

Mennonites at Play: Postmodern
Aspects of Low German Drama

by

Lesley Glendinning

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of
The University of Manitoba
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English
University of Manitoba
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Abstract

For those approaching Mennonite culture with little or no previous knowledge, the official definition involves accounts of the martyrdom of early Anabaptists (the Mennonites' forerunners), a history of persecution, and a rigid biblical doctrine that persevered into the twentieth century. However, these aspects are matched, and countered, by a tradition of humour that existed alongside the more serious nature of Mennonitism. My thesis explores one expression of this humourous side of the culture in the Low German drama created by Mennonites in Manitoba.

My study explores the characteristics of Low German drama in order to determine both how it functions within the Mennonite community, and its position in relation to English-speaking, mainstream culture. A number of theories aid in my examination of these comic plays, and these can be categorized under the broad term "postmodernism". My discussion investigates Low German drama's subversive qualities, as well as how it probes questions of identity, ethnicity, and the status of women in Mennonite society. Located at the margins of both Mennonite and English-speaking, secular culture in Canada, the Low German comedy in my study holds many important social and theoretical implications with regard to these larger, surrounding entities.

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Abstract

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Introduction – Why postmodern theory for this study?

This project began with my discovery of an entry in *Planting the Garden*, a record of the women's writing held in various archives in the province of Manitoba. The entry indicated the existence of unpublished plays in Low German by women, with the added tag: "often about rural Manitoba women both real and imaginary" (283). When I first came across these words, I felt the excitement that other women—whether writers, researchers or readers—have reported at their discovery of texts previously unknown to them and forgotten by critics. Such texts offered them an opportunity to see into the lives of other women, and spoke to their own experiences. These opportunities are less rare now than they were in the past, of course, but this particular medium struck me as an unrecognized type of literature that perhaps had new things to tell us. My research confirmed this suspicion, and I was excited to find I was able to identify and assess elements of the plays in relation to current literary theories that I believe are necessary to the understanding of literature, drama, ethnicity, and culture. For instance, my choice of subject material would not have been justified without the expanded vision of what constitutes value, which is one of postmodernism's attendant traits. Theorists make the case that it is not intrinsic value but social structures that govern the choice of literature in established canons. Aesthetic criteria that were held to be timeless and unwavering are now replaced with the view that these standards are dependent on social position. My project here is to test the validity of some of these theories when applied to Low German Drama (LGD), and to determine how postmodernism can shed light on LGD.

Here it must be noted that these theories can be helpful in identifying qualities in literature from periods in the past, and that the term “postmodern” then indicates these characteristics and how the literature operates rather than where it falls in time. The LGD in my study is produced by Mennonites in Manitoba, a people whose history reaches back to the Anabaptists of northern Europe. This group that emerged during the Reformation established their faith through a radical stance of nonconformity against powerful ideologies in their day, and these origins are pertinent to my discussion of Mennonite culture. One of the foundational beliefs of the Anabaptists is the idea of separation (Epp 32), which is commonly understood simply as living apart from mainstream culture; however, accompanying this idea is the more encompassing view that all elements of reality can be classified as belonging to one of two opposing symbolic categories represented by good and bad, sacred and profane, spiritual and physical, and heaven and earth. The Mennonites strove to separate themselves from ‘the world’, which falls on the lower or earthly pole, living apart from the rest of society both geographically and through strict adherence to the tenets of their biblical beliefs. In line with these divisions, Mennonite culture has had two distinct languages that correspond to the separate areas of existence: the “higher”, spiritual activities of Mennonite life were conducted in High German, while for everyday interactions at home, at work, and “on the street”, Low German was used.¹ And because the dualistic way of thinking entails value judgments that rank opposites through comparison and contrast, the language of domestic

