the music-hall boards served as site where women had the possibility to enjoy a subject position in regard to culture and assume control outside the patriarchal institutions and could challenge male stereotypes through song (2004: 111-12). In *Inside Out: Women Negotiating, Subverting, Appropriating Public and Private Space* (2008), Janet Wolff notices how the attention to women’s exclusion and invisibility has changed to paying special interest to “the blurring of boundaries, the negotiation of spaces and the contradictory and open-ended nature of urban social practices” (15). Women’s presence in the music halls, both on- and off-stage, broke with the public/private dichotomy in a twofold way. First, the fact that working-class female spectators went to the halls for amusement challenged the idea that lower-class women in the audience were prostitutes. Second, the presence of women on stage as part of a public spectacle culture, not only situated them in the public sphere, but also provided a space where to challenge patriarchy and gendered restrictions. Patricia Pulham notices that in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* “the underlying theme of London’s Victorian Music Halls destabilize[s] gender, identity, and sexuality” (162). Thus, the music-hall stage becomes a place for the heroine to negotiate the status of gender, identity and sexuality as fixed categories.

Cross-dressing and gender reversal are central themes in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* and the core of novel is based on theatricality. Ackroyd has expressed in an interview that he does not quite understand the process involved in creating gender identities but that it is a theme which fascinates him due to its transferable potential (1997: 246). Ackroyd engages with the performativity of gender in the novel as the heroine skilfully interprets different gender identities on and off the music hall scene. At Elizabeth’s stage debut she has a moment of epiphany at the discovery of how identity can be performed. This is crucial for her off-stage performances as it serves to hide her identity as the Limehouse Golem. It is Elizabeth’s awareness of the performativity of identity and of gender which later enable her to carry out criminal acts under a false identity, an idea I will return to later. The first appearance on stage as Little Victor’s Daughter changes Elizabeth’s perception of identity as she gains insight into the possibilities of creating the illusion of a stage character:

My old self was dead and the new Lizzie, Little Victor’s Daughter with the rotten cotton gloves, had been born at last. ... It was if I had some other personality which walked out from my body every time I stood in the glare of the gas, and sometimes she even surprised me with her slangster rhymes and cockney stuff. (1994: 106-07)

She acknowledges that she has been reborn in the music hall and that her true self is grounded in performative acts. As Elizabeth feels comfortable in her role as a music-hall artist she broadens her theatrical skill by adding cross-dressing to her act. She becomes a disciple to Dan Leno who teaches her how to impersonate male characters and she develops her character into The Older Brother. For Elizabeth the stage becomes a site where gender roles can be exposed as socially constructed and thereby subverted. Her ability to shift between different gender roles on stage is transmitted in her skill to transfer the spectacle off stage and continue to perform in different settings and interact with the city.

Peter Ackroyd draws heavily on theatricality in the depiction of Elizabeth's crimes as the Limehouse Golem, and the inherent theatricality of London life is something that is mirrored in her ability to conceptualize the view of the city as a stage. Once she marries she is expected to become a respectable middle-class wife and leave the stage. When Elizabeth is forced to abandon her music-hall career, and subsequently an independent life-style, she transfers the control achieved in the halls into real life by continuing her performance off stage. Susana Onega and Patricia Pulham have examined Elizabeth's off-stage performance in relation to her criminal acts. Both critics connect the violent murders committed by Elizabeth as the Limehouse Golem to two key events in 19th century crime history –the Ratcliffe Highway murders of 1811 and the crimes attributed to the serial killer Jack the Ripper in 1888. Although the novel is set in the beginning of the 1880s, before the Ripper murders were committed, Ackroyd alludes to these crimes by having Elizabeth performing the murders accordingly. In the same way, she copies the Ratcliffe Highway murders which were adapted textually in the style of a pantomime in Thomas de Quincey's essay "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" (1827). Thus, Elizabeth invokes the Jewish mythological figure of the Golem and interfuses the Ratcliffe Highway murderer and Jack the Ripper in the role of the Limehouse Golem. In order to access the streets and act out her criminal desires Elizabeth becomes a true shape- and scene-shifter as she adapts male disguise and turns London into her stage. To paraphrase Julian Wolfreys, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* considers questions of authenticity and masquerade in a set of narrative strands which are linked to the condition of the city –its performativity, iteration and transformation (2004: 150).

Heike Hartung remarks that in Ackroyd's fiction the figure of the "wanderer" establishes a relationship between the subject and the city (2002: 141). Ackroyd insists on the theatricality that permeates the city, its topography and its urban life, and therefore I want to link the walking subject in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* to the figure of the *flâneur*. This urban stroller perceived the activities that were carried out in the streets of the city as a form of entertainment. For him, the urban scene was a site of spectacle to watch and enjoy as a spectator in the theatre. The first time that Elizabeth ventures out in the city disguised as a man she does so in order to watch the urban scene as a spectacle. Dressed as a man she is able to enjoy the city after dark and walk the streets at her leisure and for pleasure:

It might be a piece of fun to take him out into the streets of London and see the other world. ... I would quietly dress myself as the Older Brother, wait until the lights were dimmed and the house was quiet, and then creep out of the back of the window by the staircase. ... He was a scamp, as I said, and liked nothing better than to stroll through the night like a regular masher; he would cross the river down Southwark way and then wander by Whitechapel, Shadwell and Limehouse. He

soon knew all the flash houses and dens, but he never set foot in them: he had his fun by watching the filth of the town flowing along. (153-54)

Elizabeth takes on the role of a *flâneur* who rambles along the impoverished areas of London. In the character of a male urban stroller, she holds a peripheral position and watches the street scenes with detachment. As Deborah Epstein Nord remarks, the *flâneur* maintained a disengaged position in relation to the activities of the lower classes and did not wish to get involved. Instead, he kept a marginalized position to the social struggle which was enacted on the urban scene (1995: 30).

