



University  
of Glasgow

Price, Victoria E. (2014) *Something in it for the underdog: the playwriting of Joan Ure*. *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen*, 6 (2). pp. 22-41. ISSN 2046-5602

Copyright © 2014 The Author  
Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/94441/>

Deposited on: 21 August 2014

**Something In It for the Underdog: The Playwriting of Joan Ure****Victoria E. Price, University of Glasgow**

In the introduction to *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama*, Ian Brown articulates the hope that his volume will help 'cure the amnesia that has afflicted knowledge about, recognition of and pleasure in Scottish drama and theatre' (2011, p. 5). One aspect of the history and tradition of Scottish drama and playwriting that has been particularly afflicted by the 'Creative Amnesia' Brown has identified, concerns plays by women dramatists. Indeed, writing in 1986 Joyce McMillan reflected on how the experience of female playwrights in Scotland has often been one of exclusion and marginalisation.<sup>1</sup> And, as Tom Maguire has recently noted, 'This exclusion from the industry was matched by the occlusion of women playwrights from the then dominant accounts of Scottish theatre' (2011, p.154). This certainly rings true when considering the playwright Joan Ure: in spite of being the author of more than thirty plays for stage and radio and involved in the founding of the Scottish Society of Playwrights, Ure has nevertheless become a largely forgotten voice of the Scottish stage.<sup>2</sup>

This essay is intended to contribute to a recent move to address and help remedy the amnesia surrounding the playwriting tradition of Scottish women dramatists and, in particular, is intended to celebrate the playwright Joan Ure.<sup>3</sup> It will argue that Ure was an important and formidable creative force in Scottish theatre and that she frequently employed her drama as a vehicle through which to articulate urgent observations on the Scottish theatrical landscape of her day. She was a woman dramatist who broke with the social and stage conventions of her time and whose work was, as a result, in many ways undervalued by her contemporaries.

In *Theatre & Scotland* Trish Reid identifies a Scottish stage 'hitherto and even now largely dominated by masculine voices and concerns' (2013, p. 71) but also points to the way women playwrights, even though they have been in the minority, have made a significant contribution to the development of theatre within Scotland. Audrey Bain in her influential 'Loose Canons: Identifying a Women's Tradition in Playwriting' connects with this when she asserts that the work of female playwrights in the 1970s and 80s constituted 'the emergence of a women's tradition in playwriting', one that 'enter[ed] into a dialogue with Scottish drama as a whole, informing and gaining strength from it' (1996, p. 138, p. 144). One such playwright who contributed to this dialogue was Joan Ure (Elizabeth [Betty] Clark née Carswell, 1919-1978) who emerged on the Scottish theatre scene in the 1960s.

From 1965-71 Ure worked as one of the 'house dramatists' for the Arts Theatre Group at Glasgow University.<sup>4</sup> She then went onto become in 1972 one of the founder members of the short-lived touring Stage Company (Scotland).<sup>5</sup> In 1973 Ure was, together with Ada F. Kay and Ena Lamont Stewart, involved in the formation of the Scottish Society of Playwrights.<sup>6</sup> As Anne Varty has documented, during her career Ure wrote over thirty short plays, several of which were performed across Scotland and on BBC radio (2011, p. 141). She was occasionally the director of and an actress in her own plays. And, she additionally produced a body of (largely unpublished) poetry, some of which was interestingly broadcast, 'testament to its performative quality' (Varty 2011, p. 141).<sup>7</sup> Her writings did not come to wider recognition until the beginning of the 70s. But even then, as Jan McDonald has noted, 'Ure was never a popular dramatist. Few of her plays were performed professionally, indeed many were never staged. Such productions as were mounted were undertaken by "fringe", semi-

professional groups', notably the aforementioned Glasgow University Arts Theatre Group and Stage Company (Scotland) (McDonald 2002, online).

