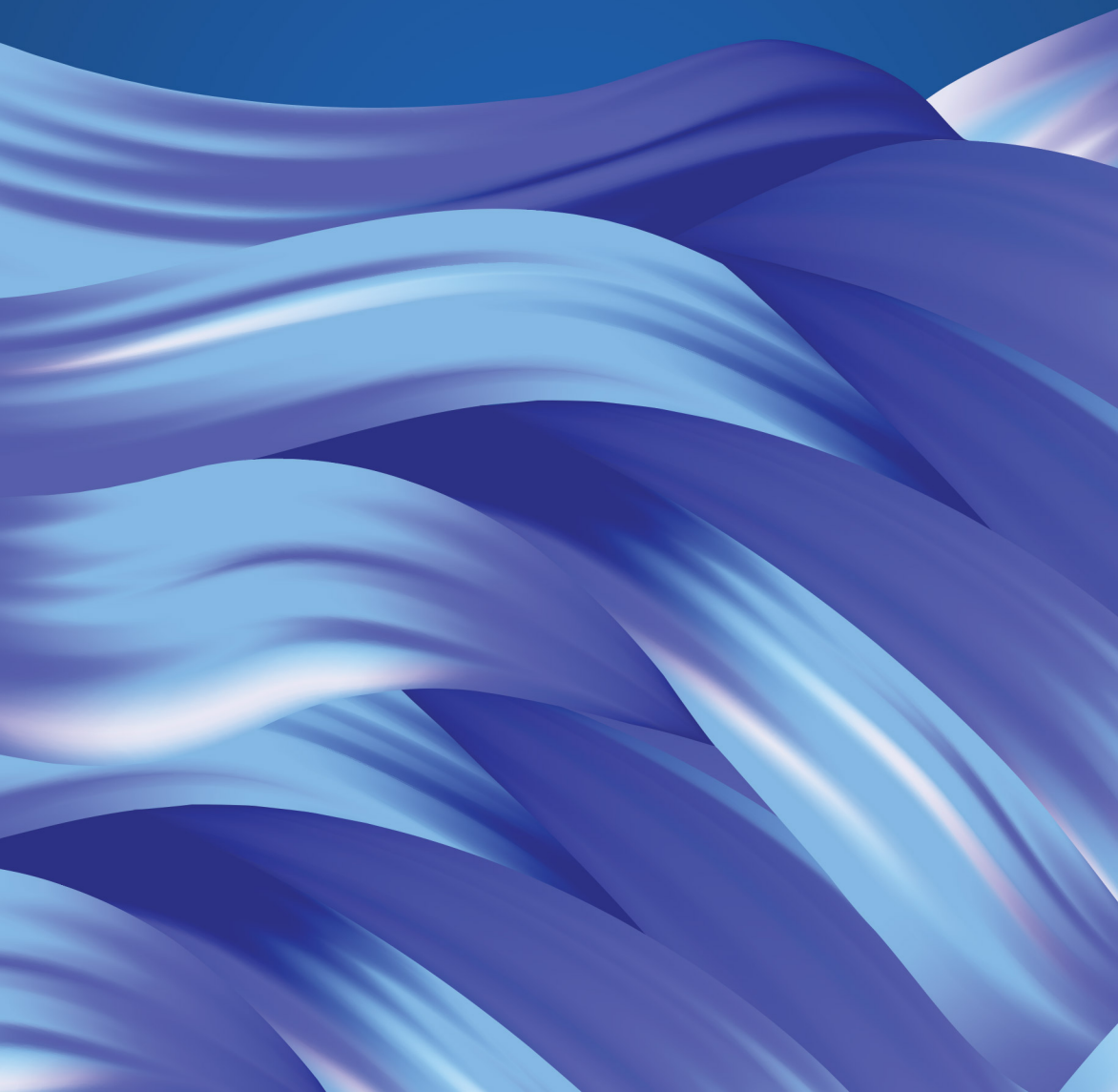
IFETA ČIRIĆ-FAZLIJA
LEJLA MULALIĆ

A COUNTRY OF THEIR OWN: Writing Scotland as a Woman



A Country of Their Own: Writing Scotland as a Woman

Ifeta Čirić-Fazlija
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Sarajevo, 2025

A COUNTRY OF THEIR OWN:
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We dedicate the book to our greatest supporters, our families

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A COUNTRY OF THEIR OWN: INTRODUCTION

"Scotland, Whit Like?" asks Liz Lochhead, in her inspiring dramatic piece *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* ([1987] 1989, p. 11), which portrays the country and its society by unravelling the most enduring myth and grand narrative regarding the loss of its independence, its distinctive language and culture, and its 'martyred' Queen. "What is Scotland like?" the authors of this book similarly asked themselves in 1995 and 1996 respectively. This was when, as undergraduate students in our first year(s) of the English language and literature programme at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Sarajevo, we were presented with the most basic information in our two-semester course on the history and culture of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. "What is Scotland *really* like and what is its literature like?" we continued to ask during our under- and postgraduate studies, which (apart from half a dozen poems, novels and works of short fiction by Robert Burns, Sir Walter Scott, Alasdair Gray and Muriel Spark) primarily focused on the classics of English, American and select postcolonial literature. "What are (modern and contemporary) Scottish drama and poetry like?" was the question that remained unanswered for the greatest part of our individual student lives and our research, directed by our professors and mentors. Such research predominantly led us into the world(s) of anglophone novels and Shakespearean, Beckettian and Pinteresque drama, but largely excluded the Scottish context, barring a few songs and poems by Burns and Edwin Morgan that we discussed and analysed in courses on British Romanticism and Modernism. Then in 1998 and 1999, we each in turn won scholarships that took us to Edinburgh, Scotland, and the Scottish Universities Interna-

tional Summer School (SUISS). The six-week programme facilitated our personal immersion into the idiosyncratic language, culture, history and society of a country in the process of devolution, and enabled us to absorb the international and multicultural atmosphere shaped by SUISS participants from around the globe, in the classrooms and adjoined premises of the University of Edinburgh, Pollock Halls of Residence, and the cultural heritage monuments and historic sites to which our field trips took us. Yet, our enquiry into the distinctive Scottish poetry and drama, especially those works of fiction composed by women authors, produced few or no definitive answers. Lumsden and Christianson (2011) state that: "There were, in fact, Scottish women writing in the 1970s and 1980s: poets (for example, Valerie Gillies and Liz Lochhead …); novelists (Muriel Spark, Jessie Kesson and Emma Tennant, for example); short story writers such as Elspeth Davy; and dramatists such as Joan Ure" (p. 1). Despite this, it looked to us as though women writers were scarce, and that there were almost no women poets or dramatists in (1990s) Scotland, judging by the reading lists of the University of Sarajevo's (mostly hetero-androcentric and English/Anglo-Saxon dominated) literary and cultural courses, and those of the two course modules, "Text and Context" and "Modernism", that SUISS offered at the time. Our separate doctoral studies, conducted from 2007–2013 and 2008–2014, provisionally led us away from Scotland, but not from British theatre, (dramatic) literature, cultural history or women authors; the quest for distinctive women's voices in anglophone literature, arts and culture has persevered in our individual post-doctoral research and publications. This monograph represents its authors' joint academic and figurative return to Scotland and its literature, especially those created by women writers in and of Scotland.

Resolved to correct the (un)intentionally projected images of Scotland as men's country and its literature and culture as exclusively male zones, we have placed our critical focus on select works by five women dramatists, poets and short fiction authors, generally employing feminist theoretical tenets and approaches. For this reason, the book, which comprises six analytical chapters, is not preceded by an extensive review of the theories, methodological approaches and significant figures pertaining to feminist criticism, or women's and gender stud-

ies; instead, it offers our students and fellow scholars a concentrated feminist reading of specific Scottish writers' works. Further, because (Scottish) women's production in dramatic, poetic and short narrative genres is largely overlooked and underappreciated (partly because of the long-standing hetero-androcentrism in theatre and other arenas of public life, and partly because of the unwavering pre-eminence of novels in academic and publishing ecospheres for over 200 years), we have narrowed our critical attention to selected plays, poems, short fictions and essays by contemporary authors Kathleen Jamie, Liz Lochhead, Sharman Macdonald, Rona Munro, and Agnes Owens. We intend to open up a discursive and academic space for Scottish women authors in and beyond Bosnia and Herzegovina, to place their works in the limelight, and simultaneously examine the ways in which Scottish-born women dramatists, poets and short fiction authors write (about) Scotland, and thereby creatively demarcate a country of their own.

Boundaries are an essential aspect of women's lives, because the walls of patriarchy irrevocably define their inner and outer spaces. Kathleen Jamie captures the inner split in a woman's mind with refreshing gusto and sharp irony, in the poem "Wee Wifey":

> I have a demon and her name is
> WEE WIFEY
> I caught her in a demon trap – the household of my skull
> I pinched her through her heel throughout her wily transformations
> until
> she confessed
> her name indeed to be WEE WIFEY
> and she was out to do me ill.
>
> So I made great gestures like Jehovah: dividing
> land from sea, sea from sky,
> my own self from WEE WIFEY
> (*There,* she says, *that's tidy!*)
> […]
> (Jamie, 2013, p. 139)

This excerpt underscores the complexity of the relationship between women and the socially constructed gender norms and expectations embodied in the 'wee wifey', as well as Jamie's effort to symbolically divide the self from the 'wee wifey' demon. The poet's creative powers are immense (like Jehovah's), but it is the 'wee wifey' who observes the imposition of the inner boundary with a smirk, knowing that she is, like most demons, a shapeshifter. Boundaries mean nothing to her; she can re-emerge in the most hidden parts of a woman's psyche, only to remind her that she does not conform to the image of a good wife, mother, daughter, friend, artist or any other form of self. The women writers included in this book have created inspiring stories of how women of diverse backgrounds chase, nourish, struggle with and are haunted by the 'wee wifey' demon. Crucially, the works examined in this book are written in diverse genres, thereby challenging the convention of 'gendering the genre' and resisting confinement to a single narrative mode. For reasons previously outlined, this book does not explore women novelists who are now an important part of the Scottish literary canon, although their journey towards recognition was not without its challenges.

For women writers in Scotland, the sense of literary agency is additionally complicated by the contested concept of Scottish nationhood within the larger context of the United Kingdom. Scottish/English borders have often been contested in the past. Since the 1707 Act of Union, Scotland has been a "stateless nation" (McCrone, 1992), although such an identification seems ill-fitting in a world in which nation states increasingly lose credibility (McCrone, 1992). In 1997, Scotland regained its national parliament through the Devolution Referendum, after an unsuccessful attempt in 1979. The rejected proposal for Scottish independence in 2014, compounded by the Brexit and Covid-19 crises, indicates a persistent polarisation in Scottish society, but similar tensions can be identified in many other societies with completely different histories. While it can be said that we live in a globalised world, which seemingly renders small nations and their stories irrelevant in the larger scheme of affairs, McCrone (2005) powerfully argues that this is a misunderstanding of the modern world, because "globalisation does not create bland, uniform homogeneity" (p. 1). Territories react differently to huge so-

cial forces and "the local and the global are but two sides of the same coin" (McCrone, 2005, p. 1).

Understandably, these tensions are reflected in literature, a domain traditionally tied closely to the issue of nation in Scotland, with consequences for women writers much graver than for their male counterparts. As a result, women writers' engagement with the issue of national identity has in the last few decades been inevitable, necessary, and problematic. As Christianson (2002) argues:

> It is clear that women have always had different kinds of split demands and pulls of loyalty, stemming in part from the original passing of ownership of the woman's body from fathers to husbands, loyalties split between outside and inside the family, between parents and partner (of whatever sex), between children and husband/father. These kinds of shifting demands ensure that a commitment to monolithic concepts like 'nationality' is problematic, especially when legal nationality is seen as stemming from the father, not the mother. (p. 70)

Accordingly, Christianson's evocative concepts of 'debatable lands' and 'passable boundaries' convey the interplay of nation and gender in our consideration of Scottish women writers. We focus on five authors, each of whom is represented by either one dramatic work or a number of shorter pieces, such as poems, short stories, or essays. This cannot do justice to what is now a flourishing literary scene in Scotland, but we hope it can initiate a productive dialogue with other interested readers, and invite new interpretations. From the 'wee wifey' demon to the confined spaces of nation, region, race, class, and sexuality, women writers have been silenced, marginalised, and defined by a sense of uncertainty. This is precisely why it is essential for them to not only register the ways in which these identities intersect, but also to explore how they interrogate and problematise one another (see Christianson, 2002). Selected women writers (almost all of whom are neglected in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian literary and scholarly context) range from those now widely acclaimed, such as Liz

Lochhead, Kathleen Jamie, and (to a degree) Rona Munro, to those who have remained lesser known, such as Agnes Owens and Sharman Macdonald. The setting of their works ranges from the urban areas of Glasgow and Edinburgh to the rural and liminal areas of the Highlands, Fife and the Hebrides, and their protagonists sit on a broad spectrum from poverty to royalty, with many shades of the working and middle classes in between. Our readings of individual writers trace their personal struggles and the transitions in their views on gender and nation, thus endorsing "a perpetual state of flux, with oppositions and alliances in constantly shifting relationships, both within ourselves and with others" (Christianson, 2002, p. 68).

Liz Lochhead remains an immense feminist figure in the Scottish literary ecosphere, and her advice for women writers in the decade leading to the new millennium reflects the spirit of the political and creative enthusiasm of the 1990s, but also the potentially limiting effect of societal expectations:

> Three points about being a woman writer in Scotland. One: your gender is not a 'problem'. Quite the reverse. The supressed feminine inside all those males (and the supressed feminine outside and inside all those females) is crying out for sustenance and starving for soul food. You have a territory to explore insufficiently mapped out or exploited. […] Two: you don't *really* need 'role models'. […] Three: you don't have to 'write positively about women' or create 'heroines'. To tell the truth about things, even to delineate the chains of victimhood is to write positively. (Lochhead, 1991, pp. 73–74)

Lochhead's advice was not in vain for the authors included in this book, whose chapters are outlined in the brief overview that follows.

The first chapter concentrates on Scottish feminist playwright Rona Munro, who blends entertaining narratives with political depth, centring on women's experiences and resisting heteropatriarchal norms. Briefly discussing Munro's oeuvre and the web of influences that have shaped her writing, the chapter's analytical focus is her less-

er-known play, *Your Turn to Clean the Stair* (1992). Examining the ways in which Munro disrupts the stereotypisation of women as mere victims or villains, and exploring violence, desire, and agency in this episodic murder mystery/social drama set in an Edinburgh tenement stairwell, the chapter foregrounds the play's depiction of morally complex women (see Munro, 2012, p. 30) who challenge classism, gender essentialism and the male gaze in the Scottish urban landscape. The play's structural design and fragmentation is also addressed, centring on the stairwell – a liminal space that obscures the public/private and reality/unreality divides, and a metaphor for systemic surveillance, confrontation, and blurred identities.

Continuing with the assessment of Scottish dramatic authors, the book's second chapter directs its critical lens at Sharman Macdonald, who crafts women-centred narratives that explore the correlation between (gender and sexual) identity construction, larger societal metanarratives, and personal emotional inheritance. Analysing the structure and portrayal of characters in Macdonald's underappreciated play *When We Were Women* (1988), set in wartime Glasgow, the chapter discusses the playwright's creative resistance to patriarchal storytelling and the either rigid androcentric favouring of men over women, or reductive second-wave feminist privileging of women over men. It also examines Macdonald's reframing of Scottish wartime society through domestic and subjective perspectives, and her re-positioning of (working-class) women as active agents who defy poverty, subjugation, androcentrism, and the male gaze.

Lauding her seminal place in the canon of Scottish women's literature, the third and fourth chapters focus on Liz Lochhead and her writings. Starting from her dramatic oeuvre, "Liz Lochhead (1947–): Feminist Literary and Stage Icon" depicts the ways in which she interrogates patriarchal structures and the marginalisation of women's voices in myth, histor(iograph)y, culture and everyday life. By engaging with her acclaimed play *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (1987) – thus breaking with the method of presenting unheralded texts by Scottish women dramatists – the chapter intends to offer a fresh perspective that concentrates on less explored dimensions of the text. Lochhead's feminist challenging of Scottish cultural identity, history and literature in the play is foregrounded through the

examination of the narrative's skilful structuring, the characters placed centre-stage, and the imagology of Scotland contained in the play's initial monologue, "Scotland, Whit Like?". The chapter also analyses the play's systematic unravelling of androcentrism, gender essentialism and the male gaze, inherent in national and European narratives about (female) Renaissance monarchs, and the political theory of a monarch's two bodies.

While the chapter on Lochhead's play *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* establishes the important theoretical concepts of androcentrism and the male gaze, "The Female-Coloured and Scottish-Coloured Poetry of Liz Lochhead" takes a more thematic approach to her selected poetry, exploring the ways in which Lochhead subverts the patriarchal structures of society. Starting from her role as Makar, with its political and literary implications, the chapter examines three aspects of womanhood – changes inherent to particular stages of a woman's life; women and creative work; and women as carers, past and present – through critical readings of selected poems from the collection *A Handsel* (2023).

The chapter "Scotland's Wonderful Revolting Subjects in Agnes Owens's Short Stories" considers the unsettling politics and aesthetics of working-class Scotland in Owens's story "Arabella" (1978) and the collection *People Like That* (1996), with a focus on the role of women in economically deprived communities. Drawing on Butler's (2012) concept of ethics of care and an analysis of neoliberal capitalist discourse on the 'undeserving poor', the chapter provides insight into Owens's role in enhancing the literary representation of working-class women in ways that defy easy classification and theorisation, thereby highlighting her impact on the Scottish literary landscape.

The volume concludes with the chapter "Embracing Change and Uncertainty in Our Lives on This Planet: Kathleen Jamie (1962–)", which first traces a shift in Jamie's attitudes to issues of gender and nation over several decades, and then focuses on her non-fiction (*Findings* [2005] and *Sightlines* [2012]) within the framework of New Nature Writing. Informed by the broad concept of ecofeminism and more specific ideas such as trans-corporeality (Alaimo, 2010), the chapter dwells on humanity's relationship with the non-human world,

using the permeability of boundaries as its entry point. Replacing the discourse of nation with that of our being-in-the-landscape, Jamie also pursues new dimensions of gender identity and equality as a careful observer of women's traces in Scotland's landscape.

Finally, our individual chapters and analyses underline the findings of other women and gender studies academics, and all who oppose the universalising and homogenising tendencies of 'cishet' white middle-class (second-wave) feminism. Women's experiences and writings are versatile and disparate, and will not allow for an uncomplicated "goodies and baddies" (Macdonald, 1990) binary. The works we assess pursue a common trajectory, reflecting Lochhead's previously cited advice: a woman writer, feminist or not, is not obliged by her gender or social and/or critical position to create works that portray women (only) as infallible heroines. What really matters is to represent the intricacies of women's experiences, plights and bodies truthfully, whether or not their surroundings, life choices, and opportunities make them "victims or dyed in the wool villains … [or] morally complicated" (Munro, 2012, p. 30). In that regard, Lumsden and Christianson (2011) affirm that "[t]he 1990s have seen the addition of many new Scottish women writing from a more confident assumption that being female and being Scottish are linked and culturally positive" (p. 1). This implies a necessary "redrawing of the literary map of Scotland, allowing for these writers a natural assumption of place in a culture previously more accessible to male Scottish writers" (op. cit.). Any assessment of Scottish women's literature therefore demands a multiplicity of critical approaches, because the "most notable [aspect] about Scottish women writers today is their diversity; they write in a number of styles and genres and take as their subject matter a wide variety of themes" (Lumsden and Christianson, 2011, p. 6). As the authors of *A Country of Their Own: Writing Scotland as a Woman*, we sincerely hope that all interested readers will find their own routes on the map of Scottish women's literature, and in doing so help create spaces for new exciting debates, and for other women authors in/of Scotland.

RONA MUNRO (1959–): A SELF-DEFINED FEMINIST WRITER

Although Rona Munro has been active in English-speaking theatre and drama since the eighties, when she graduated from the University of Edinburgh, she is still somewhat neglected in more general surveys of dramatic literature and performing arts, and in academic and critical studies of contemporary British drama generally, and Scottish drama specifically. Even though certain number of Munro's plays (most frequently *Bold Girls*, *the Maiden Stone*, *Piper's Cave*, *Iron*, and/or *Fugue*) have been assessed and examined by a range of scholars,[1] to date there has not been a single comprehensive study of her full dramatic scope, even among unpublished doctoral dissertations. Describing herself as "… a Scottish playwright, a woman playwright, and an Aberdonian playwright, not necessarily in that order …" (Munro, as cited in Smith, 2006, p. 244), Munro is a brilliant and prolific[2] Scottish-born author and a self-defined feminist,[3] whose plays have been produced in theatres across Britain and the US. She has received many awards for her outstanding work, such as the 1988 Giles Cooper Award (for radio drama *Dirt Under the Carpet*); the 1991 Evening Standard Most Promising Playwright award;

1 See, for example, Goodman, 1993; Scullion, 1995; Bain, 1996; Zenzinger, 1996; McDonald, 1997; Scullion, 2000; Horvat, 2005; Smith; 2006; Smith & Horvat, 2009; Horvat & Bell, 2011; Archibald 2011; Maguire, 2011; or Čirić-Fazlija, 2022.

2 From 1982, when her first plays *The Bang and the Whimper* and *The Salesman* were produced by Stage Traffic Theatre Company in London (Oddy, 2003; Smith, 2006), to 2024, when her most recent drama *James V: Katherine*, the fifth part of the *James Plays*, debuted at the Studio Theatre in Edinburgh (Brennan, 2024), Munro authored nearly fifty dramatic works for theatre, radio and/or television. More detailed lists can be found in Oddy (2003), Scullion (2000), and Smith (2006).

3 This term is taken from Rona Munro's essay (see Munro, 2012, p. 28).

the 1990–1991 Susan Smith Blackburn prize for best woman dramatist; the 1991 London Theatre Critics Circle prize for best drama; the 1992 *Plays and Players* best play award (all for her play *Bold Girls*); the 1995 Peggy Ramsay Memorial Award for her play *The Maiden Stone*; the 2003 John Whiting Award for her drama *Iron*; and the awards for best play from the Evening Standard and the Writers' Guild of Great Britain in 2014, both for her trilogy *The James Plays*. Yet the extensive list of Munro's works, awards, fellowships and positions – which include that of a writer-in-residence at Paines Plough Theatre Company in London, England in 1985–86 (Oddy, 2003); EIF–IASH Creative Fellow in 2008–2009 (IASH-Edinburgh, 2018); and an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Sterling, Scotland, in 2023 for her exceptional contribution to national literature and drama (University of Sterling, 2023) – conceal the true nature of her early struggle to become an acclaimed playwright. Like many women dramatists in 1980s (anglophone) theatre, Munro had to produce her own work[4] and/or diversify her scope early, in an attempt to propel her writing career while simultaneously doing odd jobs such as cleaning, which were unrelated to her vocation and education. Apart from the stage plays she has created for both subsidised (established) and independent, alternative theatres (such as *Bold Girls*, her venerated – and still best-known – 1990 play set against the backdrop of The Troubles, and the prized 2014 trilogy *The James Plays*, about the Stewart monarchs), Munro has also written radio dramas (for example her *First Impressions*, 2006), television series and episodes (e.g., *Doctor Who*, 1989; and *Rehab,* 2003), television plays and screenplays (such as *Biting the Hand*, 1989; and *Ladybird, Ladybird*, 1994), stage translations and adaptations (e.g., her translation of Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba*, 1999; and her adaptation of Evelyne de la Chenelière's *Fraises en Janvier*/*Strawberries in January*, 2006), and a range of youth and community theatre (devised) dramas (e.g., *The Bus*, 1984; and *Dust and Dreams*, 1987). Scripted stage dramas and depictions of women's experience have, however, remained her focal point: the most recent texts she has authored have been sequels in *The James plays* cycle – *James IV: Queen of the Fight* (2022), a drama whose plot revolves around two high-born Moorish women in the court of James IV (see Fisher, 2022a; Fisher, 2022b); and *James V: Katherine*, a play which foregrounds historical figure Katherine Hamilton (see Brennan, 2024; Forbes, 2024).

4 Munro's work with the *MsFits* will be elaborated upon later in the chapter.

It was within the socio-political milieu of the early eighties – which included the consequences of the 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher as the UK's first woman Prime Minister; street riots by the Black urban population; the miners' strike; Irish hunger strikes and IRA bombings; and "the rise of Latin American solidarity" (Munro, 2012, p. 21), all of which informed her literary scope, her personal politics and social consciousness – that Rona Munro began to associate with a number of similarly aligned theatre groups, organisations and individuals. These included a community theatre group that took her to Belfast at the peak of the Northern Irish War, and the inclusive Edinburgh Playwrights Workshop (EPW),[5] which gave her her first, albeit unpaid, professional theatre experience (see Munro, 2012, pp. 22–24). Another important organisation, Women Live, which was funded by the Greater London Council and endorsed women in the arts nationally, was highly influential on Munro's formative years in theatre. The organisation secured "venues, a platform, festivals and places that women could get a play on, and simply get seen" (Munro, 2012, p. 24), and was where Munro met actress Fiona Knowles. In 1985, the author and the actress co-founded *MsFits*, a feminist theatre company working in "cabaret and in a series of themed and politicised entertainments" (Scullion, 2000, p. 111), which started touring in 1986. Munro wrote nineteen dramatic pieces for *MsFits* over the next two decades,[6] some of which she also performed in (Smith, 2006, p. 245; pp. 261–262; Simpson, n. d.).[7] Women's troupes and/or feminist collectives were on the rise in the UK from the mid-seventies onwards, and this subsequently led to the foregrounding and promotion of women's and/or feminist drama, and to an increase in the number of women in theatre professions. This represented a reorientation of

5 Horvat (2005) accentuates that after a number of Scottish women dramatists (including Sue Glover) flourished in radio-drama but were mostly ignored and marginalised in Scottish theatres in the seventies, initiatives to establish "a school of women playwrights" were endorsed. She additionally indicates that the subsequent founding of Edinburgh Playwrights Workshop, as part of such initiatives, led to the eighties being considered "a sort of a renaissance period of women's playwriting tradition in Scottish drama" (Horvat, 2005, p. 145).

6 This period spans 1986 to 2006, when Smith's article was published (see Smith, 2006).

7 For more information about the company, its itinerary and previous tours, as well as creative collaboration of Munro and Knowles, see the *MsFits* official webpage (Simpson, n.d.).

what at that point was still a prevalently male-centred British theatre scene. According to Horvat and Bell (2011, p. 669), however, this strategy did not extend to Scotland, where female-led theatre was still seemingly exceptionally rare. Munro (2012) says of *MsFits Theatre Company* that:

> We were, we are, Scotland's longest running small-scale touring theatre company […] we would […] talk about the kind of theatre we wanted to do, the kind of theatre we never saw. We decided to do it ourselves. So we started the *MsFits*, and we were a double act. […] We performed sketches around a running narrative theme, which was feminist in a very explicit way. We did shows about Scotland's matriarchal ancient history and how that might have looked, or about women superheros [sic] who got lower wages than Superman and had to operate without a creche. … (pp. 24–25)

Although *MsFits* stopped touring in 2018, after three decades and "nearly 3000 performances" (Knowles, as cited in Simmons, n.d.), the duo has left indelible traces equally on the Scottish theatre scene, especially in "small scale rural touring" (Bell, as cited in Simmons, n.d.); regional audiences who would otherwise have had limited or no access to stage dramas, particularly women's plays; and the resplendent careers of Fiona Knowles and Rona Munro, despite critic Nightingale's condescending qualification of the latter as "the little-known Scots dramatist" in 1995 (as cited in Scullion, 2000, p. 70).