¹ The use of High German in church services can be traced back to the eighteenth century in Prussia, when Dutch was officially given up in this setting. Because of its similarity to the Dutch dialects, Low German became the language of commonality among immigrants to Prussia, and here the language was standardized, according to Reuben Epp. Here I will add that the terms “low” and “high” in relation to the language do not indicate value, but elevation, the “low” dialect developing in the lowlands of northern Europe, and the “high” forms occurring in the area of southern Germany, in mountainous country.

or everyday affairs ranks lower than that of spiritual matters. This tendency to classify extends to the two genders as well, and critic Edna Froese notes the paradoxical nature of the Mennonite stance towards the sexes: the Anabaptists founded their movement upon the rejection of the principle of a hierarchy among believers, which was the Catholic model, but retained the dominant role for men (202). Having two distinct categories means that artistic and expressive elements of culture are also designated into these areas, and while aspects such as canonical literature, church sermons and choir performances are associated with higher ideals (Van Dyke 30), what is often now described as “folk” culture (Erb 204) falls into the category of lesser significance. LGD, along with arts such as quilt-making, preparing ethnic foods, woodworking, and storytelling, belongs in this latter category. Focusing on a marginal aspect of the culture like LGD retrieves an element of the Mennonite world, and exposes previously overlooked parts of the culture that accompany the drama, including women’s interests and the experiences of everyday life.

Through these official and unofficial practices, and during their search for freedom from persecution, the Mennonites developed a unique religious and ethnic identity. This identity, however, was not necessarily uniform and is still subject to dispute within the community; some of the plays openly present attempts to define Mennonite identity. The articulation of who they were and were not, early in the movement’s inception, is an important form of self-definition, and disagreement on the subject of what constitutes Mennonite identity has led to many divisions among them. The debates on this subject began with the Anabaptists in the first decades of the sixteenth century. Their theology was related to a wide-reaching movement of dissent against the Catholic

Church sparked by Martin Luther's teachings at the University of Wittenberg. This movement spread through the northern regions of Europe, taking a form that grew into Anabaptism in the Netherlands. Educated men such as brothers Obbe and Dirk Philips and Menno Simons were impelled to reform the abuses of the Catholic church, and inspired by the idea of a direct relationship between the individual and God without the need for an interpreter. In connection to this emphasis on individual understanding was their opposition to infant baptism. On this point the Dutch leaders differed from both the clergy aligned with Rome and the reformation leaders such as Luther, and their view put them violently at odds with the power structures of sixteenth-century Europe. Through the sacrament of infant baptism, membership in a system clearly ruled (and covertly exploited) by a religious hierarchy was not negotiable, but understood to be divined or given, and therefore unquestionable. To refuse automatic membership was to invite the persecution that Mennonites subsequently suffered, due to how closely religion was bound up with the politics of social control. On ideological grounds they insisted on the right of the individual to choose to be baptized at an age of discernment (Weigle 3). Their view defined faith as participatory, marked by the individual's decision to become part of the "community of believers" (Loewen and Reimer 9).

This participatory faith is analogous to more recent theories that see identity as dependent on the influence of the group to which the individual belongs. In some of the Low German plays, identity is presented clearly as a performance of certain accepted practices and gestures. Postmodern theory encourages the examination of LGD as an aspect of the culture that actively shapes identity, and highlights the performative element of identity. That is, rather than seeing identity as the reflection of a stable self,

performance theory works from the view that the self is created through one's exposure to social influences.

Anabaptist belief, then, emphasized commitment to the group over one's own interests, and this idea is underscored by the priority of humility or *Gelassenheit* in Mennonite culture. While the view that each believer must make a conscious choice appears to valorize the individual, the system of thought that he/she accepts by the act of choosing is precisely one that denies the importance of the self. The Mennonites' attempts to apply different interpretations of biblical passages to daily life, on these and other subjects, resulted in varying streams of Mennonitism. The Low German plays I examine show evidence of the ongoing dynamic and are a medium for the transference of Mennonite conceptions of identity.