Ure followed in the wake of such female playwrights as Naomi Mitchison (1897-1999, perhaps better known as a novelist and poet but who also wrote a number of plays with a keen focus on Scottish history), Ada F. Kay (aka A. J. Stewart, 1929-) and Ena Lamont Stewart (1912-2006). These three, as Ksenija Horvat has outlined in 'Scottish Women Playwrights Against Zero Visibility: New Voices Breaking Through', were 'hailed as representatives of a small but significant number of women dramatists whose work focussed on the positionality of women in family and society at large' (2005, online). Their plays were concerned with exploring issues of 'domesticity, femininity and gender struggle within a predominantly patriarchal Scottish society' (Horvat 2005, online). When Joan Ure joined these female playwrights in the 1960s, her appearance on the Scottish theatre scene was significant for several reasons.

Firstly, what set Ure apart from her predecessors was that in her writing – not only in her dramatic works but also within numerous articles and letters - she gave voice to the constraints placed upon women dramatists and the limited opportunities for females in the world of Scottish theatre. This is nowhere more apparent than in her 1974 play *Take Your Old Rib Back, Then*. When considering the possibilities of an acting career for Fiona, Malcolm and his wife reflect on how there have been very few parts available for women performers since 1956:

**Fiona:** The rise of the angry young man killed off the girls parts.

**Malcolm:** Ten girls there are for every good female role and some of the girls' parts are now played by boys: It has something

to do with the shortage of dressing room space. (Ure 1979, p. 127)

This exchange clearly articulates Ure's frustration with the fact that despite the presence of a small number of women playwrights, theatre in Scotland was still largely male dominated. It explicitly references, as McDonald has noted, the kitchen-sink naturalism that had become popular in British theatre after John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* had appeared on the stage at the Royal Court, London in 1956 (2002, online). It also alludes to the practice of cross-gender casting at the Citizens' Theatre under the management of Giles Havergal. For Ure, the Havergal years at the Citizens' were additionally problematic due to an apparent lack of interest in work by local Scottish (especially women) playwrights. Ure was to return to a discussion of these issues in her provocative short monologue, poignantly titled *Make a Space for Me*, which she delivered in 1977 at the Scottish Society of Playwrights' Conference in Edinburgh.

In a memoir published shortly after Ure's death in 1978, and reprinted with slight additions as 'Portrait of a Playwright' in *Lean Tales* in 1985, Alasdair Gray described Ure's own struggles to get her work produced thus:

Joan's plays had very few decent productions because: - she worked in Scotland where hardly

any theatres used local writing; her plays were usually short, an evening would require two or

three of them and the public aren't thought to like that...So to get her work seen Joan directed

small productions performed by friends in an Edinburgh basement, sometimes acting in them

herself. She made contact with amateur companies and worked hard, without pay, for

organizations trying to change things, like the abortive Scottish Stage Company, and the more

successful Scottish Society of Playwrights. (1985, p. 253-54)<sup>8</sup>

Gray's observations here point not only to the tendency of Scottish theatres at this time to stage 'classical' plays brought in from outside of Scotland but to the economic aspects of the theatre climate which impacted on dramatists. That is, he calls to mind the small and short-term funds that the Scottish Arts Council (SAC) made available to playwrights and suggests that for economic reasons Ure wrote small casts, hoping that this would increase her chances of having work produced, albeit by semi-professional groups. Although, as Valentina Poggi has argued, 'It is unlikely that in choosing this form Ure merely aimed at reducing costs and increasing chances of production, for as Gray points out Scottish audiences at that time were not particularly taken with the idea of three one-act plays in succession rather than a full-length one' (2000, p. 74). It appears, therefore, that the short play form suited Ure's purposes artistically, as well as serving practical and strategic functions. Nevertheless, the small and limited bursaries distributed to dramatists by the SAC was something Ure felt frustrated and disillusioned by. The restraints placed on Scottish artists by the lack of state funding is a theme that recurs in a number of her works, including *Scarlet Mood* (1964) in which she wryly asserts:

A country makes the artists it deserves

as it makes governments

Our artists shriek in paranoic discords

when they are not just havoring.