In her essay "One Writer's Ongoing Struggle to Write Entertaining Narratives with Honest Politics" (2012), Munro shares that her association and early experience with EPW, Women Live and *MsFits* tours in the eighties not only facilitated her (play)writing, but also provided her with a valuable and enduring understanding that "the best theatre is collaborative" (p. 23), and a reciprocal dialogue of its many equal participants; and that writing for larger audiences does not imply that the author "ha[s] to compromise on style or content" (p. 24). For Munro, creating dramatic literature and art is and should be a socially responsible and immersive action, which fosters a syner-

gistic, symbiotic communication among all its participants – author, director, actors, technicians and lay and expert audiences. Within such a mutually cooperative and inclusive process, Munro has always desired to "write stories I hadn't seen before, represent voices that might not usually have taken centre-stage, … represent women's experience" (Munro, 2012, p. 25). This essentially implies a multifaceted process of decentring and deprivileging the homogenous heteropatriarchal discourse and its dominant male gaze (upon women and their bodies). This is reflected not only in the prevalent thematic scope of her nearly fifty pieces (the intricacies of women's experience), but also in the frequently fragmented and/or anti-naturalistic form of her plays (see *Fugue* for example), and the complexity of the characters of women whose ordeals and dilemmas she positions centrally (e.g., Marie and Cassie from *Bold Girls*). It is further reflected in the fact that her ethics and aesthetic – which are "to write entertaining narratives with honest politics" (op. cit., p. 34) in an all-inclusive space where the author should "gradually become the silent partner" (ibid., p. 24) – have meant Munro's plays have provoked varied, at times antithetical, interpretations and responses, and she, as the author, has had to adapt to the new, allegedly 'post-feminist' era. Rona Munro testifies to the fact that the change of socio-political context and atmosphere in post-Thatcherite British society and theatre led the *MsFits* to adjust their tactics, and she, as its playwright, to devise a new strategy that left her style and desired content unaltered:

> The audience who came to see some theatre in order to support the miners, or stick it to Thatcher, or raise money for Nicaragua, had gone, along with its causes and the arrival of the Blair government. We were all supposed to be mainstream now. In order to reach our audience, the *MsFits* now had to go to them. *We built up [a] circuit of community venues and we dropped the explicitly labelled politics from our leaflets*. However, much like my experience of writing *Bold Girls*, when we actually had to reach out and find our audience, in many ways the actual political content of our material strengthened. *We were being inclusive. We were having a dialogue. We presented shows people could*

> *interpret for themselves rather than ones that told them what we thought* and waited for the applause of solidarity and approval. *We had to listen to the women we were talking about. It was a dialogue that gave me the confidence to say more uncomfortable things about female experience*. (Munro, 2012, p. 27; added emphasis)

This personal documentation of the author's enduring struggles to remain loyal to her aesthetic might leave an impression that Munro's early works are less inclusive, not as open to dialogue, or are more straightforwardly didactic than her later plays. It might also appear that in her early scope, Munro, a steadfast and self-proclaimed feminist, offered subjective, one-sided portraits of women as flawless victims of societal gender essentialism and patriarchal marginalisation. On the contrary, in her peculiar dismantling of the androcentric gaze upon women and its control and distribution of gender roles, Rona Munro has never shied away from tackling the "more uncomfortable" aspects, including presenting women as an extension of patriarchal disciplinary power (see Nora in *Bold Girls*), or those who, although disenfranchised themselves, openly display fear and hatred of the Other (e.g., *Saturday Night at the Commodore*). Moreover, Munro does not hesitate to represent women who are guilty of transgressions, of inexplicable violence, and even of murder (as in her play *Iron*). The questions that such figures provoke, the questions that Munro would like her audiences to engage with, are: "Is a woman like that a woman like any other, a woman you'd otherwise like and empathise with–or is she a different breed of human being?" (Munro, 2012, p. 29). The dilemma Munro is foregrounding here is whether "we still have a problem with how we are prepared to perceive women characters: they can be victims or dyed in the wool villains, but they can't be morally complicated" (ibid., p. 30).

To demonstrate that Rona Munro has indeed retained her artistic goal to centre-stage women's experience while presenting "morally complicated" characters – without falling prey to overt didacticism or exclusion – the next section of the chapter analyses her

early nineties' play, *Your Turn to Clean the Stair*. The assessment will scrutinise the play's thematic framework, its formal and structural elements, the complex characters that inhabit its fictional world, and the ways in which Munro dismantles gender essentialism and the heteropatriarchal gaze upon the women's body in the piece.

An Edinburgh Murder Mystery: *Your Turn to Clean the Stair*

The play in the analytical focus of this chapter was created and produced in 1992, two years after *Bold Girls*, the piece with which Munro achieved a breakthrough after the first decade of her playwriting career.[8] *Your Turn to Clean the Stair*[9] was commissioned by the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, and was "the last play to be performed in the original Traverse Theatre in the Grassmarket"[10] (Munro, 1995, p. vi). Having by that point already written twenty seven works of diverse length, genre and/or media – four plays for community and youth theatres, five pieces for *the MsFits*, five radio dramas, five episodes of tv series *Dr Who* and *Casualty*, two television plays for the BBC and Scottish Television, and seven theatre dramas that premiered in Scotland or England (see Smith, 2006, pp. 245; 260–262) – Rona Munro was anything but a novice in the performing arts. Nevertheless, most

8 More on the highly acclaimed *Bold Girls* can be found in McDonald (1997), Scullion (2000), Smith (2006), Horvat and Bell (2011), Maguire (2011) and Čirić-Fazlija (2022).

9 From here on in the chapter, *Your Turn*.

10 Horvat and Bell (2011, p. 66) claim that, among other developments in the 1980s, the Traverse's activities in support of new drama – including their "playwriting workshops for women" – "facilitated the emergence of playwrights such as Sue Glover, Marcella Evaristi, Liz Lochhead, Rona Munro, Catherine Lucy Czerkawska, Anne Downie and Sharman Macdonald". Maguire (2011, p. 156), however, suggests that the theatre's furtherance of national women playwrights "was sporadic and often dependent on specific directors championing the work". Considering the number of Munro's plays that premiered at the Traverse and by the Scottish branch of the 7:84 Theatre Company (see Smith, 2006, pp. 260–261; Scullion, 2000, p. 116), she can be said to have established "productive links with Scottish theatre companies" (Scullion, 2000, p.111), even if at the beginning of her writing career she appeared more welcome in England than Scotland (see Horvat and Bell, 2011, p. 67; Maguire, 2011, p. 156).

of her previous stage dramas explored either natural and/or rural settings and mythical, folkloric or historical narratives and events, and presented characters who spoke in a range of accents and languages, including historic Scots, Northern Irish, vernacular Aberdonian and contemporary English. None of her plays written before the early nineties were set in urban Edinburgh, or had characters who spoke in contemporary urban Scots vernacular. Therefore, Munro created this play which "was intended very much as an 'Edinburgh' play" (Munro, 1995b, p. vi), in which five characters of both genders speak in what Zenzinger (1996) describes as a "genteel Edinburgh middle-class accent" (p. 127).

In the Author's Note preceding the dramatic text, the playwright testifies that she wanted to write "something particular to Edinburgh" (Munro, 1995b, p. vi), and therefore placed the action of *Your Turn* in an Edinburgh tenement building. The title itself draws on the city's material cultural heritage, tenement buildings, and the shared practice of such edifices' occupants; it "refers to the printed notice that is hung on each doorknob in turn as the residents of Edinburgh tenements pass on the obligation to swab down the common stair" (ibid.). Moreover, the author professes that she once mislaid the sign when she lived in such a building; yet "none of the [play's] characters are thumbnail sketches of [her] neighbours" (ibid.). Indeed, realism is neither the mode nor genre of this play; rather, its two acts[11] are episodic in structure and employ expressionistic techniques. These include a highly subjective, non-realist stage design and decoration; sudden shifts and lapses in time; use of lighting to indicate changes in tone, atmosphere, the spatio-temporal framework of the action or the state of characters' consciousness; and instances of characters sleepwalking, or fragments of their reminiscences, dreams, and/or hallucinations, juxtaposed incongruously with episodes that exploit the ostensibly realistic dialogue "in the vernaculars of contemporary Edinburgh" (Scullion, 2000, p. 106). Due to its formal elements and unusual yet gripping structuring of incidents this play that portrays 'neighbourly' relations and women's experiences situated in the shared urban space, the stair,

11 The text of the play uses no further subdivision, and the changes of sequences and beats are achieved either through characters entering or exiting the main location of the action, and/or through lighting changes indicated in the didascalies.

appears to "move between sequences of 'reality' and 'unreality' […] but this time there is a twist in the tale" (Smith, 2006, p. 247). The twist in the plot (and the dramatic story) that Smith refers to shapes *Your Turn* into a stage version of a murder mystery, a genre that Munro declares she "always wanted to write" (Munro, 1995b, p. vi).

The play opens with an image of its central character Lisa, a married woman in her early thirties who works as an assistant in a lingerie shop, descending the stair, illuminated only by light from behind the half-open doors of other tenants' flats. Lisa is dressed in a heavy coat but wears no shoes or socks, and gazes silently into the dark void ahead. As she comes to a standstill, her expressionless and speechless gape into the darkness is contrasted with a murmur of voices sputtering from the apartments. This surreal vignette suggests that the protagonist Lisa is somnambulant, caught in the act of sleepwalking. The lights fade on the character, and a new scene opens with scrubbing sounds: it is early evening, and Lisa's seventy-year-old widowed neighbour Mrs Mackie is scouring the stair. Her deliberate, systematic, and arduous movements, her heaving, and her adroit lifting of the assortment of buckets, scrubbing brush and mop that surround her, reveal that Mrs Mackie, although aged and not as able-bodied as she once was, has become skilled in this long-practiced, supposedly shared, routine. The character's progress is interrupted by another resident, early-twenties mum Kay, who is carrying her shopping goods and her baby in her arms. Their conversation imparts important pieces of information about the characters, their mutual relations, and this municipal micro-community. While Kay, cautiously climbing the stair, is trying to keep the talk light and respectful but is tangibly quite distanced, Mrs Mackie (intently observing Kay's ascent) presents her scrubbing efforts as a form of communal (self-)sacrifice, and gossips freely, decrying a mutual male neighbour as a "dirty brute" (Munro, 1995, p. 6). Kay vanishes into her flat and Lisa's husband Brian, in his early thirties, enters the stair with a bag of items from hardware shop B&Q. This gives Mrs Mackie the opportunity to ask him curtly to repair the front door, as she continues to complain about the racket allegedly made by the disparaged neighbour, and the cries of Kay's young child, which keep her up at night. Mackie, thus characterised as a prying, irksome neighbour, builds on her gossip, switching from the "dirty brute" to

the "Young Mums", depicting Kay as an inept mother and a licentious woman: "Starving their own bairns out of ignorance, I've seen her feed it in broad daylight too, out on that backgreen, blouse open for all the world to see, I says, 'This isny the Third World lassie, you do up those buttons …'" (Munro, 1995, p. 7). Brian, obviously used to his elderly neighbour's quarrelsome personality, ignores the chatter and directs his exchange and attention to the required maintenance, while Mackie keeps ranting about modern women's loss of decency and propriety, and passes xenophobic, racist and sexist observations. Interrupted by Kay rushing down to collect the pram as her child begins wailing upstairs, Mrs Mackie redirects her disparagement to the still-unnamed male neighbour, the "dirty brute" who apparently keeps the company of "hoodlums and hoors" (ibid.). Brian identifies him as late twenties Bobby McNulty, their shady downstairs neighbour. As their conversation continues, the swift shifts from one topic to another create a comical moment, as Mrs Mackie haphazardly switches from one unfavourable issue (Bobby), to another (the broken front door), and Brian, not following her natter partly out of annoyance and partly because he is genuinely disinterested in anything other than the repairs, fully misses the point, and responds that Bobby has never troubled him personally. As Mrs Mackie adds another of McNulty's transgressions to her heap of grievances – the supposed loss of the council notice that determines whose turn it is to clean the stair – Lisa enters with her load of shopping bags, and Brian – surprised that she is home, having lost track of the time – greets her, and hurriedly disappears into their flat. Although Lisa appears to have done Mrs Mackie a favour by doing her shopping, the latter seems displeased, and ungratefully complains about the time-frame, the goods she bought, the solvent stench wafting from Lisa and Brian's flat, the front door banging, and a stray black dog digging up bones and destroying the (shared) garden her late husband John tended to, all of which support her early characterisation. When, full of praise, she starts to reminisce about her late husband, the audience might feel sympathy for the lonely elderly woman, but Lisa, clenching her teeth and retaining a superficial smile, politely ends the conversation and leaves, which does not stop the former from grumbling after her about Brian's obvious absent-mindedness. Mrs Mackie ceases her tirade only when she is startled by the dubious Bobby McNulty, who finally appears on stage, whistling and

in a good mood. He ironically breaks into a rendition of Elvis Costello's "She" upon seeing the elderly woman, who watches him fixedly, as if clamped to the stair she has only just stopped scrubbing, the tension between the two palpable. Breezy Bobby offers the frozen Mackie a present, a mould remover spray he has been selling. He reads from the label and jokes with his elderly neighbour, who retains her taciturn composure throughout the brief scene before picking up her cleaning supplies and leaving, warning McNulty of his impending doom. By introducing all the *dramatis personae* and most of their mutual relationships within the centrally placed locus of the action, the tenement stair, Munro has meticulously laid out the scene for subsequent events and for her inspection of the diversity and complexity of women's experiences.

The next sequence shows Lisa and Brian inside their flat, seemingly performing the mundane activities of a childfree married couple. Still, Brian's lack of interest in the elaborate foreign meals Lisa plans to cook, the silk lingerie she holds up to her body, and the need to finish the renovations to their flat, sell it, and move to a more affluent neighbourhood, as Lisa desires (and as Brian has promised) suggest a crack in their relationship. Lisa's exasperated protests, her perturbed, rapid transitions between rooms, and her angry slamming of the bathroom door further suggest that their marriage is at least dysfunctional, if not broken beyond repair. Although childhood sweethearts, the two seem ill-fitted, and Brian does not seem to have lived up to Lisa's romantic expectations or her adolescent dreams of the better, richer life her 'prince charming' would have provided. Exacerbating this, Brian's aloof, self-absorbed manner leaves the impression he does not hear or see her at all, which he denies. Their argument ends with Lisa sardonically threatening to slash her wrists in the bathroom where, after Brian tells her not to break anything (as it would be a waste of his time and effort), she smashes glass, at which point Kay simultaneously rings their doorbell to ask if Lisa could babysit. Brian agrees to the request on Lisa's behalf, and once Lisa is out of the bathroom their argument continues. Lisa is annoyed that Brian has made the arrangement without consulting her, and Brian, who sees no problem in his actions, is only concerned about the item Lisa broke, and fails to notice she has unintentionally cut herself.

The lighting changes again and the following beat reveals Lisa on the stair, and the sounds of Mrs Mackie going down the stairs to her flat and Bobby talking on the phone. When Bobby, carrying a bucket of water and a mop, almost collides with Lisa on the stair, the two begin a conversation in which Bobby slanders Mrs Mackie, and Lisa defends the elderly neighbour until Bobby asks Lisa's whereabouts, makes irreverent innuendos about Kay, compliments Lisa's looks, and asks her inappropriate, intimate questions. Lisa's terse reaction at this point may be interpreted as a fitting response to Bobby's brazenness, but the whole exchange leaves a sense of unease and apprehension, as if the two characters share more than just neighbourly relations. The sequence ends with Lisa running upstairs to Kay's flat and Bobby gazing dumbfoundedly after her as he accidently spills water from the bucket. In the next, the focus is on Kay and Lisa. The two women's conversation provides more information: Kay is the single mum of baby girl Tina, whose father, Dave, lives in Falkirk with another woman, and has never seen his daughter. Kay is concerned about the impressions she and her flat might leave on her social worker, who is coming to pay a visit, and Lisa consoles her, offering Kay silky-smooth lingerie to cheer her up. Although Kay refuses, stating the sensual underwear is not to her liking, Lisa keeps on insisting, suggesting it will boost her confidence, and (along with her sexualised body) enable her (or any other woman) to manipulate men, just as she has allegedly manipulated Brian (which, given the previous episode, is a clear fabrication). It is also quite evident from this brief sequence that Lisa is not particularly maternal, as she wonders if the baby will awake, and is uncomfortable with the notion of having to pick her up. Conversely, Kay, despite being young and alone and facing slander from her neighbours, is depicted as a sound mother, a nurturer who makes her own bread, cooks warm meals and has a green thumb, also planning to plant flowers in the communal garden Mrs Mackie has usurped. When Lisa grumbles about Bobby, stating "he gives [her] the crawls" (Munro, 1995, p. 20), Kay is surprised, and says "he's O.K." (ibid., p. 23). Lisa explains the discrepancy away with the fact that Kay has a child, and is therefore not accosted by Bobby. As Kay makes no comment when Lisa reports his insinuations against her, it appears as though the former is also concealing something from her, possibly protecting certain aspects of her private life.

With Kay's exit and another change of lighting, a brief new beat begins: Lisa is presented somewhat later (still in Kay's flat, babysitting) as if in slumber, opening the door onto mocking from disjointed voices, which ask variations of Bobby's inappropriate question. Protesting, she flees back into the apartment, and the lights turn up as she hears the racket of Mrs Mackie pounding on Bobby's door, and loudly demanding he return the council notice. Lisa intervenes to prevent the noise from waking the baby, but the elderly lady continues to yell, remonstrating that McNulty should be dealt with, and remembering how successfully her late husband had "just had a wee word, that's all it took …" (Munro, 1995, p. 26). When Mrs Mackie mentions the garden her late husband tended to, Lisa, to divert the conversation, carelessly remarks that it will soon be dug up, and when the elderly neighbour insists on knowing who is going to touch it, Lisa, lying, opportunistically names Bobby. Annoyed by the idea of Bobby (or anyone else) overturning the garden, Mrs Mackie departs wearily, and Bobby's head protrudes from behind his flat's door to thank Lisa for saving him, and ask where he got things wrong, bringing up Christmas. Neither Bobby nor the audience get clarification, however, as Lisa coldly spurns him. Lisa enters Kay's flat, and attempts to tidy up the bread and seeds she spilled when the commotion had begun, but Kay, returning from the pub, accuses the former of snooping. Lisa tries to clear the misunderstanding, but Kay remains on the offensive until she explains she has been sleepwalking, and was not prying. With the air seemingly cleared, Kay and Lisa exchange pleasantries for the night, and Lisa walks onto the stair.

The lighting alters again and the audience watches Lisa hallucinate – the voices now point to the fact that Lisa and Brian's relationship is dysfunctional, suggestively claiming Lisa is keeping up the appearances of a perfect marriage while the two never have intercourse, and that she is a distressed woman, "not fit to be touched" (ibid., p. 30). Lisa's loud screams to suppress the voices suggest this is not just a sleepwalking incident, but that the voices come from Lisa's own subconscious, and the scene ends with a blackout. Simultaneously, someone emits a death groan and the lights momentarily turn up to show Lisa, wide awake, looking at Bobby, prostrated on the stair next to her feet, with a wound to his head, and blood surrounding him. As

Lisa examines his body, checking for a pulse and contemplating what to do, having only half-realised Bobby is lifeless, she hears Mrs Mackie coming downstairs with the buckets. As if to protect the elderly neighbour from the disagreeable sight, Lisa attempts to block the body from her view, but Mrs Mackie insists she has to clean things up again as "He's made a terrible mess of the stair" (Munro, 1995, p. 31). Although the double-entendre has Lisa (and the audience) thinking the elderly Mrs Mackie, obsessing about the cleanliness of the stair and McNulty's offences, has simply forgotten that she already scrubbed the place, the latter corrects the former, stating she is not senile, and maintains that "There'll be some mess down there, I'm telling you. Leave it to tomorrow it'll be dried in. We'll never lift it. … Him! Dirty drunken so and so, puking his fish suppers all over my clean steps." (Munro, 1995, p. 32). After a few more words, Lisa persuades Mrs Mackie to go back to her apartment, and then, thinking Bobby is deceased, runs to her flat to get Brian, who does not respond immediately. At that moment Lisa returns to the door to re-enter the stair, and as she draws nearer to it, there is a full blackout, noises of the front door banging and heavy feet climbing the stairs. In a state of fright Lisa yells for Brian, feet are heard running on the stairs, and he appears at the door, turning the lights on. Believing Lisa has sleepwalked again, Brian tries to comfort her, but she nervously admits to having murdered Bobby in her somnambulism, which Brian refutes – he claims he saw no body on the stair on his way back from trying to fix the outer door (his repair attempt was the cause of the blackout). The mystery and suspense continue as Lisa, left alone, peers onto the stair and sees an empty landing, but once she touches the place where Bobby had lain, she finds blood. This activates her fight-or-flight response and she bolts back to her flat, panic-stricken. Nonetheless, Brian attempts to persuade her it was just a figment of her imagination, a somnambulant nightmare, while Mrs Mackie is concurrently presented swabbing the stair. When Lisa asks what her neighbour is cleaning, the latter states ambiguously: "his mess everywhere just like it always is" (ibid., p. 36). By this point, Munro has deftly built a series of impressions of her characters and their mutual relations, hence, the plausibility of Lisa being the murderer is equal to that of any or none of the other tenants, since they all conceal skeletons in their respective cupboards. As Lisa observes the elderly woman going upstairs, having mopped "his

[the dirty brute's] mess", Brian, in a restrained voice, tells Lisa to forget about Christmas and the mysterious incident, which "there's no need to talk about" (Munro, 1995, p. 36). And yet, with a change of lighting and a feat of (dramatic) irony, in the ensuing sequence Munro takes the action back in time, juxtaposing Brian's words with the events of the crucial Christmas party.

The flashback first presents Mrs Mackie giving Bobby a scare as she warns him about a disturbance – it is late at night, and he is loudly decorating his door for a Christmas party. After the initial jolt, Bobby turns the music down and attempts to sell her dodgy electric socks. He then gets back to his business as she goes back to her flat, claiming her late husband would have "sorted you quick enough" (op. cit., p. 37). A heavily pregnant Kay joins Bobby for a drink, confessing to him that Dave, the man who impregnated her, has deserted her, and warning Bobby to keep quiet about it. She leaves as Lisa enters the building, jovial and tipsy. Lisa gives Bobby a card, and he attempts to stall her departure under the pretence of needing advice on the dodgy items he sells. Lisa reluctantly indulges, and as they share more drinks and jokes Bobby chats her up and they end up in his apartment. After a lapse of time, signalled by another change of lighting, the episode reveals Lisa emerging from Bobby's flat; as she attempts to close his door, it slams and Brian sees her on the stair. The moment Brian bends to pick up the coat Lisa left in front of Bobby's door, a half-dressed Bobby appears from behind it; the scene ends the first act, as a stuttering Bobby wishes Brian Merry Christmas and closes the door, leaving Brian flabbergasted and motionless on the stair.

The play's second act transports the action back to the present time, showing Lisa in her housecoat checking on Bobby. Her knocking brings Mrs Mackie out onto the landing above, and she demands Lisa join her for a chat. Lisa hesitantly enters Mrs Mackie's, where she is served watery tea and stale, chewy biscuits along with a stretched, convoluted, indirect admission of guilt. Fully perplexed, she consents to assist her elderly neighbour in a cover-up, not grasping what she is agreeing to. Thinking she has made an arrangement, Mackie dismisses her younger neighbour, and goes on gossiping about Kay, telling Lisa: "She's no long out you know. […] The Royal, Psychiatric. Oh she was violent. I heard all sorts of screaming before they lifted her. That poor

bairn. They should sterilise them you know, it'd be a kindness in the long run." (Munro, 1995, p. 48). On the stairs Lisa runs into Kay and Tina. Kay, upset, asks if they can hide in Lisa's flat, claiming that some ruffians, "business associates" of Bobby's, are looking for him, and she cannot go back to her own apartment. This conversation provides the audiences not only with more information on Bobby's shady character and background, but also on the relationships between particular tenants. Kay states that: "You canny keep secrets on this stair can you" (ibid., p. 51), suggesting the neighbourhood allows its residents no privacy, while Lisa, frenziedly tidying to distract herself, attempts to destigmatise and normalise Kay's mental health issues. At this moment, Munro has Kay confess to Lisa that she has attempted suicide, and that she is a lesbian, but lonely enough to want to keep a man around, and willing even to kill rather than be forcefully separated from her baby. The audience is not given the chance to see Lisa's reaction, as at that moment Brian makes a loud noise at the door, which the two women misinterpret as danger. Kay threatens the imagined thugs with violence and readies to leave, then runs into an astonished Brian. Brian, noticing Lisa is unwell, helps her lie down, and a change of lighting introduces another brief beat.

In another sleepwalking incident, Munro shows Lisa's subconscious resurfacing through a nightmare. This time all the characters are present on the stair with Lisa, who watches motionless as Brian, Kay and Mrs Mackie batter Bobby senseless with a hammer, a broom and a mop, respectively. Using the same tools, the three sweep the bludgeoned Bobby down the stair, and Brian hands the unresponsive Lisa the hammer and leaves. As the bloodied, barely alive Bobby attempts to crawl away, Kay and Mrs Mackie ascend the stairs, glancing back. This potent stage image suggestively points to Lisa's chaotic state of mind and her conceivable breakdown, but it also complicates the plot of the murder mystery, as it signifies the (latent) homicidal intents of everybody in the community. Additionally, when Brian re-enters with a ludicrous clown mask on his face and juggling balls in his hands, the scene has the play bordering on the grotesque, and reminding the modern audience of a certain killer-clown film franchise. The lighting then changes again, which, along with the other characters' disappearance from the stage, signals that the image is not inclusive

to the same beat – namely, after a pregnant pause, Brian breaks into a Looney Tunes theme while juggling the balls, and then, lifting the mask, reveals it is his routine for a kids' Easter show. Lisa breaks down crying, insisting that either she is losing her mind or someone did kill their neighbour, and Brian tries to comfort her. He also selfishly picks the worst possible moment to tell Lisa he will not move house as he is settled, and orally paints an image of what the flat will look like once the renovations are complete. Lisa asserts they should consult a therapist to help repair their relationship, but Brian counters ferociously, and the heated conversation boils to an argument in which Brian retakes the hammer:

> BRIAN. Shut up!
>
> *He snatches the hammer off her, holds it half raised.*
>
> That's what you want isn't it? You want me sweating and raging with jealousy, you *wanted* me to kill him didn't you?
>
> *She doesn't answer, terrified.*
>
> See? … I do not know how to make you really happy, don't I Lisa? [sic]
>
> *He snatches up his coat and goes to exit.*
>
> LISA (*whisper*). I just want you to touch me like he …
>
> BRIAN *exits onto the stair, going down.* LISA *watches him go then turns and*
>
> *walks upstairs.* (Munro, 1995, p. 59)

Perturbed by their argument and ignoring Mrs Mackie's calls to clear up the mess as she promised, Lisa seeks comfort at Kay's, and asks her about lesbianism and maternal instincts. As they touch upon the topic of McNulty, Lisa discloses fragments of her Christmas escapade with him, painting a vivid image of her sexualised body that contains "rich visual and olfactory properties" (Horvat and Bell, 2011, p.

71). The eroticised depiction surprises Kay, which leads Lisa to admit her marital problems. Becoming increasingly drunk on the brandy she brought, Lisa initiates sexual congress with Kay. The change of lighting brings in another sequence in which Lisa, sleepwalking, is shown on the stair, torn between Kay at the top and Bobby at the bottom of the stair, the two seductively asking her intimate questions. The twist is that it is revealed it is not the disembodied voices of neighbours who direct words of hatred and disgust at Lisa, but she herself. The next sequence juxtaposes Lisa's subconscious self-loathing with the accusations and offense she hurls at Kay upon waking up, even charging the latter with exploitation. She cruelly utters that it is "easy to see why you ended up in the Royal isn't it?" (Munro, 1995, p. 68) and Kay recoils and freezes as Lisa exits to the stair where she sits down, on the verge of tears.

