

# Performing Identities in Scotland: Liz Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*

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## Abstract

It has been argued that Scottish culture has experienced a “Second Renaissance” in the last two decades, which has been identified with the works of Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, Jackie Kay, Janice Galloway or A. L. Kennedy. Liz Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* is one of the most controversial texts of the period, because of its irreverent interrogation of Scotland's past and its criticism of its present asymmetries. The aim of this paper is to analyse the subversive portrayal of Scottish tradition in the play, considering its emphasis on the performative nature of identities, as well as its examination of the transmission of values from one generation to another. Special attention will be given to the political side of the text and the strategies employed by the author to reflect on gender issues, England's cultural colonialism over the nation or the resistance to accept difference in 1980's Scotland. It will also be analysed how Lochhead manipulates the representation of Scotland's past taking the last queen of Scotland as a symbol of the transformation undergone by all national signs, and the connections between the ideas expressed in the play and postmodern theories on nationalism.

Liz Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (1989) is now considered one of the most influential plays written by a Scottish author in the last decades. After its premiere in 1987 as part of the commemorations of the fourth centenary of Mary Stuart's death, the play gained immediate popular success, as well as institutional recognition through the Scotsman Fringe First Award it received. The text clearly parodies Scotland's rigid social structures by making use of historical characters to denounce the transmission of discriminatory practices in the nation; mainly by taking the last queen of Scotland as a

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symbol of the contradictory discourses that determined its idiosyncrasy in the 1980's. Indeed, Lochhead described her play as “a metaphor for the Scots today” (Varty, 1993: 162), or even declared: “[i]t's really about Scotland, more about the present than the past, how these myths of that past have carried on into the present malaise of Scotland today” (Wilson, 1990: 9). From the diverse interpretations of Mary Stuart's life, Lochhead created a hybrid character that is subject to constant transformation throughout the play, thus connecting her text with contemporary theories of nationalism and identity.

In a nationalist context, where the world is conceived of as “a product of the interplay of various communities, each possessing a unique character and history, and each the result of specific origins and developments” (Smith, 1999: 175), historical records, that is, the narratives of the community's past acquire great relevance. Benedict Anderson points out that identity “because it cannot be ‘remembered’, must be narrated” (1999: 205), and highlights the effects of intentional “amnesia” when one standpoint is privileged over other marginal ones in these collective texts. The revision of History then becomes essential to subvert the hierarchies of nationalist discourses, even if such recovery is made from the artistic text. Lochhead's postmodern rewriting of Mary Stuart's life is particularly significant in this sense, since the queen is one of the figures in Scotland's history whose image has openly been subject to the constant redefinition of cultural signs. With the passing of time, the icon has been assigned various contradicting identities either to represent women's wickedness or the religious/nationalist oppression of the groups that claimed revenge of her death at Protestant/English hands. Lochhead's text disrupts these narratives through the caricaturisation of a sixteenth-century Scotland that subversively mirrors social prejudice in Thatcherite Britain through the manipulation of “the most pathetically interesting woman in the annals of [Scotland]” (Hume, 1903: 10).

In *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*, such subversion is inscribed within the transnational microstate –England/Scotland caricaturised– represented on the stage, but most significantly in Mary Stuart's heteroglossic speech: “(We have by now noticed MARY's strange accent – a Frenchwoman speaking Scots, not English, with [...] quite a French accent)” (Lochhead, 1989: 13). Given her role as head of the nation, Mary's hybrid language becomes a symbol of the *différance* of