You hope they do not feel they speak for you. (Cited in McDonald 1997, p. 508)

Joan Ure, then, employed her literary and performance works as a platform through which to draw attention to the challenges encountered by artists in Scotland during the 1960s and 70s, especially those working within the area of theatre and drama. Through her writings, though, she especially sought to expose the multi-layered difficulties women faced in getting their voices heard on the Scottish stage. For this reason, it is not surprising she has been hailed by historian Andrew Hook as ‘perhaps the twentieth century's most outspoken critic of our culture's treatment of women artists in the field of theatre’ (2010, online).

A further aspect of Ure's writing which set her apart from many of her contemporaries concerns how she extended and enriched the dramatic range by experimenting with new theatrical methods and innovative forms. Encapsulated in Ure's playwriting and dramaturgy was experimentation and a departure from convention. As McDonald puts it, her dramaturgy broke 'the bounds of both post-1956 “angry” naturalism and post-Brechtian political rhetoric. In an age “hot for certainties” her ironic voice seemed frivolous and her metatheatricality, perverse and self-conscious' (2002, online). As indicated earlier, Ure chose mainly to write short one-act plays. This drama, lacking in action, is made up mostly of verbal exchanges between (usually) two characters; in this way the structure functions to provide the sense of a ‘conflict between two selves’, or a ‘debate taking place within a single consciousness’ (Poggi 2000, p. 75). Ure incorporates into her dramatic works poetic monologues, lyricism of movement, songs and dance; her work is ahistorical, anti-naturalistic and typically features surreal settings with the playing space often becoming an 'active participant' in the drama, as opposed to background or milieu

(McDonald 2002, online). That is, her dramaturgy is striking for the way it uses the playing space symbolically to 'define the spheres of psychological or metaphysical "influence"' and for how she 'highlight[s] the process of representation itself by consistently employing alienation devices that underline the theatricality rather than the mimetic realism of the drama' (McDonald 1997, p. 510).

It is Ure's experimentation with lyrical styles in dramatic language, though, that is especially noteworthy. For, she was keen to explore the relationship between verse and drama in different creative ways: to cite Ure herself, 'Is it not possible to have a poem made out of theatre?', so she asked Giles Gordon, director of her play *Punctuated Rhythms*, in 1962.<sup>9</sup> Accordingly, she experimented 'with poetry *in* the theatre and with the poetry *of* the theatre, linking lyricism with dance and movement in symbolic and often surrealistic settings' (McDonald 2002, online [my emphasis]). As Christopher Small says of her play-texts in the introduction to his volume of five of Ure's plays, published in her memory in 1979:<sup>10</sup>

they concentrated an extraordinary amount of thought, feeling, and imagination into small

compass. Concentration was always her aim, achieved by allusion, ellipsis, an uncommon

capacity to make her every word work for its living and carry as much meaning as possible, and

at the same time to move with natural grace. In a word, she was a poet; but though also a lyric

poet, one who fully grasped the fact – indeed with all her instincts – that drama is another mode

of poetry. (Ure 1979, p. 4).



It is perhaps this defiance of and moving away from conventional distinctions between poetry and drama that meant Ure's playwriting achievements were not fully recognised by many of her contemporaries. This is a sentiment which appears to be shared by Gray: within 'Portrait of a Playwright,' he 'complain[s] of the national stereotype of Scots as "violent people" in order to explain why the more restrained, formal language of Ure's plays were not popular' (Glass 2008, p. 40). Nevertheless, what cannot be disputed is that Ure brought a fresh and 'distinctive style to [her] language and composition for the theatre' by drawing on her craft as a poet (Varty 2011, p. 140).

In addition to experimenting with dramatic style and extending its formal dimensions, Ure's plays are notable for their subject matter: they bring centre stage issues of gender politics that have an urgent Scottish focus and are explored from the perspective of individual women's experiences. Ure broke from convention in repositioning female characters and removing them from the domestic sphere; in this way, she challenged patriarchal preconceptions about the position of women in society and was explicit in her rejection of the traditional roles of wife, mother and maiden. As Horvat has argued, Ure sought in her dramatic writings to 'explore the nature of human identity and relationships on all levels, in order to expose the falseness of the clichés of femininity firmly entrenched in both social and literary context' (2005, online). Removing female characters from the margins and repositioning them as the central protagonists of her dramatic writings, Ure was thus able not only to foreground the struggles women faced to be recognised in patriarchal Scottish society but simultaneously to imagine and look ahead to new possibilities and relationships between the sexes.