At that moment, with no change of lighting, the author presents the bloodied Bobby strenuously crawling up the stairs, and Mrs Mackie concurrently appearing, with a coal shovel in her hands. As Lisa runs down to help Bobby, Kay also arrives and the former sends the latter to call the ambulance. Meanwhile, the lengthier dialogue between Lisa and Mrs Mackie uncovers an unexpected series of revelations: it is disclosed that Lisa, although sleepwalking, did indeed see the maimed Bobby on the tenement stair; that it was the elderly woman who knocked Bobby over with her bucket; and that she had also brought about the death of her husband, John, then buried his body in the garden. When the black dog began to dig John's bones up, and when Lisa told her Bobby was going to overturn the garden, Mrs Mackie felt compelled to "sort out the mess", even if she claims "I never meant harm to him. He shouldny suffer" (Munro, 1995, p. 71). As Bobby takes his last breath, the revelatory scene unfolds with Brian and Kay entering the stair from their respective flats. They observe Lisa crouching and stroking her neighbour-cum-lover's lifeless body while remorsefully addressing Brian. At the very end of the scene, before the blackout, Munro shows Lisa moving away, while Kay stoops crying. The author leaves the play open: the final episode shows Lisa helping Mrs Mackie down to the front door where someone, assumedly the police, is waiting for her – as the elderly woman descends, she comments on the messy state of the stair, and Lisa stays to clean

it up, even though, as Mrs Mackie acknowledges, it is not her turn. Lisa's question "So who's counting?" (Munro, 1995, p. 72) is whimsically directed not so much at Mrs Mackie or herself, but more at the audience, who is asked to readdress the true issue of the play, in this ironic inversion of its inceptive scene.

As previously elaborated, the plot of *Your Turn to Clean the Stair* is fragmented, and the structure of the play is episodic, with constant lapses in time that correspond to its central character's fluctuations in levels of consciousness. Although the time of action oscillates to represent Lisa's psychological disturbance – these vacillations represented by changes in the lighting – the location of the action, the common stairwell, remains unchanged. To keep the focus on the shared vestibule, which is the scene of the crime but also the point of communal urban exchange, random meetings of neighbours, and a kind of liminal space that obfuscates all boundaries, Munro instructs that the stage design should show "the middle flight and landing, [as] the stairs continue into darkness above and below" (ibid., p. 5). Additionally, per the didascaly, beside the central hall construction is a functional door, opening into a room that represents all flats, which is entered from different directions. This accommodates the fact that Lisa, the play's central protagonist, suffers from somnambulism, which often takes her outside her private space to the public, common, one (this movement symbolises the resurfacing of her suppressed desires and fears), and the married couple's flat is entered/exited from the front door. Conversely, the other women's flats are entered from rooms inside, hence the audiences do not see their respective apartments' entry doors. Specific to the function and nature that Bobby McNulty's character has in the play (that of a shady neighbour with a hidden agenda, who becomes the murder mystery's unforeseen victim), the door to his flat is placed in opposite direction to the functional stage door, and the interior of his flat is never on display. Munro (1995) states that "other doors are positioned non naturalistically around the set" (p. 5), visually representing the metaphoric doors to Lisa's subconscious, as they "open during LISA's dream scenes" (ibid.), and from them, in the manner explicated previously, a range of voices spew rumours, questions and accusations at her. This anti-naturalistic yet purposeful stage design accentuates the conceptualisation of the stair as an urban place

of liminality – a transitional space which, as stated, blurs fixed borders between neighbours' relations; individual character's private, intimate, and public, shared arenas; and the margins between reality and unreality, or the conscious and subconscious mind. The stair thereby becomes the locus of the disintegration of "the boundaries of place and identity" (Maguire, 2011, p. 159). Furthermore, as Maguire elucidates:

> Once the neighbours open their doors to each other, their private situations spill out onto the stairwell in a sequence of escalating violence. To achieve this, Munro interweaves the internal and the external in two dimensions, between the interior of the flats and the stairs; and between the interior landscapes of the characters and their external actions. […] The projection of these inner worlds onto the stairwell's shared space drives the action forward, as interior, domestic and public are folded into and through each other. (ibid.)

To paraphrase both Maguire (2011) and Kay (Munro, 1995, p. 51), nothing indeed remains private or separate in this fictional Edinburgh tenement building. In her artistic manipulation of theatrical space and dramatic story, Rona Munro extends the borders of the play's genre, reaching beyond the modern theatre *whodunnit* into a contemporary version of social drama that reflects on and examines complex societal issues and gender relations in modern-day Scotland.

Placing Women Centre-Stage and Dismantling Gender-essentialism

Murder mystery turned social issues drama *Your Turn* delivers its dramatic representation of Scottish urban life through the actions and intimations of five Edinburgh citizens of both genders and diverse ages. The peculiar small community of the play is comprised of childfree married couple Lisa and Brian in their thirties, septuagenarian widow Mrs Mackie, whose children live abroad, early vice-

narian single-mom and lesbian Kay, with her daughter Tina, who is "seventy-days" old (Munro, 1995, p. 50), and single, virile Bobby McNulty in his late twenties. This complex micro-community, whose depiction is achieved through exchanges among the neighbours in the common space of the tenement stair and within the inner, intimate spaces of their flats, vividly reflects on the individual struggles of men and women co-existing in the larger society of urban Scotland. Most are marginalised, whether through age, marital status, (un)employability and career choices, and gender and/or sexual orientation, and almost all lack the safety net of family and close social ties. Apart from Lisa and Brian, whose marriage is dysfunctional, all the characters live alone, left to themselves and their life predicaments. As a result, they seek assistance and even comfort from their neighbours, who are at times, paradoxically, also the cause of the quandaries, and further feelings of ostracism, isolation and alienation. Although Munro populates her play with characters of both sexes, varied ages, hetero- and homosexual orientations, and of diverse jobs and social positions and aspirations, she excludes those of different races or religion (except in passing). She does, however, foreground women and their idiosyncratic experiences, and the audience observes as Mrs Mackie, Kay and Lisa interact mutually and with other figures, and hears their intimate testimonies and confessions. As their revelations are disclosed, it becomes clear that none of the female characters are typical protagonists of women's drama, as they all are "morally complicated" (Munro, 2012, p. 29). The men in *Your Turn* are presented as menacing although deceased (John Mackie); absent and disinterested (Dave); inadequate and uncooperative (Brian); and shifty and macho (Bobby McNulty). All equally uphold heteropatriarchal and gender-essentialist values: they sexualise and objectify the women, subjecting them to their (ab)use, control, dominance and punishment.

The widowed Mrs Mackie, whose children Jean and Robyn live in Canada and Australia respectively, is at first presented as a prying and meddlesome, churlish older woman, obsessed with cleanliness and order in and outside the tenement. Having lived in the building the longest, she rigidly insists on a particular sense of propriety, and seems to have appropriated the shared garden for herself. Having nothing good to say about her neighbours, Mrs Mackie does not keep silent;

on the contrary, she takes every opportunity to gossip and spread rumours on the stair. Her utter disapproval of Bobby McNulty leads her to brand him a "dirty brute" (Munro, 1995, p. 6), a "dirty pig" (ibid., p. 25), and a "noisy so and so", who associates with "hoodlums and hoors" that turn "this stair into a saloon bar" (ibid, p. 7). When confronted with the dubious neighbour, Mackie threatens his demise, and nostalgically reminisces about previous neighbours, some of whom died, and some of whom ended up in an elderly care facility: "This was a decent stair … Then Mr Murray at the bottom died and poor Ina went into the home and nice Mrs MacPherson with the wee scottie [sic] that never went in the street …" (ibid., p. 26). Additionally, Mrs Mackie talks behind Kay's back, casting the young single mum as an epitome of modern women, whom she criticises both for their allegedly inept mothering skills and their carefree, licentious behaviour:

> … I says to her, 'You'll have the social work onto you' she says, 'It's her teeth.' I says, 'Well you do that poor bairn a kindness, put a wee drop o' warm whiskey in its bottle and may we'll all get some peace. She says, 'I'm feeding it mysel', I says, 'Well no wonder it's hungry, no wonder it's screaming, you get that wee girl a bottle.' Young Mums. Starving their own bairns out of ignorance, I've seen her feed it in broad daylight too, out on that backgreen, blouse open for all the world to see, I says, 'This isny the Third world lassie, you do up those buttons …" (ibid., p. 7)

With this report of their exchange, which is in line with the orientalist perception and subjugation of (former) colonial subjects, Mackie self-characterises as an odious xenophobe, a sexist and racial chauvinist, which is correspondingly confirmed in her depiction of local shop owners in the Second Act: "Don't like that wee shop anyway, the shouldny dress the kids like that, I hate to see that. They should be like us when they come over here and then people would like them more" (ibid., p. 48). The elderly lady does not stop at criticising Kay's aptitudes and manners; she even divulges to Lisa that Kay had had a nervous breakdown in the past, and had been admitted to a psychi-

atric hospital. Mackie's portrayal of the episode discloses that she is also prone to discrimination and stigmatisation of people with mental health issues, who she maintains should undergo compulsory sterilisation, as "it'd be a kindness in the long run." (op. cit.). Mrs Mackie's relationship with Lisa is also problematic. Although imposing herself on Lisa to assist with her grocery shopping, Mackie insists on punctuality and precision; when her demands are not met, she shows a great degree of ingratitude. Likewise, she reaches out to Lisa for other types of tasks, using her to get Brian to do the (unpaid) maintenance in the building, and even turning her into an unwilling criminal accomplice.

On several occasions Mrs Mackie seemingly lovingly remembers her late husband John, who "would sort [the dirty brute] out" (Munro, 1995, p. 26), and whom she recollects "had the whole stair spotless, anyone missed their turn he just had a wee word, that's all it took, he had that back green just immaculate, that's all his flowers out there, primulas and snowdrops and roses, that's still his roses …" (ibid.). The character of the elderly woman does seem "to live both in the here-and-now and in the time of her memories, conjuring up the past in a series of disjointed monologues, while she insistently washes the stair" (Maguire, 2011, p. 159), and appears a willing extension of systemic heteropatriarchal disciplinary control, although herself a survivor of gender-based disenfranchisement and even violence, as her fragmented confessions to Lisa disclose:

> Oh but he was a quiet man, that's what everyone said, he was, a quiet man, he never had to raise his voice. (*Takes another bite* [*of stale biscuit*].) See, as long as I'm left in peace in my own house I'm fine, there's enough to do keeping things straight, running a kitchen, […] he knew he'd got a good cook when he got me. See I had my routine and he had his, just as long as we stuck to that, that was alright. I'd the cleanest step on the stair. (*Another bite.*) Half eight tea and biscuit, nine o'clock bed every night … you've something to put up with when you get married, well you'll know all about that. […] It was the way he was! You couldny say no to him, you just couldny, and I was his wife, that's the way it is, I was his *wife*, but it was every night, I'd beg him

> for peace but it just made him angry, because it was his right, he wanted his rights, every night, I couldny say no to him and he's wanting to go to Canada! […] It's the quiet one's are the worst … He got so angry! I couldny refuse him, but he was angry anyway, says if I wouldny enjoy it there was plenty women that would and I used to pray he'd go to one of them, one of the hoors at the docks and give me *peace!* (Munro, 1995, p. 46; pp. 70–71)

The twist in this disconnected narrative of prolonged gender-based (economic, sexual and psychological) subjugation of a common (urban) Scottish housewife who prides herself on her domestic and housekeeping skills is that the survivor unexpectedly kills her molester. Her late husband's action that pushed her over the edge – his insistence on migrating to Canada – for Mrs Mackie carried a threat of more unbearable violence, because she understood she would have nothing familiar to hold onto, nor anyone close she could rely on "when I couldn't get out because the sky was too big" (Munro, 1995, p. 70). She therefore served John (probably poisoned) tea, went off to clean the floors, and then sat next to him while he was dying of heart failure. Knowing the doctors would ask why she did not help, she then decided to bury John's body under his rose bush, where it has lain since. Therefore, Mrs Mackie's obsession with cleanliness, peace and order in the building, her curt rapport with her male neighbours, whether Bobby or Brian, and her reluctance to leave the apartment, even for a short walk to the corner shop, must be re-examined in this context. Concerned that it will be revealed she killed her husband, although she had been his victim, Mackie carefully watches over the tenement stair and the garden, and commits another murder in angst, killing yet another man who seems to threaten her peace of mind. She then reaches out to another married woman for assistance, thereby forming an implausible "sisterhood".

Lisa, the key figure whose "states of consciousness and dream states" shape the play's non-linear, fragmented movement "between sequences of 'reality' and 'unreality'" (Smith, 2006, p. 247), is depicted

as a middle-class lingerie shop-assistant, who aspires to a "better life or at least a better rateable value" (Munro, 1995, p. 14). Superficially easy-going and friendly, Lisa is quick to offer advice and practical help to her neighbours, although she hesitates to put her words to deeds, and complains when asked to babysit for Kay, or is expected to do Mrs Mackie's shopping on a regular basis. The thirty-year-old does not seem overly contented with her job despite the perks it includes, such as the extravagant and expensive underwear she so obviously enjoys and offers to Kay to bolster the latter's confidence. Her aspirations for upward social mobility are revealed in her unsuccessful plans to prepare complex foreign meals (Mexican rice, chilli con carne and guacamole [op. cit., p. 12]) and move to a more prestigious neighbourhood (Silverknowes instead of Muirhouse or Trinity instead of Niddrie), and in her futile yet tenacious attempts to maintain an impression of wealth and well-being in her and Brian's household. Her marriage to her high school sweetheart is afflicted not only with a lack of passion, but also with inattention, discord, deceitfulness, marital infidelity, arguments and even physical violence. This time it is the husband who is the victim of physical violence – an irritated and enraged Lisa once cut up Brian's clothes, and on another occasion hit his fingers with a hammer (see Munro, 1995, pp. 58–59). The two seem ill-fitted: Brian is satisfied with mundanity and only wants "some peace in my own home" (ibid., p. 59), whereas Lisa yearns to be swept off her feet, or at least for her husband "to touch me like he [Bobby]" did (ibid.). Although Lisa is willing to work on their issues and suggests seeking help from a professional therapist, Brian stubbornly refuses. He is determined that "it's no-one else's business. […] We can fix it ourselves" (ibid., p. 57), despite not showing genuine interest in discussing their problems, and claiming they should simply move past her adultery. The two seem trapped in a vicious circle for the same reason, as Lisa vividly explains to Kay: "It feels like he's punishing me […] For not making him feel beautiful and special and loved. […] I scream at him, pour rage over him like chip fat and then throw matches [… for] not making me feel beautiful and special and loved." (ibid., p. 64). Overwhelmed and frustrated, yet unable to find a solution because divorce is not an option for economic, social, and ideological reasons, Lisa loses control over her psyche and ends up sleepwalking – the more she is perturbed, the more frequent and vivid her hallucinations and nightmares are.

Munro portrays Lisa as a troubled woman, whose "identity start[s] to dissolve" (Maguire, 2011, p. 159) under duress; additionally, the character is presented as if undecided about her sexuality, and is sexually uninhibited or at least sexually explorative. Equating her yearning for love and acknowledgment through physical intimacy and sexual congress, Lisa sexualises her body, thus objectifying herself, as she is indoctrinated to believe that "their [men's] neanderthal brains will just explode. […] You think it's obvious, you think it's crude but they will go for it *every* time. […] You see you may think that's … vulgar or something but it works. You have to try what works" (Munro, 1995, p. 23). At the same time, she feels rejected as if "not fit to be touched" (op. cit., p. 30) and turns to instant gratification outside her marriage, provided by Bobby McNulty; but this one-time drunken transgression has a contradictory effect: she immediately feels remorseful, and her subconscious resurfaces with words of self-loathing and disgust:

> You can see it in her face, her tight polite smile. She can't hide a thing, it's leaking out the seams of her little black suit, her underwear's whispering it into the air as it flaps all clean and fresh and limp on the line. They *don't do it at all!* Well, would you? […] Oh she's a desperate woman. Can't hide that. (Munro, 1995, p. 30–31)

Furthermore, Lisa queries motherhood and homosexuality. The former she considers a protective shield against unwanted male gazes and advances, and a form of self-preservation from further transgressions; and the latter just another way to feel "beautiful and special and loved" (Munro, op. cit). In desperation, Lisa turns to Kay to unburden herself, but after an intoxicated confession about her broken marriage, she also initiates intercourse. Not even this act yields release for Lisa, as she is now torn between her ungiving husband, macho male neighbour, and motherly lesbian, who Lisa also perceives "as a sexual voyeur" (McDonald, 1997, p. 504). In one of the play's final dramatisations of her somnambulism, when her repressed desire breaks loose, Lisa describes her yearning metaphorically, as a hungry stray cat:

> Oh she's not fooling anyone, she is not, walking round like she's wrapped up in cling film, like she pees disinfectant and sweats bleach, she's *desperate*. […] She's got a starved little cat in her, sitting up and begging on the dustbins, clawing for it, yowling for it *begging* for it. […] She's desperate, she's filthy she's *pathetic!* (Munro, 1995, p. 66)

The animalistic imagery here speaks more of societal oppression than personal frustration. It directly associates female sexuality with cattiness and rapaciousness, and embodies a threat to the gender-essentialism and heteropatriarchal subjugation and control that Lisa has been trying to resist but cannot escape.

The third woman in this arbitrary, ineffective, 'sisterhood' of women is Kay, in her early-twenties and a single mum to baby Tina. Unlike Mrs Mackie and Lisa, Kay has never been married but shows more a motherly instinct and nurturing nature than either of the two – she bakes bread and cooks wholesome meals, has a green thumb, and does anything in her power to care for and protect her young daughter. In contrast to the actions of her two female neighbours, Kay's predicaments, concerns and fears do not spill openly onto the stair, but "are manifest in her behaviour" (Maguire, 2011, p. 159). Kay has a difficult past – she grew up in the drug- and violence-ridden Edinburgh neighbourhood of Niddrie where she lived before moving with her then-partner Dave to this tenement building; her admissions to Bobby (and later to Lisa) reveal that Dave left her for another woman, without ever having met (or supported) their daughter. It is further revealed that Kay is regularly visited by social services, and that her greatest fear is having her daughter taken from her; for this reason, she is scrupulous about the cleanliness and orderliness of her living conditions, and gets extremely agitated when Bobby's 'business associates' visit the building:

> Oh the bastard, he brought them here, what was he *thinking* of? Well I'm telling you if there's going to be violence it'll no be me gets damaged this time. No this time, I've damaged myself enough, it's someone else's

> turn now. (*Shouting at the door.*) You hear me? (*If possible the baby is away and screaming over this.*) Come near me and see what you'll get (Munro, 1995, p. 53)

This monologue is just a small echo of the violence and life struggles young Kay has endured (which at one point led her to self-harm), but her child gives her strength to persevere and continue fighting. When in need, Kay reaches out to Lisa rather than Mrs Mackie, who perceives the young mother as a societal deviant and a hazard, both because of Kay's mental health history and because she has a child out of wedlock. Additionally, Kay directly challenges Mrs Mackie's xenophobia and gender and racial chauvinism, cautioning her elderly neighbour that the language she uses to talk about the ethnic and racial Other (the local shop owners) is not appropriate. It is evident from Kay's evasiveness with Lisa and their consequent ephemeral altercation in the babysitting episode in Act One that Kay has other issues on her mind, which she is at first reluctant to share. This turns out to be her sexuality, which poses another threat to gender essentialism and heteropatriarchal subjugation and control, and shapes her rapport with people outside her safe haven. In the course of the play, through inferences by Bobby and Mrs Mackie and through Kay's own unambiguous admission to Lisa in the latter half of the play, it is acknowledged that Kay is a lesbian, which marginalises her further and enhances her isolation, as she confesses to Lisa:

> She [Kay's girlfriend] dumped me. She dumped me in the pub last night. She said she didn't want anything committed. I think that means my daughter. See, no-one likes playing houses and families 'cept those of us who've no got a choice. […] I've nothing. No-one to touch, no-one to watch me sleep, no-one to use for warmth, nothing, just Tina and my garden … but I'll tell you, I've more than you [Lisa]. (Munro, 1995, p. 68)

Although Kay maintains she has no problem with people knowing her sexual identity, she does attempt to keep her intimate life

as private as possible, and decides carefully who to share the information with. Although homosexuality was effectively legalised in Scotland in 1981 (through Section 80 of the *Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 1980*/*Achd Ceartas Eucoirean (Alba) 1980*) [Crown, 1980]), the prevailing attitude to the non-heteronormative continued to be controversial, as deduced from the individual reactions of Bobby, Mackie and Lisa. Bobby makes leering double-entendres, and Mrs Mackie would have Kay separated from her daughter and sterilised. As Kay reflects: "They say we're not fit to be mothers, don't they? People say that. Mrs Mackie would say that. They'd take Tina away from me" (Munro, 1995, p. 52). Even the seemingly more open-minded Lisa, who originally assumed the lascivious Bobby did not make sexual advances towards Kay because she was a mother (which is also a form of latent gender-essentialism), believes lesbianism is a transgression, as proven by her livid response to Kay upon their congress which she herself had initiated. In this Munro's play, the figure of Kay, in all aspects of her singular life, represents a challenge to gender-essentialism and heteropatriarchy because, as Jill Dolan (1988, p. 116) explicates:

> The lesbian subject is in a position to denaturalize dominant codes by signifying an existence that belies the entire structure of heterosexual culture and its representations […] *The lesbian is a refusor [sic] of culturally imposed gender ideology*, who confounds representation based on sexual difference and on compulsory heterosexuality. (as cited in Aston, 1995, p. 95; added emphasis)

Nevertheless, because Kay suffers even from her contact with Lisa, we have to agree with McDonald (1997), who claims that in Munro's drama "lesbianism is perhaps too closely identified with 'motherliness' and essentialism." (p. 504).

To conclude, with her 1992 Edinburgh play *Your Turn to Clean the Stair*, Rona Munro remains staunchly dedicated to her early aesthetic of foregrounding women's stories, even if the women in

question are "morally complicated" and their experiences intricate, multifaceted and dissimilar. Through a depiction of the life challenges faced by main protagonist Lisa and her two neighbours, Kay and Mrs Mackie in a contemporary urban Scottish micro-environment, Munro subtly unravels the matrices of a heteropatriarchal society that seeks to subdue, regulate and punish its gendered others. At the same time, with the play's inventive, fragmented form and non-realist structuring, the author retains her idiosyncratic style and politics, moving the boundaries of women's theatre and drama while entertaining and engaging her audiences.

SHARMAN MACDONALD (1951–): A SELF-EFFACING FEMINIST

Although born and raised in Scotland (Glasgow, then Ayr and Edinburgh), Sharman Macdonald,[12] like her slightly younger fellow dramatist Rona Munro, found fame and fortune in England, where she moved soon after graduating from the University of Edinburgh in 1972. Unlike Munro, however, Macdonald has remained more connected to and supported by the theatre and performing arts circles in England than those in her native country (Zenzinger, 1996, p. 135; Scullion, 2000, pp. 109–110; Horvat, 2005, p. 151; Maguire, 2011, pp. 156–157; Christianson & Lumsden, 2011, p. 3; Triesman, 2011, pp. 62–63; Horvat & Bell, 2011, p. 67). Similar to Munro, Macdonald is a woman dramatist brushed aside, but has received even less critical attention in academic studies and literary surveys of contemporary British and Scottish drama and theatre. Most such (inadequate) assessments mention Macdonald mostly in passing, and keep their analytical focus almost exclusively on her debut play *When I Was a Girl I Used to Scream and Shout* (1984)[13]. Other similarities between the two authors are manifold: like Munro (and many other women dramatists), Macdonald has had to expand her oeuvre, writing for stage, radio and film; further, her works have been performed in subsidised, independ-

12 In some sources, the author's last name is also spelled MacDonald (e.g., Strachan 1994).

13 For more information on *When I Was a Girl I Used to Scream and Shout*, see Encyclopedia.com (n.d.), Strachan, A. (1994), Martinez (1999), Zenzinger (1996), Stephenson & Langridge (1997), Scullion (2000), Oddy, J. (2003), Gardner (2005), Horvat (2005), Brown (2007), Horvat (2007), Smith & Horvat (2009); Wyllie (2009); Triesman (2011), Maguire (2011), Anderson (2013), Meads (2013), Billington (2015), Cohen (2016), Gluck (2016), Leeds (2016) and Čirić-Fazlija (2025). The title of the play will be shortened to *When I Was a Girl …* for the remainder of this chapter.

ent, and commercial theatres, and at theatre and film festivals, such as Edinburgh Festival Fringe, National Theatre Connections, and Edinburgh International Film Festival. Her full scope includes two novels, *The Beast* (1986) and *Night, Night* (1988); twelve stage plays, such as *The Girl with Red Hair* (2003), a drama that discusses bereavement and loss, and coming-of-age piece *Borders of Paradise* (1995); three radio plays: *Sea Urchins* (first aired by the British Broadcasting Corporation [BBC] in 1998, then adapted to stage by Glasgow's Thron Theatre the same year), *Gladly My Cross Eyed Bear* (broadcast in 1999), and *Soft Fall the Sounds of Eden* (directed by Gaynor Macfarlane for BBC 4 in 2004); television series and plays (*Mindscape*, BBC Scotland [Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, p. 61]; *Wild Flowers*, Channel 4 Television, 1990; and *The Music Practice*, a short film for the BBC, screened in 1996); and a libretto for Deirdre Gribbin's opera *Hey Persephone!* (produced at Aldeburgh festival in 1998). She has also written two[14] film adaptations, one for her play *The Winter Guest*, directed by Alan Rickman in 1997, and the other for *The Edge of Love*, a 2008 biopic portraying the romantic entanglements of poet Dylan Thomas and his wife Caitlin Macnamara with their friends the Killicks during the London Blitz. Some of Macdonald's stage plays were commissioned for young people (such as *After Juliet* – produced in 1999 by the National Theatre under the BT National Connections Scheme for young people – which centres on Romeo's flame Rosalind upon Juliet's death) and others (such as *Lu Lah, Lu Lah*, thematising working-class women in 1930s Dundee, first performed at Cheltenham Ladies' College in 2010) were created for community theatres. Macdonald's most recent works for the stage are anti-war piece *Broken Hallelujah*, about the struggles of young people during the American Civil War (produced in 2005 by the Young People's Theatre of Theatre Royal Bath [TRBTS], and in 2006 by The National Theatre, London, for its Connections youth theatre festival[15]) and *She Town* (a re-writing of *Lu Lah, Lu Lah*) given by the Rep Theatre Dundee, Scotland in 2012.

Although less prolific than Rona Munro, Sharman Macdonald

14 According to Wendy Mitchel (2008) and a *Variety* Staff exclusive (2008), in 2008 Sharman Macdonald was commissioned to write a screenplay for Penny Vincenzi's 1997 novel *Windfall*, but no reliable source confirms the project's completion.