In identifying themselves as the true followers of God's will, the Anabaptists broke with the religious authorities that had such a part in the political affairs of early modern Europe in the sixteenth century; however, by their insistence on another, often apocalyptic vision of the world, they reinforced their own version of reality that tied up all the details of existence. The idea of Judgment Day as real and imminent gave a definitive and climactic ending to the rigidly structured storyline of their outlook. Walter Klassen documents the central place of apocalyptic views in many of the early strains of Anabaptism and later in some Mennonite groups as well (41); with the Bible as the main source of knowledge, history was neatly framed by "In the beginning..." and predictions of the end times in the Book of Revelations, so that everything in between was required to fit into the progressive narrative that the Bible outlines. The depiction of the violent and punitive events in store for nonbelievers underscored the urgency of accepting the

correct view, and drew attention to the end of mortal life rather than everyday existence. Because they leave no questions unanswered, such firm and complete visions are difficult to refute; for this reason the Anabaptist/Mennonite belief system resembles not only much religious doctrine, but also the secular view that posits the outcome of modern thought and technology as an improved or even utopian society (which has been pervasive in Western culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). The various ways in which LGD resists these all-encompassing conceptions suggest that other interpretations of the world are possible, and that our behaviour need not be dictated by these authoritative narratives.

Postmodern theory begins with the recognition that the ideology that accompanies the canonical or “classic” literature of Western culture is supported by doctrine and powerful social structures, and that this literature reflects the prevailing order and organizing schemes of this culture. Jean-François Lyotard begins to lay out some of the developments of what he calls “the postmodern condition” in his book by that name, and offers a condensed definition of postmodernism as simply “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv). The idea that history is progressive, for example, and that knowledge and technology will lead to global emancipation (*The Postmodern Condition* 32 and “Defining Postmodernism” 1613), are beginning to be seen as culturally-dependent rather than universal truths. Where the modernist literary tradition has come to be seen by postmodern theorists as a “totalizing” discourse that characteristically ties all details into an artistic unity, postmodern literature often presents its ideas and its meanings through fragmentation and the disruption of continuity. The rational structures and *a priori* reasoning used to determine and validate truth in modernist texts are

countered in postmodern texts with alternative, partial views and often playful methods (Küchler 1). Assumptions bound up with the modernist approach include the view that language is transparent, referring directly to the world in a one-to-one correspondence, and the related idea that the writer speaks from a position of authority and insight into the world she sees around her. A feature of modernism is also that the writer typically puts forward a central, authoritative point of view as a technique whereby she creates unity and convinces the reader/audience that the narrative presentation is “true”. Postmodern literature typically works through alternative narrative strategies, allowing for multiple voices to become audible, for example, and often eschewing the need to convince the reader of the truth of the narrative. While there may be some disagreement among critics about the definition of “postmodernism”, I will use the term in the way I understand Lyotard to use it, to refer to this group of features and their implications.

My thesis deals with specific theories, the first being that ideology is conveyed through dramatic and literary form. The modernist view of history as progressive is mirrored, in Mennonite belief, by the biblical perspective that sets out the idea of the afterlife (and the concept of Judgment Day) rather than the vision of a socialist society, for example, as the “end”, or as the future goal of human life. Critic Ric Knowles outlines the background behind modern dramatic form that accompanies and reinforces these metanarratives, tying biblical structure to Aristotelian formulations and the dynamics of the male psyche as theorized by Freud. Foremost in Aristotle’s list of attributes for the drama is the conveyance of a single action, and this idea is connected to the idea of a clearly-distinguished beginning, middle, and end (Knowles 31). Knowles describes the formula that ties all details of the play to a theme or underlying message through