Ure's use of her play-texts to expose the limitations and fictions of culturally prescribed gender roles and stereotypes is especially apparent in her 1971 twin or companion pieces, *Something In It For Cordelia* and *Something In It For Ophelia*, two feminist revisionings of Shakespeare. In the introduction to his edition of five of Ure's plays, Small asserts: 'Three of [her] plays...are a kind of gloss upon Shakespeare, and it is interesting that Joan Ure, who was both modest and heroically daring in her writing, should have set herself, not to improve on him but to pick up, as it were, some of his odds and ends and see what could be made of them' (1979, p. 5).<sup>11</sup> The words used here, 'to pick up...some of his odds and ends and see what could be made of them', suggests a kind of collaboration with Shakespeare which, in my view, does not quite capture the nature of the *Something In It* plays – rather, I would contend that through her appropriation of Shakespeare, Ure in fact stages a resistance and challenge to the 'canon'<sup>12</sup> by means of a revisioning and repositioning of his female characters so as to offer her audience an analysis of the experiential diversity of women.<sup>13</sup>

Both plays were staged at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 1971 in a basement room in Edinburgh's George Square – in other words, away from the well-known main venues around the Royal Mile.<sup>14</sup> Their setting is Waverley Station, significantly, as McDonald has noted, 'a place of transit and a locus of change', whilst at the same time a reference to Scotland's cultural heritage and the novels of Sir Walter Scott (2002, online). Both point up the social constrictions for women *and* men of the society they live in and challenge culturally accepted 'truths' regarding gender roles. They do so, for example, by highlighting the lack of strong female characters in Shakespeare and, in particular, by subverting the Shakespearean notion that the figure of the woman on stage is only valuable for her chaste body, fertile womb or tragic

death. As the Introducer declares as part of his opening speech in *Something In It For Cordelia*:

The young women nowadays have noticed that there is nothing much for them to do in

Shakespeare's plays – Ophelia and Cordelia for instance – except die, rather beautifully. Today

it might be different. (p. 11)<sup>15</sup>

Pointing up the limited roles for women in the Shakespearean canon clearly becomes an effective means of highlighting the narrow expressions of womanhood that were in need of revision and updating in the popular theatre culture of Ure's own time, too.

The title page of the published text interestingly describes the play as 'a comedy rescued for Festival 1971 from Shakespeare and the performance in that year of KING LEAR at the Assembly Hall' (p. 10). Within the play, Ure can be seen to 'rescue' her Cordelia from the role of victim and to reframe her as a hero capable of decisive action. This Cordelia has just arrived at the station with her father perched on the handlebars of her bike, having carried him away from a performance of *King Lear* at the Assembly Hall in order to prevent their participation in the tragic ending of the play. Ure refuses to allow her Cordelia to be used simply as a trophy for a husband or father, criticising the use of Cordelia's body at the end of Shakespeare's play as a reason to pity Lear:

But then he [the Fool] began predicting my death and I realised I had heard enough. I was not

going to let it happen. I was going to rescue you...I wasn't going to let you slip out of the world

to tumultuous applause and using my lifeless body as an object of sympathy to be conferred

upon you. I wasn't going to let it happen. Without a word. Without a word from me I mean.

There's got to be something in it for Cordelia, some day, I said. She is not just going to be

something her father uses like a medal to proclaim his sores. (p. 16)

What Cordelia appears to be lacking in Shakespeare, where her character has a mere 3% of the dialogue, is the strong voice which Ure provides: in *Something In It For Cordelia* the titular character soliloquises about her opinions and offers the audience the Lear story told from her perspective.