15 Previously known either as Shell Connections or BT Connections. For more information, see the National Theatre website (2025).

has had an equally troublesome relationship with theatre reviewers and critics. Her debut play *When I Was a Girl, I Used to Scream and Shout*, which premiered at The Bush Theatre in London in 1984 before being transferred to the West End (Strachan, 1994, pp. 154–155; Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, p. 61), brought her critical acclaim: she received the Standard Evening "Most Promising Playwright" award, and the position of Thames Writer-in-Residence at The Bush for 1984–1985 (Stephenson & Langridge, ibid.; Strachan, op. cit.). Her next two stage plays, however, were met with a "cooler reaction" (Strachan, ibid., p. 155), which Strachan (1994) suggests was only partly the result of a decline in quality with *The Brave* and *When We Were Women* (both produced in 1988), because "it is not an uncommon pattern for British critics to moderate their enthusiasm for dramatists to whose early work they awarded high praise" (p. 155). In contrast, the nineties brought Macdonald the steady support of distinguished theatre directors, among whom were Max Stafford-Clark of The Royal Court in 1991 (who directed her *All Things Nice*); actor and director Simon Callow (who oversaw the production of her drama *Shades* in the West End in 1992[16]), and Alan Rickman, who selected her 1984 debut play for production at The Bush, and cooperated with Macdonald on two more occasions: as director of her *Winter Guest* in 1995, and co-creator of its film adaptation in 1997. Lou Stein singled out her *Borders of Paradise* for his final production at the Watford Palace Theatre in 1995 (Shuttleworth, 1995), which was nominated for the Writers' Guild Best Regional Play award (Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, p. 61). Additionally, her radio drama *Sea Urchins*, commissioned by Catherine Bailey Ltd. and directed by Richard Wilson for the BBC, was nominated for a Sony Radio Academy Award (ibid.). Despite this, her latest work *She Town* (2012) received a lukewarm reception, with at least one critic finding the play "muted and humourless", when it was expected to be "celebratory and defiant" (Fisher, 2012; see Shilton, 2012; Cooper, 2012; The List, "She Town/The Mill Lavvies", n.d.).

In 1992, just before the premiere of *Shades*, Macdonald allegedly announced she would withdraw from writing for theatre because "the experience of the production seems to have been tricky for [her]" (Strachan, 1994, p. 156). Judging by the details of her three-decade

16 A short description of the production in *Theatricalia* website (n.d.) and the archived news in the *Stage* (1992) claim the play's run was short because of the political events in Britain in the early nineties and the IRA bombings.

long career[17] and the timeline of her stage works, this might have been just a momentary lapse: the author has kept creating both stage and radio dramas and television and film scripts, frequently on commission (which provides her with "the outside discipline", because she "ha[s] no plans. Never have had. That's a huge fault. I have 'wants'" [Macdonald, 1999]). Yet, Strachan's intimation is not surprising if one considers that Macdonald, who first joined theatre circles in the seventies in England as an actress (associating herself with the English branch of renowned theatre company 7:48, and the Royal Court troupe), switched to playwrighting in the mid-eighties because of her "crippling stage fright" (Gardner, 2005).[18] The author confessed that at that time she

> was desperate for a second child. Desperate never to act again. Most of all desperate to stop eating lentils, French bread and tomatoes. We were broke, Will and me. We had one child. My hormones were screaming at me to have another. So. Will bet me a child for the sale of a script. (Macdonald, 1999)

Macdonald also stated that writing *When I Was a Girl, …* was "such pleasure. All those words that had never been there before" (ibid.). Despite this, when its premiere placed the author among the top ranks of young British talent, the dramatist admitted that "[t]here was a moment, when I realised 'Oh I've got to be a writer now', and I felt shut in. I thought I am no longer a possibility. I'm defined" (Macdonald as cited by Gardner, 2005). For Sharman Macdonald writing, in whichever mode, genre or media, is a gratifying, deeply personal and simultaneously fearful activity:

> I'm afraid of writing. I was then and I am now. Not of the blank page; I'm afraid I'll never do what I can do. I

17 Although 2024 marked forty years since the premiere of her first play, there is no record of any new drama in the past thirteen years (since *She Town* in 2012).

18 For more information on Sharman Macdonald's personal life and acting and writing careers, see Strachan (1994), Zenzinger (1996), Stephenson & Langridge (1997), Macdonald (1999), Scullion (2000), Oddy, J. (2003), Gardner (2005), Horvat (2005), Brown (2007), Horvat (2007), Holdsworth (2008), Wyllie (2009), Smith & Horvat (2009), Maguire (2011), Christianson & Lumsden (2011), Triesman (2011), Horvat & Bell (2011), and the United Agents (n.d.), Encyclopedia.com (n.d.) and Theatricalia (n.d.b) websites.

> haven't done it yet. Each time I start something I think, This [sic] is it, the best, the only. Then I get to the end, and I think, Oh God, that wasn't it at all. It makes it easy to move on, to try to find 'it' in something else. (Macdonald, 1999)

This divulgence, along with her rich personal life[19], is possibly the reason Macdonald is not as productive an author as some of her fellow dramatists, such as Rona Munro or Liz Lochhead. Regardless, the works she did author are ingenious pieces, marked by a high degree of formal experimentation and structural fragmentation, despite their recurrent foregrounding of complex mother-daughter relationships, and the exploitation of dramatic stories and plots to place women's experiences centre-stage.

Like Munro, Sharman Macdonald portrays complicated and imperfect female figures, women who are "repressing each other" (Macdonald as cited by Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, p. 63), and who inhabit a (fictional) world mostly empty of (adult and/or mature) men, although it "still operates according to oppressive masculine rules, seldom leaving other options to the younger generation of women than to leave home early in search of careers and their own identity" (Horvat, 2007, p. 299). As Macdonald herself suggests, her female protagonists often possess "a huge masculinity in [them], … a kind of drag queen quality to them" (Macdonald as cited by Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, p. 63). Macdonald further claims that this depiction of women and the absence of men in her plays (even though an-

19 Macdonald is frequently mentioned in reference to her highly successful daughter Keira Knightly, who outshines both her parents and her brother. Although Macdonald's husband Will Knightly is an acknowledged television and stage actor, and her son Caleb Knightly, who keeps a low profile, is also involved in the arts as a composer and sound engineer, Macdonald is habitually asked about Keira in the rare interviews she gives. While she prefers not to discuss her daughter, Macdonald has stated on several occasions that her breakthrough and her "writing life" were initiated by a bet from her husband for another child (see Macdonald, 1999; Macdonald as cited by Gardner, 2005). Macdonald further claims to have drawn inspiration for many of her plays from her children and the games they played, and her strong-willed and powerful mother (see Stephenson & Langridge, 1997; Macdonald, 1999; Gardner, 2005).

drocentrism and patriarchy shapes and controls those women's lives) comes from her own experience, and the inferences she gathered from observing family dynamics:

> I experienced male absence. My father was an engineer and he went to all the various power stations and was away a lot. Latterly we moved around the power stations when he was there, but my mother was a vibrant personality, so my father learnt to be silent. […] So the voices that I hear are for the most part female ones, simply because my father was so silent. And because my husband was away a lot on tour and I was at home with the kids, the companionship that I had was again essentially female. The new voices that were coming in were female as well. (Macdonald as cited by Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, p. 67)

Although she does gain inspiration from her personal surroundings, Macdonald's art is not biographical, and none of the dramatic stories she has so deftly woven should be read as intimate confessions. On the contrary, her plays reveal that Sharman Macdonald is an avid observer of people, who feeds off the intricate circumstances of the lives of ordinary individuals – predominantly working-class women – and their predicaments. Playwriting for Macdonald is an intensely private, isolating and insulating activity, a form of "a protection, a way of not taking part in life and getting your hands dirty" (Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, p. 67), and simultaneously an imaginative mirror for a complex society, which also reflects her "hunger for make-believe" (ibid.). Macdonald reveals that she invented her first dialogues for her own entertainment while still working as an actress, improvising alone in the rehearsal space:

> … I used to have a lot of time on my own in the rehearsal room, so I would just talk. I'd make up dialogue for everybody who was supposed to be there and just play the whole scene out. I'd write down what I'd said and sometimes other things, story forms with dialogue. That was how it broke through. Obviously [sic]

> I'd improvised before, but not in such a concentrated fashion, and always for somebody else's purpose. It was never just purely on my own and to amuse myself. And there was huge pleasure in it. Then each time I was on a train, because I was also having to travel to this job, I'd write and it started from there. (in Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, p. 62)

Her full release of pent-up dramatist's energy and mode occurred when she came to a realisation that "the stage can stage anything" (Macdonald, 1998, as cited in Triesman, 2011, p. 53); or rather when she ceased thinking that "dialogue was sacred" (Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, p. 62). By Macdonald's own admission, the plays are her way to "explore something, in order to open something up" (Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, p. 67), and this resonates in the issues that she thematises/problematises; in the frequently fragmented structure and open form of her pieces; and in her presentation of time and memory in/as constant flux. Most of Macdonald's dramas explore relationships between women – be they mothers and daughters, grandmothers and granddaughters, or sisters or friends – and their respective rites of passage in a world dominated by gender-essentialism and phallo-centrism. Her protagonists are far from ideal; as is the case with Rona Munro, Macdonald's female characters are "flawed" (Macdonald, as cited in Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, p. 64) and "morally complicated" (Munro, 2012, p. 30), and give other women little or no support. The relationships they form with other characters, of the same or different gender, are therefore complex and continually re-negotiated, as they are "often portrayed as dislocated – both emotionally and physically – from the world that they live in" (Horvat, 2007, p. 299). The concept of sisterhood, commonly found in (early) feminist drama, in Macdonald's first works is "reiterate[d] … for the sole purpose of [being] subvert[ed]" (ibid.). Yet her female protagonists, clearly marginalised and oppressed, are profoundly human as they strive for their own gendered identity, and recognition and independence in liminal places "where the sign systems of patriarchal discourse can be exploded and revealed as an arena of struggle in which there is space for change" (Triesman, 2011, p. 54). Her feminism, which she asserts arises from

fearing she would not be as capable and vibrant as the women in her family who disdained feminism (in Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, p. 63), is not of the activist nor materialist kind. Macdonald aligns more with those lines of feminism found among working class women and women of colour: those who defy second wave feminism because it is based on the experiences of cis-gender heterosexual (*cishet*) middle-class white women, and homogenises and universalises women's ongoing struggles, while ignoring the striking life differences and circumstances among women of diverse classes, races, ethnicities and/or sexual orientations.

While Macdonald has unpretentiously claimed her early success arose from serendipity, a well-timed reaction to the one-sidedness of second-wave feminism, or simple luck (see Macdonald, ibid., p. 62), it is the striking content and daring form and structure of her stage dramas that have captured the attention of audiences and the praise of those critics who appreciate her idiosyncratic and innovative style. Macdonald's meticulous selection of stories to stage and creative and playful formal experimentations have produced plays that epitomise feminist drama; they defy androcentrism and gender essentialism with their form and structure as much as with the dramatic situations (women's experiences) and protagonists ("morally complicated women" [Munro, op. cit.]) she places centre-stage. This has at times led to her plays being poorly received and her drama not being fully appreciated, as Macdonald herself (in Stephenson & Langridge, 1997) affirms:

> I don't think there are any rules. I think, generally, audiences still accept the male structure of a piece more readily than they do the female structure. And if you say, 'Okay, the male structure is more orgasmic and the female structure of a piece of drama is more cyclical and the lines go through the female structure like that' (she makes an interwoven gesture), audiences don't accept that as readily. There are female playwrights who write to the male structure and audiences accept them more easily. Now, I don't think I do, therefore I am lucky. They accepted *The Winter Guest*, but there have been troughs where they haven't understood. (p. 68)

The next section of the chapter examines the content, form and structure of Sharman Macdonald's *When We Were Women*, the second stage play she wrote in the (late) eighties. It will also analyse the ways in which Macdonald deconstructs hegemonic androcentrism and gender essentialism in a working-class family, while portraying "flawed" women (Macdonald, op. cit., p. 64) and Scottish society during the Second World War.

Deconstructing "Ordinary" Family Life in Times of War: *When We Were Women*

When We Were Women was an outcome of Macdonald's fruitful cooperation with The National Theatre (Strachan, 1994, p. 155), and premiered at The National Theatre Studio in July 1988 before moving to The National Theatre Cottesloe stage in September the same year. The play was also produced by the Perth Theatre Company (Theatricalia, n.d.) in Scotland in February 1997, and revived by the Orange Tree Theatre and Snapdragon Productions in Richmond, England in September 2015 (Theatricalia, n. d.; Billington, 2015). None of the productions was long-lived; even the 2015 revival drew a lukewarm reception from critics. Michael Billington (writing for *The Guardian*) claimed the play was "meandering" and partly "old-fashioned" (2015); Henry Hitchings of *The Standard* (2015) described it as "experimental without being absorbing"; and Tom Aitken (whose review was published by the website *Plays to See*, 2015) overly emphasised the play's timeframe and Second World War context: "by the standards of the time and place, what we are looking at is two genuine marriages"; and "this play presents marriage as it was understood to be, in parts of this country within living memory". Strachan (1994) blamed the first production's poor reception on workshopping and the fact that it was a "significant technical experiment" (p. 155). The only reviewer and critic to unequivocally praise all aspects of the playtext and its 2015 production was Alex Sierz, who focused on its content, form and style. Sierz (2015) accentuates the seeming simplicity of the dramatic situation, its unanticipated genre-crossing, marvellous poeticism of the speech patterns, intricate structural design, and even

the "strong sense of feminism [that] runs through the play". In their reviews and analyses, some critics reflected that the play came after Macdonald's breakthrough drama *When I Was a Girl …* and therefore bore the brunt of high expectations. Macdonald herself stated that the idea and impetus for *When We Were Women* came from a true story that she felt compelled to look into more deeply, and from the desire to redress the mother figure in *When I Was a Girl* (in Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, pp. 64–65). Although not a sequel/prequel to *When I Was a Girl …*, the 1988 drama *When We Were Women* "look[s] at the baggage which Morag [of *When I Was a Girl …*] had on her shoulders, which none of us can shed, and which made her react to her own child the way she did" (Macdonald, ibid., p. 65). Additionally, addressing Heidi Stephenson and Natasha Langridge's question about *All Things Nice*, a 1991 play that also foregrounds family relationships between women (this one extending beyond the mother-daughter relationship to that of grandmother-granddaughter), Macdonald said "The thing of baggage was still there …", and jokily added she was "just writing the same play over and over again" (1997, p. 66). Whether her witticism is taken literally or with a healthy amount of scepticism, the dramatist later admitted to exploring the same thematic concern in her early playwriting, which was: "[k]nocking women off their pedestals" (Macdonald, 1999). The statement corresponds to Macdonald's discernment that nothing is uncomplicated, that men and women are all flawed (see Stephenson & Langridge, op. cit.), and that in their attempt to fight gender inequality and marginalisation the second-wave feminists set women against men. In her own writing (and life), Macdonald has had other views: "It didn't feel comfortable to me. I don't like goodies and baddies. It's too simple" (Macdonald, 1999).

When We Were Women portrays the life of a working-class Scottish family living in Glasgow during the Second World War, specifically 1943 and 1944. The focus of the action is on Isla, a woman in her early twenties, who lives in the same household with her forty-five-year-old mother Maggie and alcohol-prone father Alec (roughly the same age as his wife). Other characters include naval officer Howard Mackenzie, and a woman named Cath (Cathleen). The play comprises two acts and nine scenes (five in the first act and four in the second), but the progression of its action, however, is not line-

ar. The play's structure is marked by a high degree of fragmentation and the continual juxtaposition of two timeframes, set not a full year apart. The location of action is spread around bomb-shelled Glasgow: the outdoor scenes are set in unspecified streets and lanes, and on a hill above the Firth of Clyde; and the indoor ones occur in different rooms of Isla's parents' home, except the wedding feast scene, which takes place in an unnamed banquet hall. All the scenes in the 1944 timeframe are confined to the indoors, whereas the action in the 1943 timeframe happens (mostly) outdoors, apart from two sequences: the banquet hall wedding feast, and a scene in Maggie and Alec's home.

The play opens with a scene of Maggie, Isla and Alec engaged in a seemingly mundane family activity: as Maggie is getting ready to go out, wearing a coat over her apron, Isla is reading a magazine at the table, and Alec, prodding the fire in the fireplace while drinking whiskey and ginger beer. There is a slight commotion as Maggie looks for her hat, claiming she cannot possibly leave the house bare-headed and reprimanding Isla for not helping, while Isla chides her mother for enabling her father's alcohol abuse. The atmosphere seems rather tense, and the relationship between Maggie and Isla strained: when Isla comments negatively on Maggie pouring whiskey for Alec, Maggie claims it is her house and her husband so she makes the rules; at the same time, she ambiguously suggests that Isla has done worse (see Macdonald, 1990, pp. 67–69). When Maggie leaves, the situation becomes calmer, and the audience realises that Isla has a much better relationship with her father. Alec, who has been trying to keep the peace between the two while reminiscing about Isla when she was a child, then explains to his daughter that he has seen through Maggie's trick of watering down his drinks, and offers her a taste. The indoor sequence is then changed to an exterior one through the sparks of the fire, and the action is transported back in time: in the dark streets of Glasgow a man, dressed in a navy uniform with a raincoat over his arm, is walking when the air raid starts. As the sound of bombs draws closer, flashes of light and firelight are observed in the darkened scene, and the man, Mackenzie, falls flat on the ground. After a few seconds the scene quietens, and he starts crawling on his belly, praying to God and the Virgin Mary, and confessing his "wee sins in a minor key" (Macdonald, 1990, p. 70). Upon hearing a couple of loud bangs and the

sound of someone crying, Mackenzie, still crawling, lifts his head and sees Isla sitting next to a lamp post, having hit her head. Mackenzie attempts to help her, comments on her appearance (bare-headed and slightly dishevelled, with a cut above her eye that needs stitches) and asks what she is doing out, to which Isla answers tersely. It appears that Isla, whom Mackenzie recognises from the canteen, has gone out on her own during a black-out after a bet in which she would down half a pint of gin in one go. Her torch got broken and she could not see in the dark streets, so she walked into a lamp post, hurting herself. Mackenzie offers to walk her home, but Isla initially declines: her family has warned her about army personnel. Mackenzie insists, and Isla takes his arm while he rants about the need to respect alcohol and her unappealing looks, although the subtext suggests he is attracted to her. His line "we're all poor sinners in the vale of tears" (Macdonald, 1990, p. 74) takes the action back to Isla's parents' home, in which Alec is shown sweeping the rug beside the fireplace and Isla fetching water, soap and a rag to clean the scorched bits. He is frantic to hide the singed rug from Maggie, although Isla points out he is an equal owner of the place. Alec disagrees with her, claiming that he has learnt to respect Maggie, having "spent [his] life dodging your Mother's tongue" (ibid., p. 75). As the conversation continues, Isla asks her father to truly look at her, as it appears that he has not beheld her since she returned home. After he observes her, Isla suggests she is no longer a "wee girl", but Alec claims she will always be his "bonnie lassie" (ibid.). A certain amount of ambiguity is preserved, as the audience does not know where Isla had been before she retreated home; the remaining exchange between father and daughter, however, upholds the first impressions of the family's dynamics. Isla's relationship with her mother Maggie is tense and discordant, whereas the one with her father Alec is filled with love and mutual support. Alec and Maggie seem to be superficially functional, each keeping to their (socially-prescribed) role. By the end of this beat, Isla has offered to drive her father to her Aunt Mac's (allegedly) but Alec declines, leaving his daughter to clean the rug before Maggie returns home, thereby confining her to a gender-essentialist role and the 'women's sphere'. The next sequence of the first scene shows Mackenzie standing near a queue for the cinema, observing and commenting on women in the line with whom he has obviously had flings, when Isla takes his arm. They quarrel about

going into the cinema to watch a Clark Gable film; Mackenzie tries to weasel out of the arrangement, claiming he has forgotten his wallet, but Isla insists, saying she will pay for the tickets. Mackenzie turns down her offer, because "I'm not that sort of man" (Macdonald, 1990, p. 77). Isla sees through his ploy and, under the pretence of wanting a cigarette, pulls his wallet and a cigarette case from his inside pocket, while commenting on one of the queueing women whom Mackenzie is trying to avoid. Isla reads aloud the engravings on his case and lighter, each of which is a gift from a different woman, a Rita and a Cath, then openly tells him that although she is not the first, she will make sure she is the last woman in his life. Mackenzie's behaviour is that of a promiscuous flirt and a macho man, but Isla, although young, appears to possess social and emotional intelligence, along with her independence and a healthy disregard of patriarchal systems of control.

The second scene shows Maggie carrying grocery bags as she enters the kitchen from the back door, loudly admonishing Isla for having let the dinner burn while she was away. Her monologue reveals that the action has returned to 1944, and that Isla is pregnant and despondent about it. Moreover, it appears that although Isla is married something is amiss, because the family is trying to conceal "[her] troubles" (ibid., p. 79) from the rest of the neighbourhood. Isla reproaches her mother for buying food (that would otherwise be rationed) on the black market, and for endangering the shop assistant who could end up in prison. Maggie counters, insisting she is the one taking the risk and that the rationed goods were kept for the rich, whereas the common people like them ("The Hoi Poloi" as she puts it [ibid., p. 80]) also deserve to nourish their children. The audience learns that Maggie and Alec have three more children: two sons, one of whom is a prisoner-of-war and the other a submarine officer, and another daughter, who is married with two children (Moira and Ina). As Isla leaves the kitchen contemptuously, a new beat in the second scene begins, presenting Mackenzie in the street trying to stop Isla from gulping down a large quantity of alcohol. Asking him repeatedly whether he loves her, a laughing Isla disregards his pleas, and when Mackenzie answers her question negatively, she drinks up and immediately falls unconscious (while saying "didn't feel a thing" [ibid., p. 82]). The remaining sequence shows Mackenzie struggling to carry the unconscious Isla

away from the street, and telling himself he is determined to marry her. At that moment, the ghost-like figure of a woman appears in the distance, wearing a hat and raincoat and carrying a suitcase. Mackenzie refers to her as "Nemesis. Eh God. Creeping up on me." (Macdonald, 1990, p. 82). Without any additional explanation or information, the scene switches back to Maggie, still ranting about having to provide for her children and grandchildren in wartime, including Isla, who, she complains, is a constant source of her distress and annoyance (see ibid., p. 83).

Scene three of the first act returns the action to Isla and Mackenzie in a back lane. Isla comes around to find herself prostrate on Mackenzie's raincoat, with Mackenzie kneeling over her. Feeling hungover, her only worry is that she has been taken advantage of and that the whole neighbourhood will see her embarrassment, but he clarifies, with great difficulty, that nothing happened. As he escorts her to the door, Isla offers him the chance to kiss her, which he does, chastely. Instead of saying goodnight and parting ways, however, Mackenzie pulls Isla away; when they eventually stop running, they kneel and he recites the marriage vows but Isla, although she accepts his proposal, insists on a proper church wedding. The scene shifts to Maggie frying bacon inside, while singing and calling Isla to dinner. This is immediately juxtaposed with a drunken Alec coming up the street and running into Isla and Mackenzie. Although intoxicated, Alec threatens to strangle Mackenzie for allegedly assaulting Isla, but when Isla speaks up, attempting to quiet him, he asks in disbelief whether she has been engaging in sexual activity. The whole misunderstanding is cleared up when Mackenzie asks for Isla's hand in marriage and Alec at first declines because the former is "a damn sailor" (ibid., p. 88); when Isla says Mackenzie is a good man, however, Alec's questioning and probing of the suitor's "faults" stop. The scene shifts back to 1944: Maggie, singing, is frying bacon when a hungry and speechless Isla appears at the door, and sits down at the table to be waited upon by her mother. Maggie does not stop talking, reminiscing about her own pregnancy with Isla during which she developed pica and craved coal and beeswax, and nostalgically remembering the early days of her relationship with Alec. At that moment, Maggie allusively suggests that Isla get rid of the baby and start her life anew. The next beat presents Mackenzie

on his own, post-marriage proposal, and a woman approaching from a distance, who stops and smokes a cigarette upon seeing him. This motivates Mackenzie to soliloquise about Cath, who has been stalking him, and him "skulking past policemen" and "pulling up the collar of [his] raincoat" as if guilty of a crime. Resolute in his decision to marry Isla, Mackenzie ends his inner monologue (and the scene) begging her for protection:

> Shield me Isla. Help me. … Be my wife, Isla. My woman, Isla. My good wife. Love me cherish me. As I love and cherish … Keep me safe from harm. One day at a time. One day. Step by step. (Macdonald, 1990, p. 90).

In his mind, Isla is not only the solution to all his problems but also a semi-divine creature with the power to protect him from harm and further sinning. Conversely, Mackenzie portrays Cath as a vamp-woman, a destructive force that threatens to jeopardise his very life.

Scene four of the play sets its action on an early morning in 1944 when Maggie, serving breakfast to Isla and watching her intently, hears the postman approaching house. Imploring her daughter to fetch the post before Alec sees it, and even instructing Isla to lie should he catch her in the act, Maggie reveals that they are heavily in debt, and cannot afford to pay the bills – a fact she is concealing from her husband. Maggie states that all their income was spent on the "fine big wedding we gave you [Isla]" (ibid., p. 91) and that, although she is not afraid of Alec, he has hit her once before. Sceptical and unsympathetic, Isla defies her mother, but upon hearing her father come downstairs she rushes to fetch the bills and conceal them. The scene is interrupted by a short beat that presents Mackenzie and Isla at the back door late one night in 1943, while a woman in the distance is taking in the cold air. An unsuspecting Isla asks for romance and honesty, and the guilt-ridden Mackenzie responds to her playful questions gruffly, stating he will decide what is "good for you to know" (ibid., p. 92), and that marrying him would come with consequences. Isla dismisses his words, although the dramatic irony of this short beat cannot go unnoticed by the audience. The 1944 action resumes after the unnamed

woman in the distance shivers and leaves; while Isla slams down the bills looking intently at her mother, Maggie responds with the advice that women have to keep secrets from their men, "keep[ing] a bit of yoursel' private" (Macdonald, 1990, p. 93).

The fifth and final scene of the first act is uninterruptedly centred on Isla and Mackenzie's wedding day, in 1943. It opens with an image of the happy father Alec singing merrily and toasting his beautiful daughter, who wears a wedding gown. Particularly moving is his speech to Isla, which exudes pride and fatherly joy, although it is laced with patriarchal discourse. Alec remembers his own wedding day, when the pregnant Maggie walked proudly down the church aisle, defying communal gossip and backwardness. Maggie joins in the celebratory atmosphere, and the scene shifts to the wedding reception, where she is heard singing Robert Burns' "A Red, Red Rose". Meanwhile Mackenzie stands alone at the front, in a bewildered daze, speaking to an unfamiliar woman passing by as if she were Cath. The woman leaves, taking the lighter Mackenzie gives her, and Isla appears in the doorway asking where he has been, and who the woman he was speaking to was. In place of a reply, Mackenzie chases her teasingly, then gives her a wedding present – a small black leather Bible – thereby intending to cement his words "forever and always" (Macdonald, 1990, p. 100). The scene and the first act close with Isla watching Makenzie dance with a mysterious woman, and Alec taking Isla in his arms to dance while giving her some final pieces of advice.

The second act opens with a brief depiction of Mackenzie in darkness, talking about his life in the navy, where he listened for submarines when their torpedoes went off, and the simultaneous image of Maggie praying to God for her sons' safe return from the war. The next sequence takes the action to a lovely day in 1943, where newlyweds Isla and Mackenzie watch the ships from a hill overseeing the Firth of Clyde, and discuss their plans for when the war is over. They are interrupted by a woman tossing a newspaper cutting of their wedding photo into Mackenzie's lap, which prompts questions from Isla, and stirs in him the impulse to flee. In a brief attempt to frantically run away from the woman, Isla falls and is propped up by Mackenzie, who angrily addresses God. It is then revealed that the woman in question is Cath, who is bigamist Mackenzie's legal wife, and that Isla

is in the early stages of pregnancy. This revelatory scene continues after a brief, mostly mimed insertion, in which Alec is shown demanding Maggie give him the unpaid bills, and then hitting her "about the shoulders", immediately leaving the room while saying "You've shamed me" (Macdonald, 1990, p. 105). By the end of the scene, Isla has left the Firth of Clyde and Mackenzie for her parents' home, after learning that Cath is not only legally married to Mackenzie, but that they have two children whom Mackenzie renounces: six-year-old Tam and three-year-old Jackie. Scene two of the second act shows Isla attempting to wash Mackenzie's sins off her body. Maggie tries to take care of her daughter, thinking she has lost her mind, while Alec suggests Isla's pregnancy is causing her unusual behaviour. The audience then watches Isla and Mackenzie's ultimate altercation and farewell at her parents' house, and sees Mackenzie talking to Cath, reminiscing about his younger brother Wilf, who was killed in the war. This and the first scene ultimately help audiences establish the narrative of the play, and deftly rework the fragmented structure and its two timeframes. It can finally be gathered that in 1943, during an air raid in Glasgow, barely mature Isla ran into ladies' man Chief Petty Officer (CPO) of the Royal Navy Howard Mackenzie, who took advantage of her innocence and gullibility and married her at her insistence, fully aware he was already married with two children, and justifying his actions (to himself) with the fact it was wartime and he had lost a younger brother. When his predicament catches up with him, and his wife Cath finds them and reveals to Isla the true state of affairs, Isla is already pregnant. She makes the difficult decision to leave Mackenzie and return to her parents, while Cath has him charged with bigamy, and imprisoned.