Scottish national identity and, more globally, of the inconsistency of the boundaries that separate one community from another. Likewise, as the title of the play presages, the use of parody is a constant strategy that will question the authority of historical narratives throughout the text. In fact, the play shows how the space liberated by parody can reproduce the way collective texts are appropriated and resignified to serve different political purposes. The narration of Scotland's past is also interfered with by the fragmentary structure of the play, its anachronism and frequent Brechtian *Gests*, but also by the constant transformation of historical characters at the commands of a bizarre mistress of ceremonies, La Corbie, who is in charge of revealing the different discourses that have contributed to create a stereotyped Scotland. Her role is central in the play, since Lochhead describes her as "the sprit of Scotland". La Corbie acts as a *chorus* who, instead of representing the voice of the community or judging the action, involves the audience in the creation of meaning as the performance proceeds, transgressing the way ideology is traditionally transmitted. Hence the discursive monologues that construct Scottish identity get translated into a dialogic monologue with which La Corbie, "an interesting, ragged ambiguous creature" (Lochhead, 1989: 11), introduces the first scene, "Scotland, Whit Like?" where we are invited to partake in her irreverent and subjective description of the nation (Lochhead, 1989: 11).

LA CORBIE: Country: Scotland. Whit like is it?  
It's a peatbog. It's a daurk forest.  
It's a cauldron o'lye. A saltpan or a coal mine.  
If you're gey lucky it's a bricht bere meadow or a  
park o'kye.  
Or mibbe ... it's a field o'stanes.  
It's a tenement or a merchant's ha',  
It's a hure hoose, or a humble cot. Princess Street or  
Paddy's Merkit. (...)  
It depends. It depends ... Ah dinna ken whit like  
*your* Scotland is. Here's mines.  
National flower: the thistle.  
National pastime: nostalgia.  
National weather: smirr, haar, drizzle, snow.

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National bird: the crow, the corbie, le corbeau, moi!

All the fragmentary references in this subjective representation of Scotland converge in the “national bird”, who names herself in the three languages –English, Scots, and French–, which were relevant in Mary Stuart’s life. Linguistic transition from one language to another leads to a final emphatic “moi”, the sign of an authoritarian but multiple self that will dominate the play. Indeed, such polyphony is analysed by Robert Crawford as an essential characteristic in Lochhead’s writing, which “is at its best in the border territory where self and other [...] partake of each other, the zone of crossover, fluidity, shape-changing, pun” (1993: 69). If, as Linda Mugglestone states, “[l]anguage is [...] of prime importance in encoding the values and assumptions of a particular culture, evidencing notions of bias and inequality, of hierarchy and social stereotypes, in the division of semantic space which results” (1993: 103), Lochhead’s plural text efficiently reflects the interstice where social asymmetries are negotiated.

Another important aspect to consider in the study of collective memory is the role of time. Postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha has argued that “[t]he borderline of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present” (2000: 7). The narration of collective identity requires, hence, the negotiation between the “pedagogic” and the “performative”, which allows for the incorporation of new perspectives in the interstice liberated in the dialogue. Therefore, La Corbie’s role is interesting, as “ambiguous, ironic” “spirit of Scotland,” who will become the tragicomic link among the nation’s historical times. As mistress of ceremonies, she introduces the characters in an irreverent way, challenging the authority of the historical text: “Laughing, LA CORBIE cracks whip for THE ENTRANCE OF THE ANIMALS. In a strange circus our characters, gorgeous or pathetic, parade: MARY, ELIZABETH, HEPBURN, DANCER/RICCIO, KNOX, DARNLEY [...]. They circle, snarling, smiling, posing” (Lochhead, 1989: 12). Another feature that contributes to subvert the historic is the recurrence of anachronism, which Diane Purkiss considers an effective strategy to denaturalise the timeless prestige of cultural signs (1992: 446), and which Elaine Aston finds essential to reveal the processes employed in the construction of

normative “reality” (1994: 54). In this sense, Lochhead’s text brings an interstice between multiple pasts and presents where the coherence of Scottish cultural identity parodically experiences the transformations that Stuart Hall identifies:

Cultural identity [...] belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (1993: 394)

This “different positioning” of the self is emphasised by the constant interchangeability of the characters who act as representatives of stereotypical roles in the history of the nation, but simultaneously adopt opposing identities that transcend nationality, class and religious belief. As an example, Mary (Stuart) becomes Marian, Elizabeth’s maid and adviser, but also Mairn, “a wee poor Scottish beggar lass” (Lochhead, 1989: 32) who incarnates Knox’s sexual fantasies. This denaturalising strategy is particularly relevant since commuting pairs usually invert hierarchies, as in Mary and Elizabeth’s relationship, where both queens transcend contemporary representations of power between Scotland and England, as described by La Corbie in the initial scene:

LA CORBIE: Once upon a time there were *two queens* on the wan green island, and the wan green island was split inty twa kingdoms. But no equal kingdoms, naebody in their richt mind would insist on that. For

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the northern kingdom was cauld and sma'. And the people were low-statured and ignorant and feart o' their lords and poor! They were starvin'. And their queen was beautiful and tall and fair and ... Frenchified. The other kingdom in the island was large, and prosperous [...] and, at the mouth of her greatest river, a great port, a glistening city that sucked all its wealth to its centre which was a palace and a court of a queen. She was a cousin, a clever cousin a wee bit aulder, and mibbe no sae braw as the other queen, but a queen nevertheless. Queen o' a country wi' an army, an' a navy and dominion over many lands. (Lochhead, 1989: 12)

By making her characters interchange roles, Lochhead emphasises the performative nature of identities and humanises the representation of historical characters. In the course of the play, the antagonism between Mary Stuart and Elizabeth is an excuse to analyse power relations in contemporary Scotland, ranging from gender asymmetries and cultural colonialism to class or religious difference. Lochhead's greatest achievement is her ability to make the audience visualise the split between the body and the role it shall perform, thus connecting her text with postmodern theories on the construction of identity (Butler, 1990). Hence, the last scene in the play, "Jock Tamson's Bairns," acquires great relevance when the historical characters "stripped of all dignity and historicity" are transformed into twentieth-century children "miming childhood games" (Lochhead, 1989: 63). Such transformation takes place once Elizabeth has finally decided to execute Mary and instead of representing her beheading, the timeline is abruptly disrupted and all the characters begin to interact in a playground in 1950's Scotland, to show the transmission of prejudice and bigotry in the nation. As Ruth Frankenberg has stated:

The landscapes of childhood are important because, from the standpoint of children they are received rather than chosen [...]. And while throughout their lives people can and do make profound changes in the ways they see themselves and the world, it seems

to me that the landscapes of childhood are crucially important in creating the backdrop against which later transformations must take place. (1997: 212)

Significantly enough, Knox is the only adult at the beginning of the scene. Given his previous representation in the text as an icon of misogyny and religious bigotry, he contaminates the kids “by pouring a cup of dirty water from his pail over their heads, soaking them” (63). After baptising them, Knox loses his power and becomes “Wee Knooxy”, a marginal presence that is rather despised by the other children. They are all innocent recipients of tradition, but on the other hand, they will also be responsible for reproducing the system they have inherited, which they will predictably bequeath to future generations.

All the characters in this last scene are bound by their national identity, except Mary –Marie. Paradoxically, Elizabeth, Wee Bettie, who should be considered a stranger as much as Mary, exerts an influence over the rest of the children and commands them to bully the girl representing the power of England over Scotland. She is a symbol of the internalisation of English supremacy and her plotting hints at the consequences of lacking appropriate political and cultural structures in the nation. Bettie is also a caricature of the “Thatcher monster” (Varty, 1993: 163) in a moment when Scotland was very much suffering the effects of centralising politics and a “British nationalism” that was mostly identified with the interests of England (Craig, 2001). The children act the execution of Mary Stuart at the commands of Wee Bettie, while La Corbie parodies the scene in the repetitive song that gives an end to the story: “Mary Queen of Scots got her head chopped off/ Mary Queen of Scots got her ... head ... chopped ... off” (67). This open ending forces the audience to decide whether to interpret a metaphoric death of Scotland’s culture, or a more positive message if, as Margery Palmer McCulloch has suggested, Mary’s motto “In my end is my beginning” is considered (2000: 49). With this final twist, Lochhead manages to construct a text that might become an icon of the times, showing a society that is still very much influenced by the apocalyptic feelings derived from the 1979 referendum, yet also looking forward to a future which would materialise only a decade later.

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