If Shakespeare's Cordelia was reliant on Lear, Ure's play reverses their roles. Cordelia is keen to start a new life after leaving her husband Donald, who with his 'merry men' is off 'playing soldiers on the esplanade of the Castle' (p. 12, p. 16).<sup>16</sup> She intends to cycle to the highlands to their new home whilst Lear takes the train. The now retired 'ex-King Lear', meanwhile, is portrayed by Ure as a hypochondriac, politically impotent and simply whiney. Seeking sympathy by remaining in his 'mobile throne' (a wheelchair), he even relies on Cordelia to remember his bowel movements (p. 12). At the farm that will be their new home, Cordelia will be caretaker and Lear will sign autographs for tourists. As Poggi has asserted of the play:

The idyll dreamed of by Shakespeare's chastened Lear in the remarkable speech beginning 'We

two alone shall sing like birds in a cage' is cut down to comic size with a vengeance, both as a

comment on Scotland's condition (the negation of grandeur) and in vindication of Cordelia's –

and women's in general – right to do something more than just 'love and be silent'. (2000, p. 79)

Ure's Cordelia, then, bursts out of *King Lear*, liberating herself from the restrictions of the Shakespearean classic and exposing the fictions of culturally constructed gender roles.

In *Something In It For Ophelia*, Ure presents a revisioning of arguably *the* canonical text: *Hamlet*. Here the spectator is introduced to Hannah Macnair, a 20-year-old bank clerk from Falkirk, who has been to see a performance of *Hamlet* at the Assembly Hall and who finds herself distressed and unsettled by the experience:

when the lights went up and I looked round it was as if all the men were Hamlet.

They were clapping and clapping too. I got very frightened then. I had to remind myself of a

few things. My own father's name, Maxwell Macnair, my brother's name, Rutherfor Macnair. I

kept saying all the names of boys and men I knew, so that I wouldn't be turning my head and

seeing everybody clapping and clapping because they were seeing themselves as Hamlet. (p. 42)<sup>17</sup>

For Hannah, Ophelia's madness and death are associated with an article she has read in *The Scotsman* which reports high suicide rates in young women. She is afraid of what Ophelia appears to represent to women of her generation and, to Hannah's mind, the men who were 'clapping and clapping' in the audience appear to applaud the death

of Shakespeare's tragic heroine and, by extension, the deaths of the young women reported in the newspaper article.

Waiting for a train on the platform at Waverley Station, Hannah forces a fellow commuter, Martin Armstrong, who was also in attendance at the Assembly Hall performance, to engage in a post-show analysis of *Hamlet* and to admit that as a man he may be somehow responsible for the deaths of young women: 'All I wanted to do was read my book. But now you have put in my protection every young female whose attempted suicide is caused by my reading books instead of speaking to her, and you have no idea what you are doing' (p. 47). As Varty has asserted of the play, 'Typically for Ure's theatre, distinctions between life and art collapse, identities overwhelmed by fictional counterparts, as Hannah explores her distress at Ophelia's suicide and on behalf of her sisters, locks Martin in mortal combat over mutual responsibility and gender discrimination' (2011, p. 141-42). Overcome by Hannah's verbal duelling, Martin is reduced to tears on the platform; Hannah leaves him bereft by declaring that she was merely rehearsing an argument which she hopes later to use to impress her colleagues from the bank, who are to attend a performance of the production on another night.

Throughout the short metatheatrical piece, Ure invites the spectator to see the situation from both male and female perspectives. For example, the play encourages us to recognise that just as Ophelia is exploited by Hamlet and her father Polonius, so Martin is victimised by the materialistic Hannah and also his mother (Bain 1996, p. 143). Martin finds himself oppressed by conventional images of the masculine hero - 'You look at me as if I ride a white and gold horse, and lo I am riding a white and gold horse!' (p. 47) - and suffocated and constrained by what he describes as the 'bloodsucking' love of his widowed mother - 'What love means to mothers like mine is

that you sit quite still in your bed while she turns down the clean sheets and sends for the doctor and serves you meals on a tray' (p. 45, p. 46). As Varty has observed, 'Hannah's revolt at the applauded role model Ophelia offers leads her to inhabit the dominant, masculine position and to generate feminine patterns in Martin's behaviour, "you are just like Ophelia" she tells Martin.' (Varty 2011, p. 142; Ure 1979b, p. 56). Indeed, the play makes clear there is no neat or simple correspondence between Hannah and Ophelia, or Martin and Hamlet, though these identities are flirted with and kept in play throughout. In this way, *Something In It For Ophelia* presents a 'questioning of inherited clichés of Scottish identity' and foregrounds 'the struggle for each gender to evolve an authentic identity, validated by experience' and in resistance to cultural codes (Varty 2011, p. 142).<sup>18</sup>