With its fragmented structure and clever juxtaposition of the 1943 events – the couple's romance, wedding, and separation – and the 1944 consequences of the bigamist marriage, the play neatly portrays the step-by-step plight of young Isla, and deconstructs the dynamics of an ordinary working-class family and its struggles, against the backdrop of the Second World War. The third and fourth scenes of the second act (the final two of the play) are set in 1944. The third presents Isla arguing with her parents, who want her to give her baby away and make a new life. Isla does not yield to their demands, and when in the final scene she comes across her mother burning a letter

from Mackenzie, she takes it, reads it and without a word leaves her parents' home for good. Her reading of the letter is portrayed meta-theatrically, with Mackenzie, who is in prison, standing behind Isla and reading it out loud. Unfortunately, this open ending cannot be interpreted as a happy turn of events, even though free-spirited and independent Isla has left her bigamist husband and her hypocritical parents, who seem to be supportive of her but are more invested in their working-class respectability and the appearance of their "family as an ideal social structure" (Scullion, 2010, p. 179), although "[a]t the close the family is left turned in on itself." (Strachan, 1994, p. 156). In a culture entrenched in the hegemonic hetero-androcentric discourse and encoded with patriarchal systems of control and disciplinary power a young, single, unwed, mother like Isla does not have much chance of escaping poverty and further difficulties.

The play begins as an "almost comic account of a drunken father, a respectable mother and a lively daughter" (Sierz, 2015), before swerving into "part detective film noir, […], and part war movie" (Triesman, 2011, p. 60). From certain comic elements, such as the wedding ceremony and some humorous scenes and witty repartees that Sierz (2015) finds "nicely balance the darker moments", it develops into a "tragedy as Isla and Mackenzie marry, and begin a new family" (Sierz, ibid.). The play subsequently becomes a feminist dissection of gender-based oppression and marginalisation, which as Macdonald (in Gardner, 2005) cleverly points out, start at home: "If we don't study the family how can we understand the wider power plays in society? It's in the family that it all begins". The seeping of fragments from critical past events into the current lives and affairs of Isla, Maggie, Alec and even Mackenzie may be interpreted as the author's way of showing "how the past is always in our present thoughts" (Sierz, 2015), shaping them. Additionally, the frame-breaking, the non-linearity of the dramatic plot, the use of mime, songs and irony, and the metadramatic references to recognisable icons of Scottish and world culture (e.g., Robert Burns's poems; Clark Gable's films; popular songs and music such as "I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen" and "Red Sails in the Sunset"; prayers, psalms and hymns; and even the children's temperance society, The Band of Hope) point to the feminist application of postmodernist hybrids and epic theatre

in Macdonald's deconstructive scrutiny of Scottish society. The zig-zag movement of the play, its complementation of indoor, outdoor and liminal spaces, the contrasting of light and darkness, and the juxtaposition of a seemingly stable, loving and supportive parental home with the chaotic, shell-shocked and lie-imbued romance and marriage further add to the feminist dissection of ordinary working-class family life and wartime Scottish culture:

> The mime sequences, and the wedding dance which starts in the house and then takes in even the mysterious woman, together with the jagged interrupted sounds and lights, are a very important element in the creation of meaning in the performance. The discourse between movement and the apparently settled state of things inside the parental home shows up the instability, and emphasises that the struggle for survival in war is an extension of the struggle in daily life, with its hidden domestic violence. (Triesman, 2011, p. 60)

Portraying "Flawed" Women and Exposing Hetero-Androcentrism

In her intricate portrayal of Isla's rite of passage and the wartime struggles of her working-class family, Sharman Macdonald particularly foregrounds the plight of women who are anything but ideal and perfect "heroines". On the contrary, all the women portrayed are flawed, and although equally marginalised and otherised, their respective mutual relationships are at best complicated, and at worst dysfunctional and broken. As Horvat (2007, p. 299) properly points out, there is no sense of sisterhood among them; rather, in a world dominated and regulated by men (however absent, immature or cowardly they seem), women repress each other (see Macdonald, op. cit.) and often serve as an extension of patriarchal surveillance and disciplinary power.

Isla is on the verge of adult life, where nothing seems impossible and "when the dreams peddled by Hollywood films (it's the age of

Clark Gable after all) might touch anybody's life" (Sierz, 2015). Yet her attitude to women's (including her own) sexuality, her rushed marriage to a virtual stranger, and her immediate conception of a child might be interpreted as resulting less from her traumatic wartime experiences than from her strict gender-essentialist upbringing and the influences of a regressive patriarchal community. She clearly attempts to keep herself chaste and pristine at all costs ("My Gan said 'Keep your haund on your Ha'penny', says Isla on her first meeting with Mackenzie [Macdonald, 1990, p. 73]), and demands from him honesty, dedication and exclusive partnership (see ibid., p. 92). Simultaneously, she disparages local girl Mary for "show[ing] her knickers to the boys round the back of the synagogue" (ibid., p. 78), finds ways to ignore her father's youthful libertinism, and tells Mackenzie that she knows he has been with other women, but "I'm telling you this. I'll make damn sure I'm the last [woman in your life]" (ibid.). Isla disregards the fact that her mother is an overworked, exhausted, perturbed and downtrodden matriarch who has had her share of domestic troubles and even violence; she chastises her for buying black-market food (that Maggie obtains for Isla, who is pregnant, and for her grandchildren), and refuses to believe Maggie that Alec has hit her:

> MAGGIE: It's only the once your Father's hit me. For by I spat in his face. I canny mind what I spat in his face for. But I mind him hittin' me. He's comin'. Help me.
>
> ISLA: My Father never hit you.
>
> MAGGIE: Aye he did.
>
> ISLA: My Father never lifted a hand to you.
>
> MAGGIE: You've always loved him the best. Don't you think I don't know that. It's easy for a man to be loved. (Macdonald, 1990, p. 91)

Isla does share a special relationship with her father, taking his side in rows between her parents, helping him conceal things from Maggie, and berating her mother for enabling his alcoholism, while downplay-

ing his agency and the problem itself. She listens carefully when he narrates of his youth, their past, and her childhood, and particularly when he shares advice, although his attitudes to life, marriage and sexuality do not seem to correspond to her own. They even share an occasional glass (or half a pint) of drink, and a passion for alcohol. This is why it is particularly difficult on Isla when Alec would not look at her after she separates from the bigamist Mackenzie, having previously been excessively proud of her. Additionally, she feels utterly betrayed when Alec supports Maggie's suggestion that Isla's child must be given up:

> ISLA: Pa Pa.
>
> […]
>
> ISLA: Please.
>
> ALEC: Are you no gonnie look at your dog hen. That I brought home for you. To cheer you.
>
> ISLA: Help me.
>
> ALEC: Yer nice wee dog hen. (*Silence.*) I'm no sayin' I don't understand …
>
> […]
>
> ALEC: I'm no the one that's got tae look after it.
>
> MAGGIE: I'm telling you.
>
> ALEC: She's a good woman your Mother.
>
> ISLA: I want to keep my baby.
>
> ALEC: A good strong woman.
>
> ISLA: 'Anything you want', that's what you said to me. 'I'll get you the moon from out the sky if you ask me for it.' Pa Pa.
>
> ALEC: I'll bide by your Mother's decision.
>
> ISLA: God help me.
>
> ALEC: That's it finished. I'll hear no more. (Macdonald, 1990, p. 115)

On the other hand, Maggie – for all her concern about her children's and grandchildren's health, her religiousness and incessant prayers, and her staunch regard of respectability – is prone to finding a way to skirt the legal, social and moral codes on which her working-class community and larger society rest. Maggie will not leave the house bare-headed (because, as Mackenzie points out, "You canny be a lady if you havenie got a hat" [Macdonald, 1990, p. 72]); she justifies buying black-market food even if it might constitute stealing, and get the saleswoman imprisoned ("This stuff. It's all put by for the rich. I'm not depriving any other body. To keep 'Them' going. […] You talk about risk. I take a risk. Where's the harm." [Macdonald, op. cit., p. 80]); and even conceals unpaid bills from Alec, making Isla her accessory in the act. Maggie reprimands Isla when the latter attempts to stop her enabling Alec's alcoholism ("My own house. My own husband. You'll not tell me how to look after my own man." [Macdonald, op. cit., p. 68]); and suggests that "A woman has to cleave to a man" (ibid., p. 107) when Isla is distressed at discovering she has fallen prey to a bigamist. Although she herself flaunted her late pregnancy down the aisle when marrying Alec, Maggie tells Isla she is not truly married and should have known better than to carry a fatherless, out-of-wedlock baby, despite the fact that these statements are untrue, and none of what happened is Isla's fault. Maggie's hypocrisy particularly comes to the surface when she insists that men are like "sinners and God's in his wrath" (Macdonald, 1990, p. 113), and that any woman should "keep a bit of yoursel' private" (ibid., p. 93). She is an extension of the patriarchal surveillance and disciplinary power of women. With her gender-essentialist attitudes that she has tried to instil in Isla, and with her resolve that a woman must stand by her man at all costs, she represents a "bossy mother, whose callousness hides emotional crippling, [which] generally replaces the 'hardman' of the traditional pattern (Zenziger, 1996, p. 135). Yet her firm rejection of Isla's unborn child and the selfish decision not to take them in must be understood as a (small) rebellion against her own subjugation and the larger societal gender oppression, as expressed in the following speech, which is shortened for reasons of space:

> An' me. Eh? What about me? Eh? What about what I want. Eh? Answer me that. Do I no get a look in?

> What do I want? Playin' the fine heroine. You wi' yer face straight an' never a smile about yer mouth these dark days What about me? We could all do wi' a smile. I've seen it, the scorn in your eyes. I've seen it. Don't you think I haven't. You an' yer Faither. I can't go into a shop now … He's … Your Father … He's taken my pride from me. An' you're askin' me. Askin' me. Tendin' to a wain. Years at a wain's beck an' call. I've my own big son in prison camp in Germany. I'm tired. I'm very, very tired, I get by. Day by day by day, I get by. I've your brother on the submarines. My mind's full up. There's not the room inside my head to take on another thing. Isla. Are you listening to me? […] I pray. I'm walking round here. I'm cooking, I'm no here. I'm cleaning. I'm all the time talking to God. I'm keeping my sons alive. […] I've no room in me for a baby. We make our own way. I've no time. Each one of us, our own way. I've no room in my heart. Make your own way. I'll not tend it for you. I'll not care for it. […] I've had five wains of my own. I'll not start over. I can't. (Macdonald, 1990, p. 113)

The third woman to be given some action and prominence is Cathleen, and she is just as flawed as Isla and Maggie. Contrasted to Isla – who is portrayed as an innocent "angel-in-the-house", and a good woman who could be a stable anchor for Mackenzie – Cathleen is presented as a mysterious "vamp-woman", a stalker who jeopardises the marital bliss and bright future of Isla and Mackenzie. She tracks down Mackenzie and allegedly demands money to leave them be, but although they are separated, she will not divorce him because of her religious beliefs. Cath surprises the newlyweds as they enjoy the picturesque view of the Firth of Clyde, and tells Isla of her and Mackenzie's children, whom he disavows. Although she speaks lovingly of the children, the narrative she tells seems intended to destabilise her opponent, despite the fact that she herself is the intruder. When she does not achieve her goal, Cath has Mackenzie imprisoned for bigamy, but it becomes apparent that none of the details provided can be taken at

face-value, as they are projections of Mackenzie. Like the other women in Macdonald's play, Cath is taken advantage of by a careless, egotistical, chauvinistic male, who proves cowardly when it really matters.

All the women in the play, although flawed with their seeming emotional coldness and lack of sisterly feeling, are equal victims of the patriarchy and androcentrism. They take the blows, literally and metaphorically, yet are strong and independent providers for their families, and attempt to fight gender-essentialism in their own personal ways. Conversely, men are portrayed either as absent or as immature, unreliable, abusive, true "sinners" (Macdonald, op. cit.), and the reason for constant apprehension among the women. It is through them that Macdonald most strongly extends her criticism of systematic androcentrism and gender-essentialism. Namely, both Alec and Mackenzie perceive the women as their property; they expect them to uphold their socially-determined roles and behave according to what the men decide for them, or desire them to do. Even the smallest hint that the patriarchal rule will be disrupted becomes a source of spousal and familial humiliation, and a reason for further excessive control and punishment. Additionally, while they insist that women should rigidly sustain these legal, moral and social codes, they themselves take liberties with them, and nonchalantly ascribe such transgressions to "male nature", as Alec vividly explains to Isla:

> … For a man to marry is a great thing. He's giving up everything. […] A woman, she gains everything. Position. A place in the eyes of the world. On her finger for all to see she bears the mark of being wanted, the mark of her belonging. […] It's what she's been brought up for. The summit of her ambition. The goal of all her training. […] What if he strays What if? You let him be. […] Be canny. Never nag. Give him that much freedom he never knows he's been caught. Keep his meals hot and his bed well aired. Keep yoursel' pure for him. (Macdonald, 1990, pp. 100–101)

Macdonald further problematises the "male-gaze" upon women's bodies and sexuality. Both Alec and Mackenzie objectify and sexu-

alise the women they encounter, whether they are personally attached to them or not. Mackenzie's first description of Isla is of her allegedly unappealing appearance, although he soon compartmentalises her body and singles out her hair, hips, dark eyes, "hands wi' their great long fingers an' their red, red nails", her shoulders and even her "shoes an' your white, white socks" (Macdonald, 1990, p. 74). His projection of an image of Cath is also a form of objectification and sexualisation of a woman's body, as it zooms in on "a pair of legs wi' a crooked seam. A clicking pair of heels. […] Scarlet mouth […] cruel mouth […] a pair of pelvis bones sticking out that could cut you in two." (ibid., p. 90). Although there is nothing incestuous in his manner, Alec disproportionately emphasises Isla's exceptional beauty, even as a child. At times, he insists that the greatest gift a woman can give a man is her chastity (see ibid., p. 95), and that nothing surpasses a woman's perfume (see ibid., p. 101). Enclosed within such a masculinist fetishisation and commodification of women's bodies, it comes as no surprise that Isla is particularly anxious about keeping herself pristine, and that she, in utter distress, scrubs and washes herself at her parents' home upon learning of Mackenzie's treachery. Neither is it incredulous to watch as her mother attempts to conceal the view of Isla's body from her father that night. Through these instances Macdonald exposes what Susanne Hagemann (2007) refers to as "gender constraints [which] are inscribed on the body" (p. 221).

In conclusion, *When We Were Women* vividly depicts and deconstructs the Scottish wartime society, its working-class community, and the complex women who fight hetero-androcentrism and patriarchal subjugation and control through Macdonald's "distinctive emotional immediacy, geographical localism, and linguistic specificity" (Scullion, 2000, p. 111). According to Scullion (ibid.), these idiosyncratic elements mark her plays and make Sharman Macdonald "a unique and oddly distanciated voice within Scottish theatre."

LIZ LOCHHEAD (1947–): FEMINIST LITERARY AND STAGE ICON

Liz Lochhead is irrefutably a feminist icon of Scottish and world drama even today, some fifty years since the inception of her writing career (Edinburgh International Book Festival, n.d.). Her decision early in life to pursue an education in the arts (see Smith, 2011; Holloway, 2018) and then to focus on arts and literature in her professional career (see Smith, op. cit.; Koren-Deutch, 1992), has given her a formidable writing scope, which manifests in her numerous poetry collections (see Smith, 2011; Varty, 2013b) and some fifty dramatic pieces of various lengths and diverse genres (see Oddy, 2003; Encylopedia.com, "Lochhead, Liz"; Whyte 2011; Edinburgh International Book Festival, op. cit.). This, along with her public performances, speeches, and actions (see Macdonald, 2006; Smith, 2011; Whyte, 2011; Varty, 2013b; Young, 2017; Holloway, 2018; National Theatre of Scotland, 2023; Forbes, 2023; Bradley, 2025), has resulted in a series of awards, rewards and acknowledgments, such as the position of Writer-in-Residence at the Tattenhall Centre in Chester in 1982–1984 (see Smith, 2011, p. 14); Writer-in-Residence at the University of Edinburgh from 1985/1986–1987 (see Smith, op. cit; Encyclopedia, op. cit.); Writer-in-Residence at the Royal Shakespeare Company from 1988–1989 (Smith, op. cit.); Writer-in-Residence at the University of Glasgow in 2006 (see University of Glasgow, 2005); and honorary doctorates from the University of Edinburgh (see Rodríguez González, 2004), University of Glasgow (see University of Glasgow, n.d.), University of St. Andrews (see University of St Andrews, 2002), University of Sterling (see University of Sterling, 2025), and six other universities (Breslin 2017). In 2005, Lochhead was appointed Poet Laureate of Glasgow (see University of Glasgow, 2005; Waterman, 2012; Forbes, 2023), a position she left upon her appointment as Scottish Makar

in 2011 (see Lochhead 2011; BBC 2011; University of Glasgow, 2011; Crown 2016). Her multifarious talents, her literary achievements, and her standing in Scottish, British and world culture and literature were further recognised when she was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 2015 (Royal website, 2015; Ferguson, 2015b), the Saltire Society Lifetime Achievement Award in 2023 (see Forbes, 2023; Saltire Society Scotland, n.d.), and the position of Honorary President of Glasgow Caledonian University (see Glasgow Caledonian University, n. d.).

These awards (and others not mentioned here)[20] – along with Lochhead's impressive list of works, performances, interviews, public speeches and positions, and the many reviews, critical/academic essays and books on her scope[21] – might give the impression that Lochhead's long writing career has been thoroughly documented and assessed, and that women authors, whether poets or dramatists, in and beyond Scotland have had equal opportunities and treatment. This has further led to an insidious tokenism, which conceals the fact that, like Macdonald and Munro (and Caryl Churchill in England), Liz Lochhead initially had to earn a living in professions other than literature and theatre; and that after completing her studies at the Glasgow School of Art in 1970, and having her first collection of poems published in 1972, she spent almost a decade teaching (see Smith, 2011, pp. 4–9; Scotsman Newsroom, 2016). It was only after she won the Scottish Arts Council's first Scottish/Canadian Writers' Exchange in 1978 that Lochhead could focus solely on writing. By that time, the author had experience in performance, as she had collaborated with

20 For more on Liz Lochhead's life and profound scope, see: Koren-Deutsch (1992); Oddy (2003); BBC (2004); McDonald (2006); Smith & Horvat (2009); Crawford & Varty (2011); Smith (2011); Maguire (2011); Horvat (2011); Whyte (2011); Varty (2013); Varty (2013b); Scullion (2013); Young (2017); Holloway (2018); Encyclopedia.com (n.d.); Saltire Scottish Society (n. d.; n.d.b); and Edinburgh International Book Festival (n.d.).

21 For extensive information on and analysis of individual dramas by Lochhead, especially pertaining to the triad that made her famous (*Blood and Ice*, *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* and her adaptation of *Dracula*), see: Bain (1996); Brown (1996); Folorunso (1996); Harvie (1996); Stevenson (1996); Paterson (1996); Scullion (2000); Christianson (2011); Rodríguez González (2004); Horvat (2005); Hagemann (2007); Horvat (2007); Hutchison (2007); Rodríguez González (2008); Stirling (2008); Sassi (2009); Boyd (2011); Mugglestone (2011); McDonald & Harvie (2011); Stevenson (2011); Gish (2013); Scullion (2013); Čirić-Fazlija (2022); National Theatre of Scotland (2023); and Čirić-Fazlija (2025).

Marcella Evaristi and Esther Allan on *Sugar and Spite*, which, although comprised of poetic pieces, used the structure and formal elements of a theatre revue (Smith, op. cit., pp. 9–10; Oddy, 2003). Like Churchill, Macdonald, Munro, Christina Reid and Jackie Kay – to mention just a few of the British women dramatists who tested the British and world stages slightly before or after her – Lochhead has written in many (sub) genres and media. Her early dramatic works mostly comprises revues and (short) one act stage dramas (e.g., *Good Style*, 1980 [Smith, op. cit.]), on some of which she collaborated with Tom Leonard, Alisdair Gray, Jim Kelman (e.g., *Tickly Mince*, 1982; and *The Pie of Damocles*, 1983 [Oddy, 2003; Rodríguez González, 2004, p. 101; Horvat, 2011, p. 178]), or with Leonard, Dave Anderson, Dave McLennan and Sean Hardie (e.g., *A Bunch Of Fives*, 1983 [Oddy, op. cit.; Horvat, op. cit.]). After her first full-length play *Blood and Ice*, which premiered at the Traverse in 1982 to a varied response, and which explores the form and strategies of postmodernist metadrama, Lochhead continued with a range of revues (e.g., *Same Difference*, 1984 [Oddy, op. cit.]), young adult and children's dramas (e.g., *Disgusting Objects*, 1983; *Shanghaied*, 1983; and *Rosaleen's Baby*, 1984 [Oddy, op. cit.; Smith, op. cit.]), and highly acclaimed stage adaptations of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Moliere's *Tartuffe* in Scottish in 1985 (Smith, op. cit.; Oddy, op. cit.). Lochhead finally had her theatre breakthrough with the 1987 original full-length play *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*, which combines elements of postmodernist metadramatic hybrids with Brechtian epic theatre techniques to reassess the most pervasive myth and narrative in Scottish historiography. She also created a devised theatre piece, *Jock Tamson's Bairns*, on which she collaborated with Gerry Mulgrew in 1990 (see Oddy, op. cit.); this led to her realisation that devised and improvisational dramas were neither to her liking, nor were they her preference (Young, 2017; National Theatre of Scotland, 2023; Edinburgh International Book Festival, n.d.). Lochhead's subsequent pieces include 1992 collaborative show *Scotland Matters* (toured by Scottish 7:84 Theatre Company [Oddy, op. cit.]); the translation and adaptation of the *York Cycle of Mystery Plays* (1992 [Oddy, ibid.; Smith, op. cit.]); young adult theatre pieces (e.g., *The Magic Island*, a rewriting of Shakespeare's *Tempest* from Miranda's point of view, produced in 1993; *Cuba*, presented by BT New Connections in 1997; *Britannia Rules*, which evolved from

her earlier piece *Shanghaied* in 1998 [Oddy, op. cit.; Horvat, op. cit.]); and various adaptations of world classics (such as Euripides' *Medea*, 2000; Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*, 2000; Molière's plays *Le Misanthrope* in *Miseryguts*, 2002 and *School for Wives/L'École des femmes* in *Educating Agnes*, 2008; and Sophocles and Euripides' texts in *Thebans [Oedipus, Iocasta, Antigone]*, 2003; [see Oddy, op. cit.; Rodríguez González, op. cit.]). Her most recent dramatic works are *Edwin Morgan's Dreams–And Other Nightmares* (a full-length play honouring her late friend and fellow poet laureate and Makar in 2011); "Robert Burns" (a monologue eulogising the Scottish bard, composed as part of collaborative project *Dear Scotland*, produced by the National Theatre of Scotland in 2014); *What Goes Around* (an adaptation of Schnitzler's *La Ronde* in 2015); and *Thon Man Moliere 'or Whit got him intae aw that bother ...'* (a tragicomedy performed at Edinburgh Royal Lyceum in 2016 [Oddy, 2003]). Some of her plays were adapted to radio (e.g., *Quelques Fleurs*, originally staged in 1991 [see Smith, op. cit.]; *Blood and Ice,* staged in 1982; *The Perfect Days*, first produced in 1998; *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* from 1987; and *The Stanley Baxter Playhouse: Mortal Memories*, an original radio play produced in 2006 [see Oddy, op. cit.; Saltire Society Scotland, n.d.b]). Lochhead also created the film *Latin for a Dark Room* (aired at the 1994 Edinburgh International Film Festival, as part of BBC Tartan Shorts [see Horvat, 2011, p. 187; Glasgow Caledonian University, n. d.]), and "a twenty-four-minute factual programme narrated by Tom Baker entitled *The Story of Frankenstein* first screened in 1992 on Yorkshire Television, directed by Jenny Wilkes and featuring Rose Keegan as Mary, Alan Cumming as Shelley and Lloyd Owen as Lord Byron" (Horvat, op. cit.). Finally, Lochhead's scope includes the short pamphlet *Islands*, published in 1978 (see Smith, op. cit.; Whyte, 2011, p. 172), and an extensive number of poems. These will be examined in the subsequent chapter, which centres on the poetic aspect of Lochhead's writing and inventiveness.