Once Elizabeth has realized the subversive potential of cross-dressing she transfers her drag enactments off stage in order to exert power. When Elizabeth commits a murder she does so with a theatrical undertone and her transformation into a cold-blooded murderer is directly related to her ability to cross-dress. She wears male apparel in order to make her entrance on the city stage possible. In the role of the Limehouse Golem she steps in from the margins and takes the centre-stage when killing her victims as if performing a play. There are several reasons for Elizabeth to cross-dress off stage: on the one hand, she needs to pass as a man to move freely in the streets at night and enjoy the anonymity of the *flâneur*, and on the other hand, she uses male disguise to hide her identity as the Limehouse Golem. This is significant as she not only hides her identity, but also due to the fact that she leaves false clues about the murderer's sex so that the police will be looking for a man and not for a woman. Onega notes that Chief Inspector Kildare misses the hint Dan Leno drops that the murderer may be using a gendered disguise (1998: 69-70). The music-hall star and female impersonator, who is familiarized with performativity, gives the clue that the murderer may be a woman, but Inspector Kildare fails to see beyond the performance:

'I once had the pleasure of seeing you in the spoof version of Maria Marten [sic].'
'Oh yes. That *Red Barn* number years ago.'
'But I can still recall the way the killer grabbed around the throat, and almost throttled the life out of you. Didn't he then split you open with a razor?'
'It was a she. It was all very gory in those days.'
'But you see, this is my point. This murderer, this Limehouse Golem as they call him, seems to be acting as if he were in a blood tub off the Old Kent Road. Everything is messy and very theatrical. It is a curious thing.' (204-05)

Inspector Kildare links the murders to a theatrical performance by connecting the criminal act to De Quincey's essay "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" and by linking it to the murder scene he has watched in the music hall. Yet, whereas Dan Leno is aware of the possibility that the Golem might be a woman, Inspector Kildare misses the cue. Instead, the Chief Inspector fails to see beyond the disguise and mistakes performance for the performer. As Garber remarks, this is due to the fact that the spectator mistakes or overlooks the role of the cross-dresser (1993: 187). Elizabeth is conscious about the general assumption that the killer is a man, and takes advantage of the plausibility of attributing the crimes to a woman of her status. By continuing to perform off stage she transfers the sense of control achieved on stage into real life. Acting as a respectable middle-class wife she manipulates her husband and writes his false diary. Mr Cree's false diary invokes De Quincey's essay "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" since both texts make reference to murder in terms of theatricality. Pulham argues that Elizabeth writes her husband's diary for two purposes: to witness her own unseen acts and to allocate any sense of guilt to him (2010: 173). Although she wishes to deviate any suspicion to her husband she is compelled by the

desire to have an audience. Elizabeth needs an audience –either a real or an imaginary one. Hence, the diary serves as a textual mirror in which she recreates and witnesses her own criminal acts. When Mr Cree becomes too suspicious and finally discovers that Elizabeth is the Limehouse Golem he is poisoned by her. Ironically, in the end the Golem is caught, sentenced and executed without the police realizing it. Instead, Elizabeth is tried and convicted for the least violent of the murders she has committed and the crime that reveals least evidence. This is mainly because the police reject the possibility that the serial killer is a woman, but has no difficulty in attributing a domestic crime to her.

To conclude, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* draws upon the performative condition of the city to establish a relationship between the subject and the city in terms of theatricality. Through theatrical acts of performance and cross-dressing Elizabeth has been able to move around the city and thereby dismantled gender and space as stable and fixed categories. First, she has claimed her presence within the public sphere as a woman on the music-hall boards. Then, she has transferred the power and control achieved on the scene into real life by mastering the city as a stage. As she has turned into a cross-dressed murderer who turns the killings into a theatrical enactment, she has managed to avoid any suspicion since people fail to see beyond her performance and connect the crimes to a woman. Her progress from orphan to a music-hall star, *flâneur*, off-stage performer and serial killer breaks with the restriction of women to the private sphere and as passive objects. From stepping onto the stage in the halls, Elizabeth has claimed her presence in the public sphere and later transferred into the streets. Subsequently she has passed from being a passive urban observer in the role of the *flâneur* to interacting with the city as the Limehouse Golem. As a consequence, through her off-stage performance Elizabeth has engaged with the theatricality of the city to blur spatial boundaries and gender restrictions.

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THIS TEXT IS PART OF THE VOLUME:

Martín Alegre, Sara (coord. and ed.), Melissa Moyer (ed.), Elisabet Pladevall (ed.) & Susagna Tubau (ed.). *At a Time of Crisis: English and American Studies in Spain*. Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona/AEDEAN, 2012. ISBN-10: 84-695-4273-7, ISBN-13: 978-84-695-4273-6. Available from www.aedean.org