Ure, of course, was not the only female dramatist of her time to explore and decry the culturally constructed codes of gender that were damaging, especially to women – as Bain writes, 'The work of many Scottish women playwrights is marked by an interest in social responsibility, in particular how women can best manage the competing demands of individual desire and obligation to others in their roles as wives, mothers and daughters' (1996, p. 142). But Ure's playwriting was certainly distinctive in how it brought sharply into focus the need for the diversity of women's individual and personal experiences to be explored on the Scottish stage, as well as for new possibilities for female characters out with the domestic sphere and new relationships between the sexes to be imagined and considered.

What I hope I have demonstrated here, then, is that this largely overlooked playwright played a significant role in contributing to an extension in the range of Scottish drama – a role that demands to be recognised and remembered. Ure's fresh and innovative experimentations in dramatic style enabled her to create a space within

which she could bring new, personal female perspectives onto the stage and could expose the harsh social and political realities for women at the same time as illuminating how socially constructed gender roles are inhibiting and restrictive to all, regardless of gender. In many ways Ure paved the way for other women dramatists to give voice to their own, individual experience(s) of being female and Scottish.<sup>19</sup> As Alasdair Gray reflected in his 'portrait' of Joan Ure in 1985, 'Things are slightly better for local playwrights in Scotland today, and she is partly responsible for that' (1985, p. 253-54).

## Endnotes

---

1 See: Joyce McMillan's 'Women Playwrights in Contemporary Scottish Theatre', *Chapman*, 43-4

(1986), pp. 69-76.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, during the last decade Italy has become, in the words of Andrew Hook, a 'centre of Ure studies': Valentina Poggi (formerly of the University of Bologna) has both translated and written on Ure, and Gioia Angeletti (University of Parma) has published a book containing a long introduction on Ure's writing career, followed by her own translation of Ure's *I see myself as this young Girl* (1968) and Poggi's translation of *Take Your Old Rib Back, Then* (2010, online). And yet sadly Ure continues to receive virtually no practitioner attention here in Scotland, and within the UK has been the subject of just a couple of critical articles: Bain; McDonald; and, Varty.

3 For more on a playwriting tradition of Scottish female dramatists, see: Bain; Horvat; Maguire;

McDonald; and, Varty.

4 As Jan McDonald states, Glasgow University Arts Theatre Group 'flourished in the 1960s and 70s'

and was 'dedicated to the production of new plays, primarily by Scottish dramatists'. The group

'performed principally in a theatre-cum-lecturehall in the Modern Languages Building on campus' (McDonald 2002, online). Its membership included staff and students from the University

and from the College of Drama, as well as professional actors.

5 As McDonald has recorded, Stage Company (Scotland) was 'founded in 1972 by ex-Arts Theatre Group actors and directors, notably Robert Trotter and Helen Milne (Mitchell) who had taken part in several productions of Joan Ure's plays' (2002, online).

6 Founded in November 1973, the Scottish Society of Playwrights (SSP) was established 'in response to a need for a co-ordinated voice for playwrights to be heard in Scottish theatre and to act as a playwriting development and promotional agency' (Scottish



Society of Playwrights, online). For an insightful history of the development of the SSP, see Ian Brown's 'More to Come: Forty Years of the Scottish Society of Playwrights', *Edinburgh Review* (special edition on *Haggis Hunting: fifty years of new playwriting in Scotland*), 137 (2013), pp. 90-99.

7 A substantial collection of Joan Ure's poetry, short stories and other prose writings are available in the Scottish Theatre Archive at University of Glasgow. The range of material deposited in the archive includes letters, unpublished scripts and poems, articles and public lectures. A significant portion of this material remains to be catalogued by the STA.