In the same way as Caryl Churchill's early theatre career was marked by her collaboration with Max Stafford-Clark, the Royal Court and women's/feminist acting troupes (see Čirić-Fazlija, 2025, p. 139; p. 407); Rona Munro's by her alliance with EPW, Women Live and the *MsFits* troupe;[22] and Sharman Macdonald's by support from The Bush

22 For more information, see the chapter on Munro and the respective sources.

Theatre and Royal Court,[23] Liz Lochhead's early dramatic career was defined by her cooperation with the Traverse Theatre, Communicado Theatre Company, and Gerry Mulgrew and Ian Wooldridge (art directors at the Communicado and Royal Lyceum Theatre Company, respectively [see Smith, op. cit.; Koren-Deutsch, 1992; Maguire, 2011; Varty, 2011]). In the mid-seventies and early eighties, when Lochhead was entering the poetic and dramatic world of Scotland and Britain, she was a rare woman in what was mostly men's "country" – the public spheres of culture and performing arts, where patriarchy, the male gaze and the predominantly androcentric canon still reigned supreme, despite the advent of second-wave feminism (see Bain, 1996, pp. 138–140; Maguire, 2011, p. 154; Horvat, 2011; Scullion, 2013, pp. 118–119). These two decades in Scottish (and broader British) history and society were particularly trying, and led to the 1979 Referendum on Home Rule, the era of Thatcherism, the rise of Scottish pride (and nationalism), unemployment, general impoverishment, and industrial (in particular coal miners') protests. It is hardly surprising that within such a socio-historic and cultural milieu, Lochhead looked back at national history, and national and world classics in her (successful) attempts to pinpoint Scottishness and unravel hetero-androcentrism. None of her plays, however, are historical dramas or mere translations[24] (or even modern, slightly updated, versions) of classics. Rather, her dramatic pieces – whether reviews, full plays, original texts or adaptations – revisit the master/grand narratives of myths, historiography, religious and political ideologies and literature(s) and culture(s) from a distance, and with a double-coded irony, thereby de-historicising them and de-naturalising their inherent gender essentialism. At the same time, Lochhead has experimented with the dramatic form in most of her original texts, de-linearising their plots, fragmenting their dialogues and structures, and frequently combining postmodern metadramatic techniques with Brechtian epic distanciation, leaving her playtexts open and decidedly anti-naturalist. Lochhead often thematises (and criticises) representations of women in society, historiography, popular and official cultures, mythologies, and literary narratives. She con-

23 For more information, see the chapter on Macdonald and related references.

24 Lochhead rejects the notion of being a translator: rather she claims that she has 'only' adapted the playtexts from varied cultural and linguistic contexts and periods (Rodríguez González, 2004, p. 102).

tests the "traditional ideologies of gender, specifically those engaging with the concept of 'sisterhood', and with women as creative artists or in positions of power" (Macdonald, 1996, p. 454), and stages (pseudo) historic women as central character(s), foregrounding their dramatic narrative perspective for that purpose. With her thematic scope, her deconstructive approach to topics of interest, and her structural and formal experimentations – which are particularly tangible in her original and acclaimed plays – Lochhead is a staunchly feminist author, who creates timeless pieces that exploit what Sharman Macdonald calls the "female structure of a piece [, which is] cyclical" (in Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, p. 68). This is one reason why early reviewers often failed to embrace her plays unproblematically (see Smith, op. cit.; Horvat, op. cit.). Subsequently, however, most reviewers and critics have acknowledged Lochhead's talent and ingenuity, and have assessed her dramatic scope within the context of (Scottish) feminist theatre and gender studies (e.g., see Bain, 1996; Harvie, 1996; Zenzinger, 1996; Boyd, 2011; McDonald & Harvie, 2011), although some focus more on issues of (national) identity and the Scottish language (see Mugglestone, 2011; Patterson, 1996; Gish, 2013), and others combine these aspects of Lochhead's oeuvre in their evaluations (see Stirling, 2008; Christianson, 2011; Scullion, 2000; Scullion, 2013). It is, however, curious that some – such as Horvat (2011) or Randal Stevenson (2000, as cited in Scullion, 2013) – claim that in her original works post *Mary Queen of Scots*, Lochhead discards strictly feminist issues in favour of more humanist debates, or those that address Scottishness:

> In these mature plays [*Mozart and Salieri* (1990), *Quelques Fleurs* (1991), *The Magic Island* (1993), *Cuba* (1997), *Perfect Days* (1998), *Britannia Rules* (1998) and *Good Things* (2006)], Lochhead moves away from the feminist agenda that dominates her early work though her focus remains firmly on women's experience, albeit from broader humanist as well as more personal perspectives. Thematically, she now focuses on recalling past times, and the events that lie at the heart of ordinary people's lives, such as loves, heartbreaks, family secrets, weddings and funerals. (Horvat, 2011, pp. 183–184)

Conversely, Scullion (2013) properly identifies the problem of (mis)interpretation in such assessments which "read[] against both the allegorical potential of Lochhead's earlier plays and their feminist imperative, critical purchase and surrounding scholarship" (p. 123), and disregard the idea that

> both *Perfect Days* and *Good Things* maintained Lochhead's commitment to plays with women at the centre of their narratives and importantly, even provocatively, these women were of a 'certain age' – […] – negotiating relationships and identities in the harsh contexts of biological clocks and of a contemporary youth-fixated society. […] They also reconnected Lochhead's theatre writing with the imagined and the linguistic worlds of her poetry and her dramatic monologues […]. (p. 124)

Although Liz Lochhead has not premiered a new original play in the past decade, in her recurrent public appearances and advocacy she remains vocal about Scottishness, gender essentialism, and the mis- and under-representation of women in society, education, culture and literature, as expressed in her early works. She is unfaltering in her principles, even when holding to them means dismantling national myths, institutions, and icons (and the idealisations projected thereon), such as the National Theatre of Scotland (see Ferguson, 2015), art establishments (see Scotsman Newsroom, 2016), and Robert Burns (Scotsman Newsroom & Lochhead, 2018).

This chapter foregrounds Lochhead's feminist re-examination and deconstruction of the Scottish nation and its identity and society in her best-known drama, *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*. It does so by analysing the adroit shaping of its story-material, the characters who are positioned centre-stage, and selected dialogues. The chapter will also discuss the play's systematic unravelling of androcentrism, gender essentialism and the male gaze, inherent in national and European myths, in narratives about (female) Renaissance monarchs, and in the political theory of a monarch's two bodies: the immaculate body politic and frail human/natural body. Although examining a text that has been assessed extensively in the past,

this chapter attempts to offer a new reading, by focusing on its less analysed aspects.

"Scotland, Whit like?": *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*[25]

Liz Lochhead's most successful dramatic piece *Mary Queen of Scots* (which even she herself considers her best [see Smith, 2011, p. 10]) premiered by the Communicado Theatre Company in the Lyceum Studio Theatre in Edinburgh in 1987.[26] Since then, the play has conquered Scottish and world stages, and has frequently been revived.[27] It has also been continually assessed and foregrounded in academic articles on contemporary Scottish drama and theatre, eighties' feminist drama, and/or Lochhead's dramatic work (see Scullion, 2013). This drama takes its audiences back in time to the most decisive moment of Scottish and English histories: the reigns of Mary Stuart (commonly known as Mary Queen of Scots) and Elizabeth Tudor, (Virgin) Queen Elizabeth I. Both queens were anomalies of the Renaissance, when monarchies were predominantly male-led, and represented a rupture in the patriarchal order of sixteen-century Europe. In its textual manifestation, the play comprises two acts and fifteen scenes (eight in the first act and seven in the second). Resembling the narrative strategies of Henry Fielding's early realist novels, formal elements from selective realist plays by Tennessee Williams, or the distanciation techniques of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, Lochhead curiously gives each scene a (sub)title, which summarises its central thematic using (double-coded) irony and ambivalence. Accordingly, the first act of the first scene is titled "Scotland, Whit Like?"; the second scene "The Suitors"; the third "Queens and Maids"; the fourth scene is named "Knox and Mary"; the fifth "Repressed Loves"; the sixth "Mary Queen of Scot's Progress

25 For the remainder of the chapter, the title of the play will be shortened to *Mary Queen of Scots.*

26 For more information on the original playtext and production, see Harvie (1996), Rodríguez González (2004), Horvat (2005), and Varty (2011).

27 For more recent revivals of *Mary Queen of Scots*, see Curran (2002); Fisher (2009); Ewin (2011); Fisher (2011); Stewart (2013); Dibdin (2013); Waygood (2013); and Dibdin (2019).

and John Knox's Shame"; the seventh "Darnley and a Fever"; and the eighth scene of the first act "A Wedding". The second act opens with a scene titled "Seigneur Riccio, a Fortune, a Baby, and a Big Baby"; its second scene is "Rumplefyke"; its third "Whispers, Rumours, Souchs and Chatters"; its fourth "Knox and Bothwell"; its fifth "Mummers and Murderers"; its sixth "Sweet Baby James, Auntie Elizabeth and a Sorer Sickbed for Darnley This Time"; and its last, the only scene that takes place in twentieth-century Scotland, "Jock Thamson's Bairns" (see Lochhead, 1989, pp. 9–67). The drama uses a fragmented and open-ended form, with all the manifestations of postmodernist hybridisation[28] and time-lapse transposing, and playfully de-linearises its plot[29] to re-evaluate the historiographic and mythological narrativisation of women and Scotland in a political context. The play is as much about Scotland (and its relation to England and twentieth-century Britain) as it is about Mary or Elizabeth:

> It has to do with all these things between England and Scotland, male and female, and civil power, like the Church, some sort of democracy growing for a while. It is an interesting play to be written by Republicans. And also it is about Catholics and Protestants very much as well, because that was a very good story that was going on too. And it seems to me that what the children are representing, at the end of the play, is that the Scots are stuck with all these things. (Lochhead, as cited in Rodríguez González, 2004, p. 105)

Lochhead masterfully employs historic figures and events to critically revisit cultural myths and socio-historic grand narratives about Catholic Mary Stuart and Protestant Elizabeth Tudor. Such

28 These include genre hybridisation, the cross-bordering of high/low or elite/popular literary and cultural forms, and blurring the reality/fiction distinction. For more on postmodernist hybridisation and its manifestations, see: Čirić-Fazlija (2025, pp. 102–108); Lešić (2005, pp. 12–13); and Schmidt (2005, pp. 43–65). A detailed analysis of postmodernist hybridisation in *Mary Queen of Scots* can be found in Čirić-Fazlija (2025, pp. 171–175).

29 An extensive inspection of the plot de-linearisation and structural and formal fragmentation of *Mary Queen of Scots* can be found in Čirić-Fazlija (2025, pp. 161–171).

myths and narratives have been perpetuated for centuries, motivated by systemic androcentric matrices and encoded cultures; by the rivalry between the two (then fully independent) countries Scotland and England; and by the everlasting, all-encompassing question of distinct and clearly demarcated national identities. To that end, Lochhead uses the ironic double-coding of characters and language; metatheatricality; and the metadramatic strategies of the play-within-the-play, role-within-the-role, ceremony-within-the-play, intertextuality (whether indirectly or directly referring to fictional or non-fictional texts and events), and multiple forms of self-referentiality. All dramatis personae are enacted by only eight actors, and Lochhead was prompted to explain that the "interchangeability of characters has to do with the amount [sic] of people [she] had" (Rodríguez González, 2004, p. 106), and with a "particular theatre company with a particular style" (Lochhead, as cited in ibid., p. 105). Despite this, the metadramatic distanciation strategy, in which all but the a-historic, fictional character of La Corbie visually become other people during the course of the play, or turn into modern-day school-children in the final scene, raises questions about identity formation and its fluctuations, discourses of power and their framing strategies, and the patriarchal subjugation, control and disciplining of ethnic, religious and gendered Others. La Corbie,[30] the ultimate mistress[31] of ceremonies who simultaneously performs the roles of anti-illusionist character-cum-narrator, sardonic commentator, and metatheatric mediator of action and the audience's gaze – akin to an omniscient narrator, Greek chorus, or circus ringleader – continually intervenes on (and corrects) other characters' assumptions, projections and interpretations of the (fictional) world that surrounds them, thereby offering an alter-

30 The author explains that she created this multifaceted character specifically for actress Myra McFayden: "Corbie partly exists because of the particular actress that I wrote it for. It was like, 'What part am I going to get for Myra?'. She is a great singer!" (Lochhead, as cited in Rodríguez González, 2004, p. 106).

31 Lochhead is specific about the gender of the character, her function in the play, and what she represents, as follows: "You are not sure if she is a bird or a woman. She is a woman, but you are never sure if she is a person or a crow or if she is alive at the time of Mary or if she is now telling it all. She is kind of an immortal spirit, a shaman. She starts telling the audience 'This is my version of the story. You'd better listen to me, I'm the boss! I change it all.' And she doesn't ever speak to Elizabeth, she speaks to Mary a couple of times, so she may be a kind of a ghost of a jester. She's a kind of strange speaker, but it seemed to me that she could make it tight together" (Lochhead, as cited in Rodríguez González, 2004, p. 104).

native perspective to and reading of the (un)official historiography and mythology. Unlike a Greek chorus, however, "instead of representing the voice of the community or judging the action, La Corbie involves the audience in the creation of meaning as the performance proceeds, transgressing the way ideology is traditionally transmitted" (Rodríguez González, 2008, p. 95), and breaks the fourth wall. Through La Corbie's (postmodernist) interferences and rectifications, the ironic role-doubling and metatheatric breach of illusionism, and the juxtaposition of paralleled protagonists – the two queens – and (historic, pseudo-historic and fictional) events in their kingdoms, Lochhead de-mythologises both Mary and Elizabeth, questions the prevalent narratives about Scotland and England, and unravels and de-historises various manifestations of chauvinism that still afflict modern British society. In doing so, she prompts the audience to question their own agency and complicity in the perpetuation of myths, falsehoods, grand narratives and othering.

La Corbie opens and closes the two-act play, and is characterised as an omnipresent and eternal "ragged ambitious creature in her cold spotlight" (Lochhead, 1989, p. 11) – a national bird-symbol, "an immortal spirit" (Lochhead, as cited in Rodríguez González, 2004, p. 104) that exists outside the temporal and spatial constraints of the two levels of action. Therefore, it/she inhabits the world of the latter half of the sixteen century, when most of the historic events and their fictionalised versions shown in the play's fragments occurred; late-twentieth century Scotland, when the final scene takes place; and the time and place of the audience that reads/views the drama. It/she wheels freely between and beyond the loci of the play's action: the juxtaposed English and Scottish realms, and a contemporary schoolyard. Her soliloquy in the play's first scene, "Scotland, Whit Like?", is a prologue that contextualises the drama and accentuates one of its key themes: defining the markers of the Scottish nation and identity:

> 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' a fistfu' o' fish or a pickle o' oatmeal.
>
> It's a queen's banquet o' roast meats and junkets.
>
> 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.
>
> National bird: the crow, the corbie, le corbeau, moi!
>
> (Lochhead, 1989, p. 11)

This description evokes a Scotland of stark contrasts – wet marshland and dark forests, bright meadows and a park to a quay; a country surrounded by sea and resting on natural deposits of lye, salt-pan and coal, resembling a magical (witch's) cauldron, which symbolises creation, fertility, nourishment and even fluctuations of meaning, with its power to brew new concoctions (and rebellion). Yet it is also a country that is impoverished and filled with inequities, as it comprises tenement buildings and rich (merchant's) houses, "hure house[s]" (Lochhead, op. cit.) and humble cottages. It may provide ample sustenance one day and an inadequate meal the next, but, if one is fortunate, a lavish and elaborate feast, with multiple courses and "roast meats" (ibid.) may be savoured. La Corbie's Scottish monologue emphasises a multiplicity and mutability of signs and markers, and suggests that audiences may even have their own vision and version of Scotland, depending on their subjective perspectives and projections. La Corbie then paints her own (ironic) image of the country, which evokes a defiant and resilient prickly thistle, an elegiac mood and sentimental longing for the past, a cold wind, wet and snowy weather, and an avian

symbol of duality, death, and wisdom: a crow whose name is given in English, Scottish and French, to emphasise the volatility of meaning and remind the audience of Scotland's history and geopolitics. Even the portrayal of this alleged national bird, the corbie, is branded with double-coded irony and self-derision:

> Voice like a choked laughter. Ragbag o' a burd in ma black duds, a' angles and elbows and broken oxter feathers, black beady een in ma executioner's hood. No braw, but Ah think Ah ha'e sort of black glamour.
>
> Do I no put ye in mind of a skating minister, or, on the other fit, the parish priest, the dirty beast?
>
> My nest's a rickle o' sticks.
>
> I live on lamb's eye and road accidents.
>
> Oh, see, after the battle, after the battle, man, it's a pure feast – ma eyes are ower big even for *my* belly, in lean years o' peace, my belly thinks my throat's been cut.
>
> (Lochhead, 1989, pp. 11–12)

Unlike other birds that (melodiously) sing to attract mates and for territorial reasons, crows croak and caw to signify their presence and to communicate with members of their flock/murder/hoard/mob/parliament. La Corbie claims the sound is as unpleasant as gagged laughter, which might further refer to how some non-Scottish speakers have historically perceived country's language, its dialects, and its speakers. Unsightly, ragged and black-feathered, the crow simultaneously resembles a headcover of an executioner (a link to the bird's common symbolism of death and ill news, and to the beheading of the central character in both the play and the country's mythology); the clothes of a skating minister (in reference to the acclaimed 18th-century painting of Sir Henry Raeburn, "Reverend Robert Walker (1755–1808) Skating on Duddingston Loch", which evokes Scotland's rich cultural heritage, its stern Presbyterian church, and the painting's fairly grey and wintry landscape); and an unnamed parish priest (an allusion to the dubious historic position of the Catholic church in Scotland, and

the precarious position of Mary Queen of Scots). Both clerical images additionally complicate and extend the signification process, as they conjure images of spirituality, the afterlife and the spirit world – also typically associated with crows, and with Mary Stuart who is sometimes represented in national myths and historiographies as a martyr, and is often depicted wearing a black gown with a white ruff collar in miniatures and paintings of the time. La Corbie points out that 'her' appearance is not beautiful, but it does exude a special type of glamour, as black is typically worn for formal, solemn occasions. This again invites a web of images connected to death, spirituality, extreme religiousness, and the mythical Mary Queen of Scots; and to witchcraft/magic, due to the possible Scottish denotation of the phrase "glamour" (see Gish, 2013, p. 53). If La Corbie is connected to Scottishness, and by association to Mary, then her nest, which is "a rickle o' sticks" (Lochhead, 1989, p. 11), is Scotland – an unsteadily structured, disorganised heap of twigs, concurrently fragile and durable. La Corbie's insistence that the crow, the supposed national bird of Scotland, lives off traffic accidents and the eyes of lambs, and feeds on corpses (wars therefore represent a feast, whereas peace implies hunger) foregrounds the carnivorous nature of these birds of prey. Combining this imagery with previous ironic suggestion that the national "sport" is a sentimental longing for the past, Lochhead begins her assessment of myths and grand narratives in and about Scotland, Scottishness, and the country's loss of independence, and questions the extent of the involvement and responsibility of those who have perpetuated these myths and narratives uncritically. The double-coded irony in this excerpt is sustained throughout the scene, as La Corbie, laughing and with the crack of a whip, brings the main characters – Mary, Elizabeth, Hepburn (O'Bothwell), (John) Knox, (Lord) Darnley and Dancer/(David) Riccio – to the stage in a circus-parade, narrating the following:

> Once upon a time there were twa queens [sic] on the wan green island, and the wan green island was split intae twa kingdoms. But no equal kingdoms, naebody in their richt mind would insist on that. For 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 beau-

> tiful and tall and fair and … Frenchified. The other kingdom in the island was large, and prosperous, with wheat and barley and fat kye in the fields o' her yeoman fermers, and wool in her looms, and beer in her barrels, and, at the mouth of her greatest river, a great port, a glistening city that sucked all 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.
>
> (*Burst of dance from* DANCER*, a sad ironic jig.*)
>
> Twa queens. Wan green island. […] (Lochhead, 1989, p. 12)

Using the prototypical opening formula of a fairy tale, and thus implying narrativisation, mythologisation, and distanciation, La Corbie (re)presents the two queens who inhabited the same island, suggestively juxtaposing and contrasting their appearances and their respective kingdoms, and foregrounding the issues to be developed and elaborated during the course of the play. She parades the queens before the audience, her monologue narrowing to differences in the details of the public and private lives of these two great British women, whose gender and estates (not to mention their joint ancestor), as well as their uncharacteristic political position(s) in the then rigid patriarchal system of power dissemination, connect them beyond (national) borders. This makes their respective experiences of being women and monarchs both analogous and dissimilar. Through this and the juxtaposed fragments in the scenes that follow, Lochhead points to discrepancies in the public, official narratives and the personal, unofficial admissions and revelations. In her portrayal of Great Britain and its kingdoms, La Corbie projects images commonly disseminated in narratives on/of the two countries and their mutual relations. Although the island is split into two kingdoms, the kingdoms are nothing alike. The northern one, Scotland, is described as small, cold, poor, and inhabited by illiterates whose stature (whether inferring height or

social position and wealth) is diminished, and who fear their oppressive lords. In contrast, England is a large, prosperous country, whose natural riches are exploited by the royals and by London, the seat of both the queen and political power. Although Scotland and its people are of "low stature", its queen Mary Stuart is beautiful, tall, and foreign (so much that in her first dialogue Mary speaks Scottish with a thick French accent, which she gradually loses as she becomes increasingly Scottified). Conversely, bountiful and spacious England is ruled by the Scottish queen's cousin: the less beautiful but wise and slightly older Elizabeth, renowned for her army, navy and her position as leader of a Renaissance European superpower. In the prologue, the queens, each representing her country, are seemingly praised but effectively objectified by certain markers: the Scottish queen for her visual appeal, height and youth (through implied binarism); and the English for wisdom, social position and (geo)political superiority. The final implication in La Corbie's 'fairy tale' is that Scotland – visually appealing and fertile, but dependent on foreign/continental influences, cultures and allies – is not only unequal but also more precariously poised, as it is hierarchically subjected to the dominant England.

The second scene discloses Lochhead's strategies of metatheatric juxtaposition of the queens (and related characters) with fragments of historic and pseudo-historic-cum-fictional events – which assist the non-linear structuring of the play – and with a postmodernist re-evaluation of grand narratives and myths: under the keen eye of La Corbie (who occasionally comments or partakes in the dialogue), one corner of the stage shows Elizabeth and the other Mary, in their respective courts. The two are simultaneously visited by foreign ambassadors, and offered the hands of various sovereigns in (political) marriage. The queens are first proposed to by obvious political doubles – Elizabeth by King Philip I of Spain, and Mary his son, Don Carlos of Spain – before both Elizabeth and Mary are comically offered one or the other Archduke of Austria as alternatives. The common folk and nobility of each country use identical language constructs and show equal prejudice as they comment on the implications of Spanish and French interference, and suggest local lords whom the queens could/should marry. Thus the divided stage becomes the sixteenth century island of Great Britain, a political battlefield of foreign

influences and internal contentions and manipulations, an image reinforced by parallelisms and contrasts in actions and dialogues in all subsequent scenes.[32] The historiography and mythos of the Scottish loss of independence and Mary's beheading are dismantled scene-by-scene, as paralleled fragments tackle narratives, popular beliefs, and conspiracy theories about Elizabeth's alleged (English) manipulation and scheming to install a puppet in the House and Court of the Stuarts in order to facilitate a takeover, and about Mary's (Scottish) naivety and agency – and martyrdom – in the loss of her literal and metaphoric head, and in her plot to destabilise and depose Elizabeth (English/Tudor dominance). The play's final scene, which moves the action to a twentieth-century schoolyard in Scotland, and portrays all the historic characters as children[33] "stripped of all dignity and historicity" (Lochhead, 1989, p. 63), who bully and molest ethnic, religious, and gendered Others, is a warning to the island's contemporary inhabitants. Here, the play urges them to reconsider what they teach their children through their (indoctrinating) stories they tell and (detrimental) actions they perform: "Well, they [the kids] are quite innocent, but they are stuck with all that. So this is a play that says, 'This is who we are,' 'Do we have to always be like this?' Because I don't think we have to stay the way we are with the children. They were a powerful kind of image" (Lochhead, as cited in Rodríguez González, 2004, p. 105).

De-Naturalisation of the Body Politic, Androcentrism and the Male Gaze

Another key issue Liz Lochhead deconstructs is hetero-androcentrism and the male gaze, which has controlled, shaped and directed narratives and images of women and their bodies. Lochhead

32 For reasons of space and critical focus, the structuring of subsequent scenes and the techniques of fragmentation and distanciation will not be discussed further in this chapter. For an extensive analysis of Lochhead's formal experimentation and structural play, see: Čirić-Fazlija (2025, pp. 161–175); Macdonald & Harvie (2011, pp. 133–146); Koren-Deutsch (1992, pp. 426–429); and Rodríguez González (2008, pp. 95–99).

33 For an ingenious interpretation of the children's dynamics and their potential contemporary political symbolism, see: Rodríguez González (2008, p. 99), based on Varty (2011, pp. 161–163).

specifically exploits parallelisms, juxtaposition, role-doubling, roles-within-roles, and inserted play-within-the-play (*Masque of Salome*) to de-naturalise both the theory of the monarch's two bodies and the gender-essentialism inherent in the patriarchal narrativisation of women in positions of (political) power. By contrasting the public and private events in the lives of the two queens, or rather by juxtaposing their political and personal spheres, Lochhead unravels the male gaze, which reduces women in politics to either sexualised, over-displayed, fertile bodies and fetishised parts of women's anatomy or to completely de-sexualised, (self-)censured, under-displayed and seemingly (unproductive and 'unnatural') virginal bodies. By placing the two female figureheads centre-stage, seemingly contrasting them through the binaries of virgin/harlot, barren woman/mother, celibacy/marriage and self-sacrifice/self-indulgence, Lochhead mirrors the male gaze and phallocentric representation of the lives and reigns of Elizabeth Tudor on one hand, and Mary Stuart on the other. She does this through a fixation on their bodies, or rather through the contradiction inscribed in the (seemingly) feeble body of a woman in the politically potent position of a Renaissance monarch. Both Elizabeth and Mary are historical anomalies, ruptures in the patriarchal order of Renaissance Europe, and rare women leaders in the political systems of the time. Their mutual relationship, however, was not friendly or sisterly (either literally or metaphorically), although they shared a common ancestor, historical time, geographical space, and paradoxical political position. Having become monarchs in their own rights through birthright rather than marriage, motherhood or regency, Elizabeth and Mary (visually and with their biological and gender markers) ironically subvert and threaten the patriarchal order and phallocentric male/female binary, and practically contest the theory of the two bodies of a monarch (which split a prince's figure into the immaculate body politic and frail human/natural body):

> It was one thing that a king's body might fall ill, dangerously inverting the world-stabilizing hierarchy of the body politic over the body natural. But it was entirely another that a queen's body might bear her own successor, confounding the division of the body by factoring in not one but two bodies, a situation which

> could be complicated further should the child be male since his supposedly superior sex might displace—and would certainly complicate—the queen's right to rule. Furthermore, the pregnant regent bore profound physical testimony to the superficiality, even ridiculousness, of the metaphor of the prince's two divided, hierarchized bodies. (Harvie, 1996, p. 108)

For these reasons, their respective sovereignties have generally been perceived and assessed not as the public socio-political decisions of metaphoric figureheads, but as outcomes of the personal desires and bodily urges of "silly, spilte, wee lassie[s]", as Knox describes his Queen Mary (Lochhead 1989, p. 34). Although Mary Stuart never drew attention to her feminine attributes or body, either in political speeches, public conduct, or her manner of dress, and although her extraordinary education, multilingualism, intelligence, appearance and manners embodied the Renaissance ideals for monarchs, she was mythologised and narrativised into the image of a promiscuous woman of dubious morality, who had her legally-wedded husband murdered when she (unnaturally) desired another royal subject. Despite the fact that her fertile body produced an heir, and therefore fulfilled its biological and social purposes, Mary does not play the gendered role of a mother (even though Lochhead portrays her nurturing nature and motherly affection), as the androcentric system of control finds her unnatural, concurrently excessive and inadequate. Her female body must therefore be controlled, shaped, disciplined, and reduced to patriarchal gender roles, which means Mary is dethroned, banished, isolated (from her people, extended family, and son), confined, and beheaded.

In contrast, Elizabeth I frequently drew attention to her feminine attributes and "feeble" woman's body, while simultaneously (intentionally) projecting a powerful (male) regal image. During her reign, and in subsequent mythological narrativisation, Elizabeth has been referred to as a virginal queen, with an idealised (and thus de-sexualised) untouched body. She was (self-)promoted as a wise woman who allegedly sacrificed her 'natural' urges and gender roles, including those

of a wife and a mother, for the sake of her nation. Androgenising her body and vowing celibacy, however, still placed Elizabeth in an unfavourable position with respect to the male gaze and patriarchal code: she was transformed into a barren woman, whose (equally fetishised) body was infertile and unproductive, as it could not extend the Tudor line, biologically or politically. Lochhead points out that even Elizabeth has been reduced to an essentialist gender ideology, and her body – and not her erudition, political wisdom and extraordinary education – placed centre-stage. This is particularly tangible in the way her subjects and political lords speculate about her alleged (sexual) relationships and affairs, and comment on her mental (in)stability, which they suppose was provoked by unresolved sexual tension or the unrealised gendered role of motherhood.