character, plot and other aspects of the work, noting the similar patterns that are repeated and reproduced and that signify a continuity that supports the reigning political system. When he discusses the “politicization of form” and the “unconscious of the plays” (16), he refers to the ideology that is concomitant with the ways such dramatic works are written, performed, and received. To the extent that all metanarratives depend on hierarchical structures, cause and effect logic, and linear thinking, literary and dramatic form can either mirror and reinforce such ideology by displaying these characteristics or attempt to subvert these unified, hegemonic views through innovative approaches. I am using “form” to include all of the ways that the narrative presents; that is, not only the “what” but the “how” of the work. And the form that LGD takes often strays from conventional methods of presentation and so defies the vision of a unified whole that complies with and supports metanarratives, both those outside their culture and within the Mennonite community. In addition to the long-established ideologies of biblical and modernist tradition, the structures behind the early-twentieth-century political drive to make Canada a homogenous society, for example, are compromised by the disruptions presented through the dramatic form of the plays. While breaking from traditional form (through a fragmentary style or the incorporation of irrational elements) can in itself be an act of resistance to unifying or containing metanarratives in general, the plays also speak to specific ideologies; communicating in Low German, for instance, refutes the conception of Canadian society as uniformly English-speaking.

Also pertinent to my discussion is the school of thought known as social constructionism, as discussed by theorists such as Annette Kolodny and Carolyn J. Allen. My study deals with two of these formulations specifically, both connected to the recent

loss of surety in many areas of knowledge. The erosion of confidence in the origins and stability of identity leads, in one new articulation, to the view that the “decentered self” is no longer a self grounded in a timeless, individual soul, but that this self, or rather, the “subject”, is created through social channels. As Allen explains, “In its loosest usage the term ‘subject’ dislodges the individual as a locus of meaning, denies the existence of an ahistorical transcendent self, and marks as ideologically created the myth of the Cartesian cogito, an essential being, a free individual freely choosing life’s directions” (279).

Following the disintegration of the modern concept of the unified, cohesive self, she expresses the idea of the subject as “a construction, a product of signifying practices which are both culturally specific and generally unconscious...” (279). My concern here is with the ways that identity can be formulated in terms of cultural products like LGD. As the Mennonites’ view of identity is dependent on their own consensual definition, and therefore the self becomes a cultural product, LGD can be understood as a force through which this product is created. The plays do important work, then, in the formation and reinforcement of Mennonite identity, modeling behaviour and offering discussion about identity through dialogue, among other techniques.

A second application of social constructionism is in the identification of the artificiality of the aesthetic standards used to create the literary and dramatic canons. Annette Kolodny notes that feminist scholars have shown how canonical works conform to the tastes and perspectives of those in privileged social positions (“Dancing Through the Minefield”, *Leitch* 2146). With this body of theory firmly established, critics can now look to the margins of canonical literature to find new works and assess them using different kinds of standards. These new approaches include considerations of how the

texts appeal to women, for example, which traditional criteria notoriously fail to do. The political element of so-called aesthetic standards, then, is significant as well, in that the exclusion of certain types of literature from the canon mirrors the marginalization of and attitudes towards women and the literature that concerns them. As Annette Kolodny asserts, “The power relations inscribed in the form of conventions within our literary inheritance ... reify the encodings of those same power relations in the culture at large” (2149). Jonathan Cullers traces feminist theories that point out the tendency for conventional literature to privilege a “male” sensibility, characterized by an emphasis on intellectual, rational and hierarchical ways of apprehending the world. Where LGD incorporates elements of the sensory world, for example, this one-sided tradition is counterbalanced, and alternative ways of communicating are brought into view as valid. In the Mennonite culture, with its clearly differentiated classifications for all aspects of culture, the application of these views shines new light on the worth of the Low German skits and plays.