8 The memoir was originally published as 'Joan Ure: 1919-1978', *Chapman*, VI, 3-4 (1978), pp. 44-47. It was subsequently reprinted, with slight additions, as 'Portrait of a Playwright' in *Lean Tales* by James Kelman, Agnes Owens and Alasdair Gray (London: Jonathan Cape, 1985), pp. 247-55.

9 This quotation arrestingly forms the title of Jan McDonald's important article on Joan Ure's playwriting and dramaturgy in *International Journal of Scottish Theatre*, 3.1 (2002).

10 The five plays included in the volume are: *Something in it for Cordelia*, *Something in it for Ophelia*, *Seven Characters Out Of The Dream*, *The Hard Case*, and *Take Your Old Rib Back, Then*.

11 *Seven Characters Out Of the Dream* (1968) is, of course, Ure's third (and final) Shakespearean appropriation. The setting is a fancy dress party in the home of an actress, where a group of seven actors is asked to appear in the costumes they wore for their recent production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

12 This seems especially poignant given that in the decades after the Second World War the Scottish playwrights who came to prominence and gained general recognition were almost all men: one thinks here of Bill Bryden, John Byrne, Stewart Conn, Robert Kemp, Ronald Mavor, John McGrath, Robert McLellan and C. P. Taylor. For a discussion of the challenges encountered by female playwrights and the restrictions placed on them by a notional male 'canon', see: McMillan 1986, esp. p. 72-73.

13 Joan Ure was not a playwright who sought to replicate Shakespeare or pay homage to his canonical status: she had the greatest respect for drama and poetry but she dismissed the idolisation of writers. In a talk to a writers' group in 1968, she spoke about a television series on Robert Burns: 'The songs, the poems, are used as background music to leak one scene into the next. This is a product to suit the cult of Burns and the cult of Burns is like organised religion. The stronger the organisation the less the religious experience allowed within it' (Ure 1968, p. 9). She dismissed notions of canonicity and faced writers and writing on an equal footing: 'But as for poems, piety is the last emotion to bring to discovering a poem. You have to face a poem as an equal not as a worshipper and you can get no more from it than you can bring' (Ure 1968, p. 10).

14 As McDonald has argued, the 'off-off Fringe venue' in which the companion pieces were performed 'ironically position[s] the plays, and Joan Ure's perception of her role as a woman playwright, as marginal, on the periphery of art and society in Scotland' (2002, online).

15 All references for *Something In It For Cordelia* are taken from: Ure, 1979a.

16 As McDonald has written, 'As well as providing a feminist critique of *King Lear*, a play that, however poetically magnificent, is in its subject matter a reactionary paeon to patriarchy, Ure succeeds in problematizing the cognate "Scotch Myths" of Tartanry at the Tattoo and the Brigadoonery of the Highland idyll' (2002, online). For more on, discourses of 'tartanry' and masculinist constructions of the nation, see: Reid, 2013, p. 18-31.

17 All references for *Something In It For Ophelia* are taken from: Ure, 1979b.

- 18 McDonald has said of Ure's work:  
Rarely does Joan Ure write in Scots and when she does so it is with some irony. Her view was that, for her purposes, a Scottish accent was unnecessary in the acting of her characters because, as she put it in *A Play for Mac*, 'the Scottishness is in their psychology and should show up in performance.' (2002, online)  
Notably, in *Something In It For Ophelia*, Hannah proudly asserts, 'I have no accent' (p. 38). And yet, as Varty notes, her 'Scottish psychology' and the 'roles allotted to her by a patriarchal culture appear to subsume her entire identity'. In this respect, 'the high artifice of Ure's language' in the play functions to 'express the prescribed inauthenticity governing her characters' mutually destructive gender roles' (2011, p. 142).
- 19 Certainly, the 1980s saw an increase in the number of women dramatists who had work presented on the Scottish stage and who gave voice to the unspoken histories and experiences of women. One thinks here of Lara Jane Bunting, Catherine Lucy Czerkawska, Anne Mari Di Mambro, Anne Downie, Marcella Evaristi, Liz Lochhead, Sharman Macdonald, Rona Munro and Aileen Ritchie. Many of these female playwrights picked up on the themes foreground in Ure's work and explored them in a range of different writing styles. For example, Ure's explicit rejection within her dramatic writings of the social perception that family was a woman's greatest achievement is something that Sue Glover notably went onto pick up on in her depiction of Rona within *The Seal Wife* (1980). Liz Lochhead has also taken forward many of the themes present in Ure's plays within her formal dramas and also in her poetry and her cabaret (Varty 2011, p. 142).