Lochhead also exploits roles-within-roles and role-doubling to deconstruct the hetero-androcentric history of women, and the phallocentric representation of women's bodies and sexuality. During the course of the play one actress transforms from Mary Queen of Scots, to Elizabeth's English maid Marian, to the underaged "poor Scottish beggar lass" Mairn (Lochhead, 1989, p. 32), after whom Knox lusts, to abused twentieth-century Catholic schoolgirl Marie. Another actress plays Elizabeth I, Mary's Scottish maid Bessie (who freely enjoys her sexuality), thirteen-year-old Scottish prostitute Leezie (who recognises and vulgarly calls out misogynist Knox for his covetousness), and contemporary schoolgirl Betty, an aggressive and sadistic ("wild, hysterical" [Lochhead, 1989, p. 67]) bully. Lochhead contrasts these women ironically, connecting them and their bodies through and beyond time, space and history to unravel pervasive gender essentialism and misogyny, and reposition women from being objects of the male gaze to subjects who direct the gaze (or are at least "looking-at-being-looked-at" [Aston, 1995, p. 89]). What Mary and Elizabeth in their (geo)political historic positions and roles may not experience and express publicly, their respective maids Bessie and Marian, and streetgirls Mairn and Leezie can and do, easily and freely. Furthermore, the patriarchal gender stereotyping and historiographic and mythological representation of Mary as a lustful woman and inadequate mother, who yearns for emotional and sexual fulfilment – to the extent that she disregards the (private and political) consequences of her (supposed)

decisions – are challenged in juxtapositions of the two queens and the dramatisation of the possible (but equally uncertain) circumstances to which Mary is subjected, which suggestively implies a lack of agency on her behalf. On the other hand, representing Elizabeth's plot against Mary, her manipulation of Mary and Darnley's marriage, and her role in Mary's consequent beheading imaginatively exploits the conspiracy theories and myths. It also suggestively problematises the issue of women supporting androcentrism and the patriarchal control of other women, as extensions of male power and the male gaze. In either case, the fundamental (human) rights of women to have families and engage in fulfilled intimate lives, and the right of women in politics (represented here by both Mary Stuart and Elizabeth Tudor) and society in general to make independent decisions regarding their own bodies and lives, are withdrawn because of the (geopolitical) consequences of their choices. In expressing this, Lochhead problematises the pervasive disenfranchisement and patriarchal control of women, a point further explored in the inserted play(s)-within-the-play. In Act Two, scene five Mary is aggressively forced to partake in the *Masque of Salome* as King Herod: because of her lack of agency and control in that scene, she is fully disempowered by the male mummers, who plot the murder of Riccio and the fatal wounding of Darnley (see Lochhead, 1989, pp. 51–56). Similarly, in Act One, scene five, the audience watches an externalised pantomime of Elizabeth's nightmare, which presents the dethroning and murder of Elizabeth's mother Anne Boleyn by her father Henry VIII, both symbolically and as a stylised allegory. Reading it as a dangerous implication of her eventual decision to take a husband, Elizabeth vows to censor and regulate herself and her own ('feeble', woman's) body within the patriarchal matrices of power: "What shall it profit a woman if she can rule a whole kingdom but cannot quell her own rebellious heart. [...] I am not proud I love him – but I am proud that loving him, still I will not let him master me" (Lochhead, 1989, p. 25). As Jennifer Harvie (1996) affirms:

> Lochhead's Elizabeth has accepted – […] – the sexist logic rooting her era's theories of the queen's two bodies, theories which subordinate the material body to the ruling body, and the female body to the male body, hierarchizing a separation of "bodies" which is

> already, at least in one respect, arbitrary. […] In Elizabeth's perception, the anomaly of the female regent can – and will – be tolerated by herself and her people so long as she does not subordinate herself to another or to her own desires – to the "body natural." This, of course, effectively rules out marriage since she sees subordination as intrinsic to the woman's position in matrimony. She cannot be "mastered" if she remains master. Elizabeth's logic here necessitates her adoption of a somewhat androgynous persona through which she wields (and exploits) qualities associated with both the male and the female, a persona she shares with traditional representations––[...] – of her historical namesake. (pp. 112–113)

Finally, although Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I never actually met, in Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots* they are brought into close connection through juxtaposition and role-doubling. With the metadramatic roles-within-roles, their identities are destabilised and their narrativisations de-historicised; thus, "[t]he power lies not with the subject of representation, but with who controls that representation. […] while the subject of representation ostensibly may be empowered women, Lochhead frames this more specifically as women whose power is undermined through their objectification by men who control the representation" (McDonald & Harvie, 2011, p. 139). When Elizabeth becomes Bessie or Leezie, and Mary turns into Marian or Marnie, their representations fluctuate, helping de-naturalise gender-essentialism: unlike a modest and romantic Marian, Bessie is eroticised and sexually active, whereas both Leezie and Mairn are brazen, irreverent, and in full opposition to socially desirable behaviour and patriarchal codes. Additionally, Stirling (2008) points out that

> this fragmentation of the names and the figures of queens illustrates a multiplicity of female roles, and marks the gap between the iconic figurehead of the queen and the individual female body. […] Through all these transformations Elizabeth and Mary retain some

> essential characteristics, however, which they are better able to express as serving-women or as beggar than as queen. (pp. 101–101)

With its discussion of Liz Lochhead's playful dramatic inspection of national identity, and her staunch feminist unravelling of androcentrism embedded in the myths and narratives pertaining to Scotland's history, culture and society, this chapter ends the book's deliberation on women (authors) in Scottish theatres and drama. Portrayals of Scotland as a country of their own, however, do not cease here; the subsequent chapters delve into other, non-dramatic, creative texts by Scottish women, including Liz Lochhead and her poetry collections.

THE FEMALE-COLOURED AND SCOTTISH-COLOURED POETRY OF LIZ LOCHHEAD[34]

As she confidently enters her late 70s, Liz Lochhead (1947–) remains a stately presence in Scottish literature. Her career began with the energetic and powerful poetry collection *Memo for Spring* (1972), after she graduated from the Glasgow School of Art in 1970. This collection was followed by many others: *Islands* (1978); *The Grimm Sisters* (1981); *Dreaming Frankenstein and Collected Poems* (1984); *Bagpipe Muzak* (1991); *The Colour of Black & White: Poems 1984-2003* (2003); *True Confessions & New Clichés* (1985); *A Choosing* (2011); *Fugitive Colours* (2016); and *A Handsel: New and Collected Poems* (2023). Although Lochhead is known for both her poems and plays, the present chapter primarily addresses how she contributed to the creation of a unique space for women poets in the predominantly masculine 1970s Scottish literary landscape, and discusses how she helped transform and enhance this space in subsequent decades.

Initially, Lochhead worked as an art teacher in Glasgow, Bristol and Cumbernauld, but her career took a different direction in 1978, when she was awarded the first Scottish/Canadian Writers' Exchange Fellowship and left Scotland for Toronto and America (Varty, 2013, p. vii). Although teaching was no longer her primary vocation, Lochhead remained deeply committed to advocating the importance of creative personal engagement with poetry in the classroom. Aware of the inherent constraints in curriculum design, she gladly accepted invita-

34 These phrases are borrowed from R. E. Wilson and G. Somerville-Arjat's 1990 interview with Lochhead, published by Wolfhound Press as *Sleeping with Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets*.

tions to organise workshops and poetry readings with young students, and particularly focused on teaching them to learn poetry by heart and recite it in class. As Varty notes, "her emphasis on learning by heart links with her belief in the value of internalising the voices of others, to encourage a sense of individual ownership and shared community through poetic expression" (2013, p. 2). Although a seemingly simple task, the practice of listening to and reciting poetry can be a gateway through which students find their own voices – a much-needed learning outcome for audiences, irrespective of age. Likewise, she believes that, rather than "squeezing poems into exam questions […] turning [them] into a hard code, a problem", poetry teaching should focus on the sheer pleasure of reading (The SRB interview: Liz Lochhead, 2011). As an established young writer, Lochhead participated in workshops organised by Stephen Mulrine, Philip Hobsbaum and Tom McGrath, and taught creative writing courses with Tom Leonard, James Kelman, and Alasdair Gray (Gonzáles & Lochhead, 2004, p. 101). It was during one such course that she recognised the unique voice of Agnes Owens, who later became a published author.

Lochhead's work has always been inseparable from issues of nation and identity, and this led to her appointment first as Poet Laureate of Glasgow (2005) and then as Scots Makar (2011–2016), positions she took over from her friend Edward Morgan. In 2015, she was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry, for "helping to change the landscape of British poetry" (Grant, 2015), thereby receiving recognition not only as a Scottish author but also as a British one.

Lochhead's collections of poetry constitute "an interlinking daisy-chain of old and new work" (Varty, 2022, p. 116), and her poems are often reprinted to produce new meanings in different contexts. As Varty (2022) observes, this co-existence of linear and circular time institutes a much-needed continuity of Scotland as both "an ancient kingdom and a new democracy", and confirms that "the past needs to be carried into the future without rupture" (p. 116). Likewise, Lochhead's exploration of the landscape of womanhood over the years has followed the same principle of reprinting poems in various collections to open up new ways of reading, and deeper, more mature perspectives on women's lived experience. Lochhead's latest collection *A Handsel* (2023) is a rich filigree that combines layers of her earlier work with 17

previously unpublished poems. The careful selection and positioning of poems gives a unique insight into a mature and fulfilled vision of the self and the world. For these reasons, and with full awareness that a single chapter cannot do justice to Lochhead's impressive poetic opus, the poems analysed here have been selected from *A Handsel* to chart at least a provisional map of her work. Ideally, this will encourage readers to pursue their own routes on this emotional and experiential map, and to add new toponyms that transform it into a new lived reality.

The horizons and texture of Lochhead's poetry are inevitably coloured by her use of language as a tool of expression and identity construction. Lochhead gazes at the world without flinching; she dissects male-female relationships and manifold ways of being both Scottish and a woman, while venturing beyond the familiar to record the uncomfortable experiences of hospitals, care facilities and old age. This chapter is positioned at the intersection of these thematic strands. By revisiting some of her prominent poems and examining some lesser-known ones, it attempts to create opportunities for new interpretations of Lochhead's contribution to contemporary Scotland's multi-layered literary landscape.

Writing Scotland-in-the-World

Asked whether she needed more women than Scottish writers as role models at the beginning of her career, Lochhead responded:

> I read my *Goblin Market*, I read my Plaths and my Sextons, but I didn't feel I needed poets to be women for them to act as role models, and I still don't. What I needed more – now I look back – were Scottish poets. (The SRB interview: Liz Lochhead, 2011)

Her deep belief that Scottish literature is an inseparable part of the national identity was recognised in her 2011 appointment as Scots Makar. The position is equivalent to the Poet Laureate in the rest of the UK, although it is much newer. The latter title dates from 1668,

when King Charles II appointed John Dryden as Poet Laureate and Historiographer Royal. The King had hoped that Dryden would help him win public support for the monarchy after the political upheavals that preceded the Stuart Restoration and culminated in the execution of his father, Charles I (Marsack, 2013, p. 9). In contrast, Lochhead is only the second poet to be awarded the title of Scots Makar, and it was in the transition of the title to her from Edwin Morgan that the post was defined more precisely. Edwin Morgan was the first Scots Makar, and was appointed by the Scottish Parliament in 2004 under First Minister Jack McConnell, in the aftermath of the successful 1997 devolution referendum. His most important assignation was to compose a poem for the opening of the Scottish Parliament in October 2004; this was the prophetic "Open the Doors". Because Morgan had fallen ill it was Lochhead who read the poem at the opening ceremony, thereby symbolically endorsing the mutual trust and friendship between the two distinguished poets. Although the title was awarded in an enthusiastic post-devolution atmosphere (more to honour Morgan than to formalise the position of Scots Makar), it unambiguously underlined the necessity that literature be part of the renewed Scottish political narrative. According to Varty (2022), expectations of the Makar were more firmly delineated in 2011 with the appointment of Liz Lochhead. Lochhead was selected at a private meeting of Scotland's three successive First Ministers – Scottish National Party (SNP) leader "Alex Salmond and his two Labour predecessors Jack McConnell and Henry McLeish" – from "a list of suggestions supplied by the Scottish Poetry Library and the government's arts advisers from Creative Scotland" (as cited in Varty 2022, p. 25).

Salmond announced the appointment of Liz Lochhead as Scots Makar:

> In creating the post of national poet, the communities of Scotland demonstrated the importance it places on the many aspects of culture which lie at the heart of our identity. As an author, translator, playwright, stage performer, broadcaster and grande dame of Scottish theatre, Ms Lochhead embodies everything a nation would want from its national poet.

> With a natural ability to reach all ages and touch both sexes through her writing, Ms Lochhead has also been immensely successful at championing the Scots language. She continues to reach out to school pupils through her work which is widely read in Scotland's schools and she is also a much valued role model, advocate and inspiration for women who are given a strong voice in her writing. ("The story of the Makar", n.d.)

Both Varty (2022) and Marsack (2013) point out the inaccuracy of Salmond's statement that the communities of Scotland elected Lochhead, and assert that it deliberately obscures the political nature of the selection process.

The Scottish Government outlined the Makar's role on its website during Liz Lochhead's tenure, to include the production of a "poem or poems commenting on significant national events", and to invite him/her "to be free to comment publicly on poetry, the arts and any and all related matters in Scotland and internationally" (Varty, 2022, p. 26). An uneasy affinity between the realms of politics and literature, specifically poetry, was thereby reinstated, along with broad implications for the Makar's involvement with arts.

Lochhead dispelled the tensions this produced by returning poetry to "the people":

> The point of the Makar role is to fight the corner for poetry. I want to do that in a down-to-earth way, because to a lot of us Scots poetry is a right, something as natural as a song and a dance. (The SRB interview: Liz Lochhead, 2011)

When asked whether writers have a duty to be politically engaged and speak out when necessary, she drew a subtle line between political duty and artistic freedom in her recognisable style: "Writers absolutely don't have a duty to do anything but to write. On the other

hand, if you are the sort of person who writes, you probably feel a desire to speak, not to stay dumb about injustices" (The SRB interview: Liz Lochhead, 2011).

When she was appointed Scots Makar for a five-year period in 2011, Lochhead joined three other women poets who received distinguished titles in other parts of the UK: Paula Meehan, Ireland Chair for Poetry from 2013 to 2016 (inclusive of Northern Ireland); Gillian Clarke, National Poet of Wales from 2008 to 2016; and Carol Ann Duffy, Poet Laureate for the United Kingdom from 2009 (Varty, 2022, p. 1) to 2019. Interestingly, although these titles encompass the four constituent countries of the UK, they betray the inconsistencies of political geography. There is no Poet Laureate for England, only one for the whole of the UK; this both conflates England with the UK, and denies it its regional identity. Similarly, the Ireland Chair of Literature does not recognise the political border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland (the latter of which is part of the UK), but refers to the island as a whole, thereby recognising its cultural and geographical oneness.

Tensions surrounding this interplay of literature and politics resurfaced when Lochhead announced her official membership of the SNP in 2014. Many saw this as inconsistent with her role as Scots Makar, and some demanded her resignation. The Scottish Labour Party argued that "People are, of course, free to join any which political party they choose. The role of Makar, however, doesn't belong to any one person or any one political party" (Bradely, 2014).

Although openly supportive of Scottish devolution and independence, Lochhead has always been keenly aware of the nation as a closed space (Mulalić, 2023). As a result, her national space is recognisably Scottish, but it is also flamboyantly coloured by the shades of other nations, and its windows are permanently open. Through this lens, the chapter examines a selection of her poetry.

That her Scotland is a diverse – although not necessarily harmonious – place is visible in her first poetry collection *Memo for Spring* (1972). The poem "Something I'm Not" speaks directly to our senses, requiring us to listen, smell, see and touch the presence of her Indian neighbours in a Glasgow tenement community. Labelled "per-

haps the most distinguished twentieth-century poem to deal with immigration into Scotland" (Crawford, 2013, p. 15), this short piece on the nature and texture of otherness is unpretentious and remarkably honest. The title "Something I'm Not" unequivocally asserts otherness by foregrounding the 'I' as 'not-you'. In doing so, it emphasises that the neighbours are to be perceived exclusively from the perspective of the 'I' in the title. In the first line, however, "familiar with" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 37) spills over from the title and smooths the tone, offering uncertainty and a lack of knowledge instead of the straightforward 'us vs. them' perspective. Throughout the poem, the speaker admits to not having sufficient understanding of the cadence of her neighbours' language, the smell of their food, the colourfulness of the mother's sari beneath the drab coat usually worn by the locals, and the touch of her golden-turned-bluish skin as she clutches the pram in an attempt to fend off the cold Scottish weather.

The literal and figurative meeting point in the poem is the local but distinctly foreign Shastri shop, where both 'I' and the Indian neighbour shop for spices. It is then that the speaker wonders "How does she feel?" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 38), when her neighbour has to accept her children's flawless Glaswegian slang, whose rhythm and meaning remain foreign to her. The moment of sympathetic reaching out remains just that – a mental approach that never quite connects. Crawford (2013) registers "an unsettling but profoundly human wariness" at this "complex encounter" in a 1970s Glasgow not yet at ease with its immigrant population, and considers it far more honest than a sermon on how to be a good neighbour (p. 18).

Lochhead's interest in language and nation is brilliantly captured in her well-known "Kidspoem/Bairnsang" (originally published in *The Colour of Black and White* 2003). The poem switches between English and Scots, as a Scots-speaking little girl attempts to create a memory of her first day at school, where her classes are exclusively in English. The first part of the poem, which depicts a loving mother sending her daughter off to school, is written in Scots. It ends abruptly at the door of the school, where the girl is about to learn to use English like a coat she can put on and take off when needed. The second part of the poem is an English translation of the Scots part, where English is the place of forgetting the sound and texture of her native Scots; it

then mischievously lapses back into Scots, in both a childish act of play, and an unconscious code-switch typical of bilingual and bicultural adults. The final stanza invokes acts of speaking and writing as central to identity construction, not only for the little girl summoned from the speaker's memory, but for the poet as well. This is clearly not just a linguistic issue; it is also a political one. The little girl sees translating from Scots as a language of the private sphere to English as a language of the public sphere (in this case, the school) as an act of multiple transformation: "the way it had to be said / was as if you were posh, grown-up, male, English and dead" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 122). It is in the act of reading the poem out loud that its full linguistic and political potential are released. The colours and sounds of Scots and English gain substance, while the daily co-existence of the two cultures is enacted through uneasy transitions.

The figure summoned by the poem's final lines resembles a strict English teacher as he appears in the eyes of an apprehensive first-grader. The comic undertone does not allow the poem to sink into bitter cynicism. Instead, it skilfully uses the format of a children's song with a repetitive pattern, while subtly framing the poem within the notions of writing, speaking and translating.

McMillan playfully observes that the tone of finality in the last line is undermined by the fact that most of Lochhead's poetry is in English, which means the language is "far from dead" (2013, p. 35). Although the poem seems to suggest linguistic absolutism, it is more appropriate to read it as an example of a "mixed linguistic terrain" (McMillan, 2013, p. 35), which embraces its heterogeneity as a form of identity.

Lochhead's Scotland is firmly intertwined with the dynamics of female relationships in "View of Scotland/Love Poem" (originally published in *The Colour of Black and White* 2003). The poem brings together past and present Hogmanay celebrations. In doing so, it juxtaposes the speaker and her mother, and sweet memories of the speaker's partner from thirty years ago and their mature and somewhat disillusioned relationship in the present. The poem bristles with emotional images from the past, such as the speaker's mother scrubbing and greasing the linoleum floors (which suggests a modest work-

ing-class household taking pride in its cleanliness) then overloading the table with food ("sockeye salmon" [Lochhead, 2023, p. 131]) intended more for the imaginary guests than the family; "Mum's got her rollers in with waveset" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 132), and has laid her best dress out on the bed, not to be worn before the celebration begins. Nevertheless, the poem renounces sentimentality through an effective aside ("This is too ordinary to be nostalgia" [Lochhead, 2023, p. 131]), and instead embraces the notion of an intergenerational gap revisited and overcome as the daughter is finally able to look at her mother without judging, and with a mature acknowledgement of cultural and gender patterns. As their relationship becomes a place of new hope, so does the vision of Scotland, in (presumably) the early 1990s, at the eve of the devolution referendum. Lochhead's intimate understanding of working-class identity and gender dynamics, alongside Scotland's changing social and political landscape, means that "personal and social histories intersect […], suggesting that each prefigures the other" (Severin, 2013, p. 46). With their flavour of ordinariness, or even cliché (Nicholson, 2007, p. 165), however, her images transcend Scotland and invite the reader to inscribe the similarities with his/her own culture, thereby "becoming her co-performers" (Nicholson, 2007, p. 165) and enacting Scotland-in-the-world, not its more parochial version.

Moving away from Britain, Lochhead places Scotland within the wider European political and historical landscape in a poem dedicated to the fall of the Berlin Wall: "5th April 1990" (originally published in *The Colour of Black and White* 2003). The narrator visits Berlin to attend a writers' conference shortly after the fall of the Wall, and this confluence of history and art sets into motion manifold reflections on the place of Scotland in this wider framework. The Wall's fall coincides with that of Margaret Thatcher, and the hopeful new beginning of a unified Germany anticipates the possibility of a successful devolution referendum in Scotland (Severin, 2013, pp. 41–42). Further, the poem professes great faith in the "Bethanien-House artists" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 139), and "art's radical powers" (Severin, 2013, pp. 41–42) to record and preserve historical change in the public memory. The poet, however, is acutely aware of the multilayered nature of history and the dangers of its simplification. She is simultaneously a historical tourist, bringing home graffitied bits of the Wall and cheap

souvenirs, and a poet witnessing a moment of transition in European history, with all its political and cultural implications. The poem suggests that history is owned by both "the moneychangers at Zoostation / fanning out fistfuls of Ostmarks" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 140) and Edwin Morgan to whom the poem is dedicated, and who would most likely be the only person that could make sense of this whirlpool of voices. The poem's multiple threads converge in Scotland past and present, and in Edwin Morgan, Lochhead's dear friend and one of the country's foremost poets, who immortalised his country by internationalising, rather than enclosing, its cultural identity.

> Morgan's poems whirled me from space
>
> to the bedrock of my small
>
> and multitudinous country, and swung me
>
> through centuries, ages, shifting geologies
>
> till I was dizzy and dreamed
>
> I was in the sands of the desert and the dead
>
> as the poets lived it, just before my time (Lochhead, 2023, p. 140)

However, the Scotland-in-Europe and the Edwin Morgan in the poem are entirely Liz Lochhead's creation, and it is her compelling voice that brings the poem to life.

Lochhead's anxiety over the somewhat claustrophobic space of nation is clearly articulated in "The Unknown Citizen" (originally published in *The Colour of Black and White* 2003). Echoing W.H. Auden's poem of the same title, which satirises the materialistic world's lack of interest in the ordinary man, Lochhead paints the nation in the same bleak terms but with the addition of ominous overtones: "How to exist / except / in a land of unreadable sounds and ambiguous symbols / except / between the hache and the ampersand" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 117). The citizen from the title remains unknown, as if to resist the clutches of the ambiguous symbols of the nation. The poem invokes our modern urge as descendants of the Enlightenment and

empiricism to classify and categorise things in order to understand them. The sense of difference embodied in an empty symbol such as an ankh, a fleur de lys, a cross, or a crescent, validates our existence in the world. We ascribe meanings to symbols, and sanctify them only to become ensnared and enslaved by their absolutism when belonging to one nation rather than another means the difference between comfort and misery, or even life and death. The question at the beginning of the poem – "How to exist?" – makes a final ironic twist in the last lines: "except / under some flag / some bloody flag with a crucially five / (or a six or a seven) / pointed star" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 117).

As previously mentioned, Lochhead gladly employs clichés, and in doing so draws the reader's attention to the arbitrariness of words. She then implores that they be unpacked, and that some serious questions are asked. Themes from "The Unknown Citizen" are developed in more hopeful terms in "Connecting Cultures", written for the marking of Commonwealth Day in Westminster Abbey in 2012. Although it was commissioned for a public event framed by the highly contested legacy of the British Empire – and therefore susceptible to the emptiness of politically sanitised wording – Lochhead avoids slipping into "flagged-up slogans" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 188). By turning to language as the place where our understanding of the world is fully formed, she takes well-known words such as *Commonwealth* and *communication*, and defamiliarises them: in place of the dictionary definition of Commonwealth is the notion of *common wealth*: "Remembering how hard fellow feeling is to summon / When Wealth is what we do not have in Common" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 188). This approach underlines the difference between nominally empathising with people of another country affected by war, poverty or a sense of insecurity, and actually consenting to share our resources and power with them (Stonebridge, 2021, p. 24).

Likewise, the notion of communication is gradually stripped of its positive connotations of physically and virtually connecting people and places, to be replaced with the idea that "Communications can mean means of transporting, especially / Troops or supplies" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 188). These lines echo all too powerfully the permanence of conflict at a global level, where peace is an intermittent break between great powers' perpetual fight for zones of interest. Finally, the

poem revisits the gap between the word and the world – "What we merely say says nothing – / All that matters is what we do" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 188) – and urges us not to take words and history at face value. We are reminded to care for each other, which is more than we could ever hope for.

Lochhead's vision of Scotland comes full circle with "Favourite Place" (originally published in *Fugitive Colours* 2016): an evocative mapping of Scotland's West Coast, and an epitaph for Lochhead's late husband Tom ("But tonight you are three months dead / and I must pull down the bed and lie in it alone" [Lochhead, 2023, p. 158]). The poem is written as a journey from Glasgow to the couple's caravan, somewhere close to Lochailort, on the West Coast. It captures beautifully the interplay between the emotional and physical landscape, as husband and wife enjoy moments of shared silence, little routines and a deep appreciation of the gift of togetherness. That the journey is an act of imagining the past as future becomes obvious from the use of the conditional continuous tense, as in "We would be sneaking up Loch Lomond" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 157), but the use of tense varies and winds like the road to suggest movement in place and time. Places like Loch Lomond, Tyndrum, Rannoch Moor, Glencoe, Ballachulish and Loch Linnhe assume a prominent role in the poem because of the strangeness of their sound, and their clear departure from the familiar elasticity and music of the English language, in which the poem is delivered. As Gillis (2011) suggests, insisting on strange-sounding Scottish (and Irish) place names in poetry written in English enhances the effect of verisimilitude, but also literally inscribes marginal cultures within the dominant English one (p. 204).

While many non-Scottish English speakers will struggle with the Scottish place names in the poem, non-native speakers of English are twice removed from their original sound and meaning. But "despite this element of alienation, Irish and Scottish poets have continually used place names as a means of energising their English" (Gillis, 2011, p. 205). Because the pronunciation of such names, along with their local geography and history, is unknown to many non-Scottish speakers, "the place name's connotative energy will be central to the poem" (Gillis, 2011, p. 206); its imaginative power "creates a gravitational pull, a connotation of belongingness" (2011, p. 208).

Accordingly, following the poem's route on the map and merging it with the power of sounds and feelings of love and loss, initiates an act of complex learning as we engage our intellect, emotions and imagination to create our own interpretation of Lochhead's Scotland.

Navigating the Spaces of Womanhood

Research into Lochhead's position on feminism and Scottishness inevitably leads to the collection of poetry and interviews *Sleeping with Monsters: Conversations with Scottish and Irish Women Poets*, edited by Rebecca E. Wilson and Gillean Somerville Arjat and published in 1990. The title is inspired by Adrianne Rich's idea that a thinking woman sleeps with monsters. This collaboration between the two young scholars (Wilson was only 24 at the time), resulted in personal portraits of Irish and Scottish women poets, including Liz Lochhead. The interviews are structured around a few simple questions: What inspires them to write? How important is their female gender to their writing? Do they see themselves as Irish/Scottish writers? The book does not pretend to be an analysis of gender and nation, or an "expose of women's personal lives"; rather it hopes to state "an acknowledgement that life and art are inextricably bound" (Wilson & Somerville Arjat, 1990, p. xiv).

Although Wilson pursues the relevance of feminism and Scottishness in Lochhead's work by asking the same question several times in different ways, Lochhead subtly eludes rigorous divisions by claiming that her "language is female-coloured as well as Scottish-coloured" (Wilson & Somerville Arjat, 1990, p. 11). More specifically, she doesn't write in Standard English, but in Scots English and sometimes in Scots, and notes that this use of language is "defining what you really are so that you can more honestly relate with the world" (Wilson & Somerville Arjat, 1990, p. 10).