The recognition of worth in previously marginalized literatures corresponds to a movement that responds to the absence of everyday experience, particularly that of women, in other areas of study as well. Gloria Neufeld Redekop outlines the neglect of women generally in historical accounts, and the beginnings of ‘social history’ that seeks to remedy this absence. She explains the concepts behind the growth of this new approach to history:

Since the rise of social history—a history focusing on ordinary people and one that claimed to be told “from the bottom up”—source material not previously considered valid, began to be accepted. These included archival materials;

routinely generated records; oral histories; registers; artifacts; autobiographies; local historical records; letters and diaries; the organizational records of women's clubs and religious organizations. The acceptability of these sources for historiography meant that the documentation of the history of ordinary women began to be regarded as valuable and legitimate. (16)

Redekop's discussion of the "parallel church", in which she depicts the importance of women's groups as well as their consignment to the margins of Mennonite culture, speaks to these developments. Studies like Redekop's offer connections to LGD, which is so often created and produced by women. Many of the women's church groups were and are the ones who produce LGD, with women donning costumes to represent the male characters. This practice is particularly significant for the way it opens up the possibilities for women as comedians and satirists in the culture; as well, it has historical interest in being radically unusual in theatrical tradition. And just as the new sources for what makes history are legitimated, LGD's quality of being created from elemental building blocks drawn from everyday, "trivial" objects, can be seen in a new light, and one that shows its value as a cultural and artistic product.

Walda Katz-Fishman and Jerome Scott echo Redekop's observations with their discussion of the "bottom-up movement" in sociology; in their explanation of the roots of the change to this wider-reaching and more inclusive approach, they note the problem of theory's removal from the lived world (374). They detail the response to a growing awareness of this distance between theory and its real-world referents in the description of the social background of the shift, which connects LGD to larger movements outside Mennonite culture: "The movements of the 1960s and 1970s – black liberation, national

liberation and anti-imperialist/anti-colonial struggles, women's equality, sexual equality, environmental justice struggles, etc. – created the conditions for a radical sociology” (371). The developments in these fields attest to a change in perspective to a more democratic view; the shift signals an “increasing political and social inclusion” (Katz-Fishman and Scott 372), and my study takes these ideas into account by attempting to show how LGD includes some of the marginalized elements that these struggles involve. As these changes clearly cross disciplines, they affect the way we see and create the arts as well.

The “bottom-up” theory connotes the idea that the basic “things” of everyday, lived experience are significant, and that LGD has a political component in its focus on the everyday. The names of some of the plays are enough to denote their subject matter as belonging to the personal, domestic sphere: *Uncle Giesbrecht goes on a diet* (sic), *Christmas Clothing*, *What did Mrs. Giesbrecht Carry in Her Apron?*, *The Hat*, and so on. The content of the plays comes directly from Mennonite community life; this material includes situations such as the comical events in N.H. Unruh's *A Wonderful Opportunity*, which depict the many requests for a ride and items to be bought for relatives, friends, and neighbours when Henry Janzen makes a plan to drive to Winnipeg from one of the Mennonite settlement communities in southern Manitoba. This premise is enough on which to build a full play, complete with numerous props and seven characters. In its ability to embody the elements of Mennonite material existence, LGD displays a vital connection to ‘real-world’ experience.

My thesis explores these theories with regard to LGD, and my first chapter suggests the work that these plays accomplish through form. With the help of Mikhail

Bakhtin's writing on carnival and Barbara C. Babcock's essay on ritual clowning, I explore the playful aspects of LGD as criticism. Where the plays disrupt the rational structures that support the metanarratives that constrain and limit meaning, they suggest alternative ways of thinking. In her discussion of the marginal or "ex-centric" position of Canadian writers (3), Linda Hutcheon confirms the insights of these critics when she points out that "...frequent use of verbal irony and word play ... is another way in which the ex-centrics, be they Canadians, women, or both, can subvert the authority of language, language seen as having a single and final meaning" (7). Kay Friesen's *Forgetful Jake* and Mary Pauls's *Trudeau Landing in Steinbach* are especially good examples of formally subversive plays. As well as their style, their content deals with the issues surrounding language retention in the face of the pressure to conform to English-only culture. Doug Reimer's application of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theory of "minor" literature to Mennonite writing is another concept to keep in mind when investigating LGD, where this theory helps to highlight how LGD appropriates English for its own use, and expresses itself in contrast to conventional modernist models and stylistic practices.