## References

- BAIN, A. 1996. Loose Canons: Identifying a Women's Tradition in Playwriting. In: Stevenson, R. and Wallace, G. eds. *Scottish Theatre Since the Seventies*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 138-45.
- BROWN, I. 2011. Introduction: A Lively Tradition and Creative Amnesia. In: Brown, I. ed. *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 1-5.
- BROWN, I. 2013. More to Come: Forty Years of the Scottish Society of Playwrights. *Edinburgh Review* 137, pp. 90-99.

GLASS, R. 2008. *Alasdair Gray: A Secretary's Biography*. London: Bloomsbury.

GRAY, A. 1985. Portrait of a Playwright. In: Kelman, J., Owens, A., and Gray, A. *Lean Tales*. London: Jonathan Cape, pp. 247-55.

HOOKE, A. 2010. Anything in it for Ophelia. *Scottish Review*. Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> August 2010 [online]. Available at: <http://www.scottishreview.net/TheCafe4.shtml> [Accessed 6 December 2012].

HORVAT, K. 2005. Scottish Women Playwrights Against Zero Visibility: New Voices Breaking Through. *Études écossaises* 10, pp. 143-58 [online]. Available at: <http://etudeseccossaises.revues.org/index157.html> [Accessed 6 December 2012].

MAGUIRE, T. 2011. Women Playwrights from the 1970s and 1980s. In: Brown, I. ed. *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 154-64.

MCDONALD, J. 1997. Scottish Women Dramatists Since 1945. In: Gifford, D., and McMillan, D. eds. *A History of Scottish Women's Writing*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 494-513.

MCDONALD, J. 2002. 'Is it not possible to have a Poem made out of Theatre?'- An Assessment of

---

the dramas and dramaturgy of Joan Ure. *International Journal of Scottish Theatre* 3.1.

[online] Available at:

[http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/ijost/Volume3\\_no1/1\\_mcdonald\\_j.htm](http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/ScotLit/ASLS/ijost/Volume3_no1/1_mcdonald_j.htm)

[Accessed 10 January 2010].

MCMILLAN, J. 1986. Women Playwrights in Contemporary Scottish Theatre.

*Chapman* 43-4, pp. 69-76.

POGGI, V. 2000. 'How this mother swells up toward my heart': Joan Ure Re-writing Shakespeare. In: Poggi, V. and Rose, M. eds. *A Theatre That Matters: Twentieth-Century Scottish Drama and Theatre*. Milan: Unicopli, pp. 73-87.

REID, T. 2013. *Theatre & Scotland*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

ROY, K. 2010. Land of the forgotten sex. *Scottish Review*. Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> August 2010 [online]. Available at: <http://www.scottishreview.net/KRoy3.shtml> [Accessed 6 December 2012].

SCOTTISH SOCIETY OF PLAYWRIGHTS. [online]. Available at:

[www.scottishsocietyofplaywrights.co.uk](http://www.scottishsocietyofplaywrights.co.uk) [Accessed 1 November 2013].

SMALL, C., ed. 1979. *Five Short Plays*. Glasgow: Scottish Society of Playwrights.

URE, J. 1968. On Being a Writer in Scotland, and on Scottish Culture. A talk for the *Writers On Their Work* series. Scottish Theatre Archive, Nf 1/194.

URE, J. 1979a. *Something In It For Cordelia*. In: Small, C. ed. *Five Short Plays*.

Glasgow: Scottish Society of Playwrights, pp. 10-30.

URE, J. 1979b. *Something In It For Ophelia*. In Small, C. ed. *Five Short Plays*.

Glasgow: Scottish Society of Playwrights, pp. 30-57.

VARTY, A. 2011. Poets in the Theatre: Ure, Kay, Conn, Morgan. In: Brown, I. ed.

*The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University

Press, pp. 140-53.