In my second chapter I examine the ways that identity can be seen as culturally controlled and shaped by the forces of both sanctioned and unofficial artistic creations. Sarah M. Corse's study of American and Canadian 'national' literatures implies that identity is not the foundation of expressive arts such as literature and drama, but that social forces create the idea of what a particular culture's identity should be, and employ all the arts in promoting this idea. Erin Hurley's particular articulation of identity as performative is also a useful theory through which to view Mennonite identity and LGD;

when we see identity as a practice rather than a stable category, we gain further understanding both of cultural identities and the assumptions that accompany these.² LGD can also be understood as a ritual that acts on the audience to reinforce identity. Barbara C. Myerhoff's paper on ritual and identity adds to my conclusions in this area. In light of these ideas, I find it useful to look at Margaret Tiessen's *The Right Christmas Gifts*, Arnold Dyck's *Four Mennonites Who All Agree on One Thing*, Elizabeth Peters's *The Cherry Hedge*, and Linda Ens's *I Want to Choose*. All show aspects of the instability of identity, even when they overtly direct the reader towards a distinct definition of Mennonite identity. The plays suggest and support the idea that (Mennonite) identity is a performance rather than a true reflection of the interior person.

My third chapter deals with the marginalization of LGD, examining the reasons for this position and suggesting the ways that LGD itself celebrates the overlooked aspects of Mennonite culture. LGD occupies a space on the edge or boundary of the official canon because of its content and style, and I argue that connections may be drawn between the plays and women's 'parallel' culture in traditional Mennonite society. When Elizabeth Peters's mother wanted to start a LGD group in the 1930s, for example, she had to contend with opposition from the church elders and convince them of the benefits to the community that this activity would bring (Peters 2005), and this initial withholding of approval illustrates the attitudes towards activities that fell outside official church-related categories. As a practice based so solidly in experience, LGD can be viewed with the 'bottom-up' perspective in mind. These connections strike a chord with feminist theory "with its commitment to material change" (Allen 279), and suggest the aptness of

² Although performance theory is put forward by a number of theorists, such as Judith Butler and Marvin Carlson, I selected Hurley's model because the idea of a theatrical "triad" struck me as especially relevant to my explorations of identity.

conducting a feminist analysis of the plays. Two plays about marriage, written at different points in time, invite a comparison of the ways women are represented; Elizabeth Peters's *One Must Marry*, a version of the Dutch *One Must Get Under the Hoof* (the dates of which are unknown) shows marked differences in attitudes towards women when viewed beside Linda Ens's *I Want to Choose*, written in 2004. While Ens uses some of the conventions of the drama to overturn stereotypical representations of women, other writers, female and male, use different approaches to theatrical presentation, putting objects from the everyday world on stage, for example, to convey their ideas. The study of marginal activities such as women's societies and LGD is a step towards breaking through the boundaries that segregate 'high' and 'low' culture. This crossing of borders is underscored by the crossing of the boundary between fiction (the abstract or ideal) and the actual world, and LGD carries out this crossing through theatrical devices, such as having the actors address the audience. These devices convey the close connection the two "worlds" have in Mennonite life. Where domestic, private, or intimate activities qualify for representation in artistic productions, the idea that art is not separate from experience comes across. This perspective is helpful when looking at Margaret Tiessen's *Uncle Giesbrecht goes on a diet* (sic) and Kay Friesen's *What did Mrs. Giesbrecht Carry in Her Apron?*. Current theories that draw attention to the division between actual or 'lived' experience and representations of this experience are applicable to the investigation of LGD.

The connection between the world of experience and artistic expressions has another aspect as well; LGD is always presented on 'entertainment evenings' (Interview, Ens 2005) as a fundraiser either for projects within the community or for those in need