Asked whether being labelled a feminist writer is to some extent limiting, Lochhead replies:

> I think feminism's basically very, very simple. It's about equal pay, equal opportunities, abortion on demand,

> free childcare. So what could you write about these things? The other things, the things of the soul, which have to do with the way we screw up these simple things, and the reasons we screw them up. […] I am interested in exploring things without apportioning blame. I am interested in female masochism, for instance. I suppose it's a feminist issue but it's also a human issue. (Wilson & Somerville Arjat, 1990, p. 12)

Although a review in the *Irish Quarterly* summarises the shortcomings of Wilson's and Somerville Arjat's methodology as "the spirit of youthful enquiry from a base of total ignorance", the reviewer concedes that its naivety and honest enthusiasm make the collection "an enjoyable, even jolly book" (Mays, 1991, p. 211). Accordingly, *Sleeping with Monsters*, in spite of its personal tone and alleged lack of academic rigour, provides a subtle link between diverse scholarly perspectives on Lochhead. It invites us to rethink the concept of academic inquiry, while underscoring Lochhead's own lack of interest in feminist or any literary theory as demonstrated in the quotations above.

Another interesting feature of Lochhead's work is her position in the women's literary scene in Scotland. By her early 20s, she was already among the first audible women poets' voices in a predominantly male literary setting (Christianson, 2000). Lochhead acknowledges this position without self-mythologising:

> There were no Scottish women poets writing in English when I got started really. Well, there must have been but they weren't getting into print, weren't quoted. But it was possible for me to get a start because of exactly that, as there was a hunger to hear a female voice. (The SRB Interview: Liz Lochhead, 2011)

In the Preface to the 2022 edition of her first poetry collection *Memo for Spring*, originally published in 1972, Lochhead unambiguously articulated her position as a young female poet whose poetry filled the gap in literary festivals and syllabuses:

> It was popular. Schools took it up. I'd be invited in to read to the non-academic early school leavers, especially the girls, by teachers who'd tell me they were doing MacCaig and Morgan with the clever boys in the fifth-year Highers classes. (I wasn't offended, just quite pleased and proud that for some of them when they heard this stuff, the sense of recognition they felt, their own everyday experience being reflected in my work might open them to more challenging poetry.) […] Organisers of poetry readings and literary festivals would put on any three from a pool of about a dozen male poets, and me. (Lochhead, 2022, p. 11)

Although aware of the particular role assigned to her through this 'generous' inclusion, Lochhead used the opportunity to share her own vision of what it meant to be a young woman in Scotland. One of her avid readers in the late 1970s was Ali Smith,[35] then 16 years old. She discovered *Memo for Spring* by chance one Saturday night while babysitting her teacher's children. When the children fell asleep, she found the odd-looking slim volume on her teacher's bookshelf, and read it several times that night. The impact of Lochhead's poetry on Smith is best summarised as 'revelation', as she passionately argues:

> What I felt was a combination of astonishment, possibility and profound relief. A poet who's a woman, and a Scot! That you could be all three of these things! That it might be possible in the world to be anything like this poet who used language as clear, as everyday, as streetwise, as this, and as deceptively dimensional as deep water. (Smith, 2022, p. 15)

Smith identifies two dominant strands in Lochhead's critical reception, and it is unsurprising that the latter has been appropriated in various academic narratives of Scottishness, from the outspoken feminist to the distinct voice of the nation. Both labels come with con-

35 Ali Smith wrote the introduction to the 50th anniversary edition of *Memo for Spring* in 2022.

siderable risk, because they essentialise certain aspects of Lochhead's writing, while ignoring the subtle nuances of in-between identities. As Christianson notes, however, the expansiveness and complexity of Lochhead's work does not allow reductive readings of womanhood, and therefore leads us "away from an overtly personal interpretation of her poetry in particular, refusing us the assumption that women's poetry is inherently 'autobiographical'" (Christianson, 2000, p. 50). Likewise, as Smith observes, Lochhead avoids the siren call of fixed identities and social roles through the subversive impact of her language, in whose 'deep waters' and playful use of clichés a woman of many identities is constantly reconstructed and reborn.

This section will provide insight into a selection of Lochhead's poems from various collections, and examine them through the lens of three aspects of womanhood: changes inherent to particular stages of a woman's life; women and creative work; and women as carers, past and present.

What follows is an attempt to listen to, record and name some of the voices that feature prominently in Lochhead's debut collection *Memo for Spring* (1972). Four poems will be examined – "Revelation", "The Choosing", "Morning After", and "The Visit" – in order to map Lochhead's representation of a woman's life stages. Doing so inevitably implies changing the original order of the poems, thereby imposing new meanings and unlocking new layers of female identity.

The ominous atmosphere of "Revelation" opens the collection. A terrifying memory of the speaker's encounter with a bull on a dairy farm when she was a little girl is an initiation for both the girl and the reader. The girl is seemingly powerless, as she is brought to the farm and held by the hand to be shown the massive black thumping body of the bull. She runs away ("pigtails thumping on my back in fear" [Lochhead, 2023, p. 31]) only to run into "big boys" "who pulled the wings from butterflies and / blew up frogs with straws" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 31). Amid the destructive forces of a roaring bull (although confined within an outhouse) and the adolescent boys inflicting needless pain on helpless animals, the girl is desperately trying to preserve order "scared of the eggs shattering – / only my small and shaking hand on the jug's rim / in case the milk should spill" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 31). The poem has been read

as a transition from innocence to experience, with the bull and the boys embodying unbridled, even mindless, masculinity, while the girl is associated with the concepts of fragility, domesticity and frugality, through the eggs and milk that must be preserved (Varty 2005; Boyd 2011).

Although the girl appears as a passive observer, she actively experiences the moment of crossing the threshold of the unknown part of herself: "I had always half-known he existed / this antidote and Anti-Christ" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 31). The encounter with the "monster" bull may be read in the context of the girl's growing awareness of sexual desire (Boyd, 2011), further reinforced in the reference to the violent boys and "oblivious hens" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 31), while milk and eggs suggest the girl's future maternal role. The girl, however, summoned from the speaker's memory, endows this frightening experience (smell, vision and sound) with a name, and gives it texture with her perceptive language:

> At first, only black
>
> and the hot reek of him. Then he was immense,
>
> his edges merging with the darkness, just
>
> a big bulk and a roar to be really scared of,
>
> a trampling, and a clanking tense with the chain's jerk.
>
> His eyes swivelled in the great wedge of his tossed head.
>
> He roared his rage. His nostrils gaped like wounds. (Lochhead, 2023, pp. 30–31)

The mesmerising image of the bull is entirely the girl's creation. It is a revelation of the power of language, which ultimately endows her with an agency she has yet to explore. Accordingly, the poem can be read as the initiation of a future writer, who will name the world and write herself into it.

The next stage in a woman's life can be glimpsed from the much-anthologised poem "The Choosing", which problematises

women's agency through the narrative of a female friendship starting at school. In the beginning, both girls are equal ("We were first equal Mary and I / with same coloured ribbons in mouse-coloured hair / and with equal shyness" [Lochhead, 2023, p. 45]) but after Mary moves to another part of the town with cheaper rent their lives take different turns: the speaker becomes a dedicated scholar, while Mary settles for a life of domesticity. We learn that Mary's father "didn't believe in high school education, / especially for girls" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 45). The speaker, now 10 years older, is returning from the library by bus when she sees her (long-lost) friend Mary sitting near her, married and visibly pregnant. The precise images offer simple answers to complex questions of women's choices, but the poem's revelations can be glimpsed only in its crevices. The uniformity of Scotland's housing schemes, where both girls used to live, is disturbed by an allusion to the family dramas hidden within: "The same houses, different homes, / where the choices were made" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 45). Although the speaker's choice was to pursue education, self-improvement and empowerment, she cannot help being envious of Mary's simple happiness, which is beautifully rendered in the following lines:

> Mary
>
> with a husband who is tall,
>
> curly haired, has eyes
>
> for no one else but Mary.
>
> Her arms are round the full-shaped vase
>
> that is her body.
>
> Oh, you can see where the attraction lies
>
> in Mary's life –
>
> not that I envy her, really. (Lochhead, 2023, pp. 45–46)

The speaker's arms full of books are juxtaposed with Mary's arms that rest on her belly to claim her identity as a mother-to-be. The speaker's restlessness and loneliness are intertwined with proud inde-

pendence, as Mary is virtually non-existent outside her father's house and her husband's unwaveringly watchful, albeit loving, eyes. The poem reduces the complexities of a woman's life to a binary opposition – self-made woman vs. quintessential carer – only to shatter the concept of mutually exclusive choice as another illusion of freedom. Both young women will fit into the narrative frameworks of gender, sexuality and social class. The poem wants to know how these frameworks are made, and why we can't change parts of the story to produce new meanings. Although these questions remain unanswered, they demand the reader's attention and change the way we approach Lochhead's poetry.

"Morning After" introduces us to the hierarchies inherent in love relationships between men and women: "Sad how / Sunday morning finds us / separate after all" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 36). The poem appears to be gender neutral, operating only with the pronouns *I* and *you,* but its clever use of gender stereotypes unmistakeably assigns meaning to the poem (Varty, 2005). The lovers are divided my multiple gender and class markers, so that the woman is reading the *Mirror*, a British tabloid, while the man is engrossed in serious issues in the *Observer*, a British broadsheet aimed at an intellectual middle-class audience. The space of the woman's working-class identity is further diminished by the fact that, rather than actively thinking, she is "reflecting only on your closed profile" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 36). "Morning After", with is obvious allusion to a wild Saturday night-out followed by sex and (possibly) a morning-after pill, brings only sadness, separation and clear lines of demarcation between feminine and masculine space. A sense of togetherness is undermined not only by gender and class norms, but also by an implicit reference to the schism inherent in Scottish culture, subtly introduced through the presence of the British newspapers in the poem. As Lochhead claims: "the English are like men – nonchalant and unquestioning about existing," while "Scotland is like a woman; the Scots know they are perceived from the outside" (as cited in Varty, 2005, p. 642).

The concept of the gaze which, in spite of its probing stings, only reinforces the unknowability of the Other, dominates in "The Visit". Narrated from a young person's point of view, the poem takes us to an old people's home, where a group of unwilling youths are doing their "Christian Duty" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 33), by entertaining the res-

idents with the gifts of their youth and Christian prayer. The encounter, however, only brings the sharp smell of old age, which cannot be remedied by the blessings of youth and the sound of hymns.

> Through corridors with a smell,
>
> bile greenish-yellow unfamiliar smell
>
> of nothing we knew,
>
> but of oldness, madness, blankness,
>
> apathy and disinfectant.
>
> We grinned.
>
> We did not know what else to do.
>
> A grimace of goodwill and Christian greetings,
>
> hymn books clutched in sweaty palms.
>
> We are the Church Youth Club to sing to you,
>
> bring you the joy we have never felt. (Lochhead, 2023, p. 33)

The speaker's gaze captures the otherness of old age, in "complex simple faces / so full of blankness you would not believe it" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 33). But the youthful self-confidence is challenged by the powerful gaze of two men – an orderly described as "the watcher, the keeper-calm / of what prowled his cage" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 34), and a priest with his "easy phrases" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 34), both of whom symbolise institutionalised power. The life stages represented in the previous three poems from Lochhead's first poetry collection gradually lead us towards a critical examination of the hierarchies that accompany both youth (the priest who monitors the unwilling young people and the religious ceremony) and old age (the orderly who watches every movement of the residents in the home). The poem's sombre tone, as well as the implied hierarchical grip, are softened by the speaker's playful insistence that the eyes of the orderly cannot possibly be "everywhere at once" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 34).

Lochhead's collection *Dreaming Frankenstein* (1984) is heavily indebted to the notions of monstrosity and femininity in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. While there are many creative and scholarly readings of this collection and its literary ties (McMillan, 2011; McMillan, 2013; Varty, 2005) this chapter addresses literary creation and childbirth as aspects of identity construction in the lives of women. Two poems will be used as examples – "An Abortion" and "A Giveaway" – each of which provides a unique insight into ways of being and writing as a woman.

Starting with its unsettling title, "An Abortion" problematises the failure of women to deliver on expectations. The irregularity of the word order in the poem conveys this effectively, and signals a departure from the norm. The cow in the poem literally fails to deliver a healthy calf, and instead gives birth to a deformed creature that is quickly removed by the business-like male attendants. The cow is first observed from a safe distance by a struggling woman writer, who feels affinity for it as they are both engaged in a difficult *labour*. While the cow's ordeal looms large – "she rolled / great gape-mouth, neck distended / in a Guernica of distress" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 76) – the speaker's words on her desktop are barbed and jarring in their inefficiency.

Interestingly, the powerful image of the cow's suffering ("a Guernica of distress") immortalises the physicality of childbirth, hence transforming her sharp words into art. She no longer hides behind the glass, but approaches the cow to reach a close-up view of agony and injustice. Their peculiar sisterhood is broken by the appearance of men summoned to introduce order into this chaotic spectacle of blood and failure. The woman writer is curtly dismissed, a "Shamed voyeur, back at my notebooks again" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 77).

Like Gilbert's well-known feminist reading of *Frankenstein* – which identifies issues of female sexuality and creativity in both the male and female characters of Shelley's novel, making them all descendants of the "monstruous" outlawed Eve from *Paradise Lost* – Lochhead's poem focuses on female otherness. The image of the cow's tormented body and its deformed offspring embody a "hellish femaleness", "a grotesque parody of heavenly maleness" (Gilbert, 1978, p. 48). This maleness is represented by the officious men, who wear good suits beneath

their overalls, and come to verify the aborted birth while remaining completely disinterested in the cow's pain. The authority of men is confirmed in the final lines of the poem, as the cow quietly accepts that her sin is somehow implied in her "filthy materiality" (Gilbert, 1978, p. 54), "femaleness and fallenness being essentially synonymous" (Gilbert, 1978, p. 60):

> the men in blue come back again
>
> and she turns, goes quietly with them
>
> as if they were policemen
>
> and she knew exactly what she were guilty of. (Lochhead, 2023, p. 77)

Likewise, the speaker embodies the "literary women's questionings of the fall into gender" (Gilbert, 1978, p. 52), and, echoing Mary Shelley's labour, "in her alienated attic workshop of filthy creation she herself has given birth to a deformed book, a literary abortion or miscarriage" (Gilbert, 1978, p. 59). In this case it is a poem about an abortion that creates delicate intertextual connections between Lochhead's poem and Shelley's novel.

The idea of a writing woman is further developed in "A Giveaway". Although simple, its title artfully points in two directions – a free gift, and an act of involuntary disclosure – which converge in the notion of giving parts of yourself in a poem. The poet is concerned that she has revealed too much about her feelings for her lover, so she decides to rewrite:

> I cancelled out the lines that most let on
>
> I loved you. One week after I thought that it was done
>
> and perfect, practically in print – here goes again
>
> more of this that amateurs think of as tampering.
>
> The tripe that's talked at times, honestly –
>
> about truth and not altering a word,

being faithful to what you felt, whatever

that is, the First Thought's Felicity.

I have to laugh … the truth! (Lochhead, 2023, p. 93)

This stanza raises several issues: Is women's literature by default autobiographical due to the centuries-old patriarchal belief that women are primarily emotional and largely self-referential beings? Accordingly, do their personal emotional experiences become the most important source of poetic inspiration because these topics come to women more naturally than philosophical thought? Where is the "truth" in poetry? When asked what the bull or the cow in her poem "really means", Lochhead readily responds: "I say ask the poem, not the poet!" (The SRB interview: Liz Lochhead, 2011). Further, can we speak of realism and the truth in poetry in the same way we speak of realism in the novel? If so, is not realism, as Eagleton (2005) says, just a style and not a window to the world?

As in "An Abortion", the metapoetic aspect of "A Giveaway" is inseparable from personal reflections on gender norms, which makes the two poems complementary. The more the speaker tries to deny that "writing is a confession" (McMillan, 2011, p. 23) – as in "Poets don't bare their souls, they bare their skill" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 93) – the more obvious it becomes that "the lover's ability to identify the invented feelings implies his knowledge of the real", and hence "is itself a giveaway" (McMillan, 2011, p. 23). The poem (not the poet!) is at its most vulnerable in the following lines:

God, all this

long apprenticeship, and still

I can't handle it, can't

make anything much of it,

That's my shame. (Lochhead, 2023, p. 93)

As McMillan (2011) thoughtfully concludes, vulnerability is not the same as weakness:

> As the involuntary giveaways of language are to be celebrated not regretted, so the vulnerability of the exposed female subject may turn out to be the very source of female power. Exposure then becomes the preserver, not the destroyer, of the secret places of the private life. The act of giving away then comes to figure a retained plenitude. (24)

The last group of poems in this chapter unites a period from more than a hundred years ago ("The Ballad of Elsie Inglis" originally published in *Fugitive Colours* [2016]) and the recent past, i.e., the Covid-19 pandemic ("The Carer's Song", first published in *A Handsel* [2023]). "The Ballad of Elsie Inglis" recounts the life story of Scottish doctor and suffragist Elsie Inglis (1864–1917), who greatly improved medical care for women in Edinburgh (especially maternity services for the poor), and set up field hospitals with Scottish women in the First World War (Brocklehurst, 2017). The poem is structured around a timeline of historical events, but the poet constantly intervenes in the historical narrative to give an insight into Elsie's personal experience, and to comment ironically on the past from the vantage point of the present. For example, the poem begins with a reference to Elsie being born in India, the "favourite daughter / of a most enlightened father – / despite his being a servant of the Empire" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 178). The concept of enlightened thinking is revealed here in its inner conflict between the progressiveness of Elsie's father – who supports his daughter's ambition to become a doctor, thereby challenging the patriarchal norms of the time – and the fact that he is a servant of the Raj. The latter point implies upholding colonial exploitation and the supremacy of white colonial masters over the "the unenlightened" colonial subjects of India, thereby demonstrating the deeply rooted inequality at the core of the British imperial project.

Likewise, in a historical snippet from 1886, the poem articulates the need of female patients for experienced and educated women surgeons and gynaecologists, and contrasts it with their husbands' power to deny them medical treatment within the bounds of coverture. The gap between the two historical positions is ironically bridged

through a rhetorical question: "Surely everyone saw what Elsie saw?" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 178).

The grand narrative of patriotism and "the Great War" is deprived of its lustre, and foregrounds the senseless loss of human life: "1914. Somebody shot somebody in Sarajevo / and the whole bloody world was at war. / 1914. Britain Needs You! and / young, green, lads were queueing up to enlist" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 178). In place of the official historical discourse, we witness a brief dialogue between the man in the War Office and Elsie, who comes to offer her services as a surgeon on the frontline, and promises to bring all-female medical teams in the hope that their contribution would advance their suffragist cause. Her offer is dismissed with the condescending words: "*My good lady, go home and sit still.*" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 179). Elsie's services and the women-led field hospitals, however, are gratefully accepted by other countries, such as France, Belgium and Serbia. Elsie died of cancer in 1917, so did not live to see her achievements fully acknowledged and passed on to younger generations. Liz Lochhead's poem, written during her term as Scots Makar,[36] is an attempt to increase the public visibility of Elsie Inglis, and write her into the official history.

While "The Ballad of Elsie Inglis" commemorates one particular woman's contribution to the male-dominated history of the First World War, "The Carer's Song" honours the many anonymous nurses, auxiliaries and care-workers who risked their lives to help their patients during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Composed as a song, in a language entirely "Scottish-coloured" (Wilson & Somerville Arjat, 1990, p. 11), it has rhythm, rhyme and repetition that underscore not only the poem's intended simplicity, but also its strong political message, forcing the readers to encounter their own mortality and vulnerability.

The voice of the speaker comes off the page crystal clear, and disarms with its unfeigned perspective on life's complex issues, as in the first stanza:

I am just a wummin who works as a carer

wish life was fairer but God knows it's no.

36 The poem was written for the 2016 exhibition "John Bellany and the Scottish Women's Hospitals", at the Scottish Parliament.

I've aye been a grafter it's ma job to look after

them that's never had nuthin, or were Really Somebody no long ago. (Lochhead, 2023, p. 21)

In spite of the self-deprecating tone in the opening line, the speaker reflects powerfully on the nature of life, which ends in the same place for us all, irrespective of the privilege we enjoy in our active years. This was particularly the case during the Covid-19 pandemic, which paralysed the world from early 2020 to mid-2023, and forced the global population into isolation and a constant fear of death. The end, towards which we all inevitably move, is visualised in the use of blank spaces throughout the stanza. These pauses allow us to think carefully about the meaning of the poem, and invoke silence and disruption in ways a song cannot. "Sometimes being aware of the white spaces, rather than concerning ourselves with punctuation and language, allows us to experience the silence personally" (White, 2015).

Although at the beginning, the pandemic was a social leveller that created a sense of community in the face of the unknown, it soon became obvious that it was being inadequately managed by the British government ("bliddy clowns" [Lochhead, 2023, p. 22]), and that it ultimately worsened the socio-economic divide:

I don't make a fuss I just get on two buses

For I live in a hoose, aye but I work in a Home

I've to no think twice jist follow th' advice

From thae bliddy clowns that it's hard to take it from. (Lochhead, 2023, pp. 21–22)

The carer is from a marginalised section of society, and as well as working hard in a care home she has to take two buses every day, thereby further exposing herself to the virus. Further, she has to attend to the sick "Wi even less PPE than the NHS" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 22). This reveals the hierarchy among medical care staff, and implies that the government expects her "to fight this virus / wi nothin but a bin-

bag apron and a perra Marigolds" (Lochhead, 2023, p. 22), highlighting the inadequacy of protective equipment for countless anonymous carers. The discrepancy between the reality of the Covid-19 frontline and the privileged elite looms large in the refrain where the carer does not claim to be a hero, and begs the audience not to applaud until their hands are sore. Instead, her simple words "respect me protect me mibbe pey a bit mair" unequivocally articulate class inequality in Britain. They also resonate strongly outside Britain, even post-pandemic, as they remind us it was not (any) government's strategies that saved us from the virus, but the heartfelt dedication of thousands of anonymous carers. These were people who saw that we were all vulnerable, and knew that caring for each other was the essence of our humanity. Boris Johnson, who was the British Prime Minister in the early phase of the pandemic and was himself infected in 2020, famously stated: "We are going to do it, we are going to do it together. One thing I think the coronavirus crisis has already proved is that there really is such a thing as society" (Roy, 2020). Referencing Margaret Thatcher's infamous 1980s claim that there was no such thing as society, Johnson, at least for a moment and in spite of his political allegiance to Thatcher's legacy, challenged the concept of extreme individualism at the core of neoliberal capitalism. Liz Lochhead's poem powerfully argues that that caring for each other and advocating a more equitable distribution of wealth in society are essential lessons to be learned and relearned.

To conclude, Liz Lochhead navigates the spaces of womanhood in ways that are simultaneously political, aesthetic and funny. Her characters, just like her, "occupy the slant territory of the migrant […] where they are at once insiders and outsiders" (Varty 2022, p. 11). Likewise, her vision of Scotland is distinctly local and at times contested, yet also heterogeneous, multivocal, and actively engaged in negotiating its place in the world. Lochhead moves gracefully between these domains through the power of the female narrative, as she eloquently claims in the poem "Storytelling":

> To tell the stories was her work.
> It was like spinning,
> gathering thin air to the singlest strongest
> thread. (Lochhead, 2023, p. 59)

SCOTLAND'S WONDERFUL REVOLTING SUBJECTS IN AGNES OWENS'S SHORT STORIES[37]

There are multiple challenges in defining a critical approach to Agnes Owens, largely because of the scarcity of sources. To date, no critical study has offered a comprehensive examination of her entire body of work in a single volume, and editors of Scottish literature surveys sometimes find it difficult to define her place within the Scottish literary canon or along its margins.[38] Further, being a working-class Scottish woman writer, Owens was "triply alienated from traditional forms of authority in the British literary canon" (Toussaint 2022) when she started writing. Her topics and protagonists are often as dark as her humour, and she resolutely denies writing to a political agenda, be it feminism, nationalism or socialism. Nonetheless, many critical readings of Owens's work inevitably (sometimes semiconsciously) presume a singular ideological standpoint in her approach to life's dark truths. They do so in the hope of acknowledging her valuable contribution to the Scottish literary landscape, in which the voices of working-class women are rare. Although the present chapter is not immune to these challenges, it examines the frameworks of working-class aesthetics and politics in Owens's short stories, with special emphasis on the role of women in economically

37 The phrase "revolting subjects" is borrowed from Imogen Tyler's *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (2013).

38 Fortunately this will change, thanks to the University of Strathclyde's ongoing postgraduate research project *Archiving Agnes Owens: Asserting the Marginal Voice*. The project is due to end in 2026, conveniently marking the centenary of Owens's birth, and will be "the first study of the complete writings of Agnes Owens, restoring the importance of her literature of the marginalised, within its West of Scotland setting, to Scottish literary culture, and beyond" (University of Strathclyde: Postgraduate research opportunities n.d.).

deprived communities. To do so, it draws on selected examples from the collection *People like That* (1996), and her first short story "Arabella" (1978).[39]

Agnes Owens (1926–2014) was born in Milngavie near Glasgow, and her entire life can be mapped within the borders of Dunbartonshire, a historic county of west-central Scotland. Her personal life and career path subverted the mainstream middle-class narrative of a woman writer, making her unique in the Scottish literary scene. Owens's working-class parents wanted her to get an education, specifically in shorthand and typing, in the hope that she would get an office job, and not have to do the manual work otherwise available to girls of her background. Owens, on the other hand, wanted a job making paper, so she could "come out of that paper mill with all these other young women with their hair up in turbans and going out for a good time on a Friday!" (Gray, 2008, p. 5). She eventually trained as a typist, but menial work cleaning and in factories did not escape her. It is these two intersecting paths – hard physical work, and acute observation and record-taking of working-class life – that defined her body of work.

Owens was married twice and had seven children, all the while working to make ends meet, which gave her little time to start writing seriously until her early 50s. Among the tragic events in her life was the death of her 19-year-old son Patrick, who was stabbed to death in front of their house in 1987, by people he knew. Owens described her feelings at the time in an interview 20 years later: "It took all your time to get through the day. […] You weren't ill, no, and you never became ill, but you would have loved to have died" (Ramaswamy, 2014). One man was convicted, but he was imprisoned for only two years (MacKenna, 2019), which must have sharpened Owens's awareness of the pervasive violence around her, and society's indifference to injustice and suffering.

Everything about her, including her married life and the process of finding her voice as a woman writer, was devoid of bourgeois trappings; she was constantly grounded, and not permitted the sense of a vast social space that would have allowed her to observe from a safe and privileged distance. Consequently, any attempt to assemble

39 All references in the chapter are to *Collected Short Stories* (2011), which includes *People like That* (1996) and "Arabella".

a narrative about Owens as a writer appears false, even unfeasible, because her story lacks the usual ingredients for 'the portrait of an artist'. In 1973, she joined a writing group in Alexandria near Glasgow, under the tutelage of Liz Lochhead, Alasdair Gray and James Kelman. It was in these classes that Owens was discovered by Liz Lochhead, who was both taken aback and fascinated by Owens's story "Arabella". Although this story has become prominent in all accounts of Owens's life, and the writing group undoubtedly played a large hand in her success, she insisted that "there was nothing significant about it. You just went down. I went down originally for a night out" (Gray, 2008, p. 6). She viewed writing exclusively as a way to lessen her worries about paying the bills, and insisted she did not "have the money to have a writer's lifestyle!" (Gray, 2008, p. 7). Even her friendship with literary stars such as Kelman and Gray did not make her feel obliged to admire their work. Accordingly, she admitted to not being able to finish any of Kelman's new books, which he kept sending her, claiming that "quite honestly, Jim's getting more and more non-understandable!". Similarly, she found the non-realist parts of Gray's universally acclaimed *Lanark* beyond her grasp (Gray, 2008, p. 10), and consequently rejected the idea of any art as self-sufficient. Likewise, Owens was acutely aware that she lacked recognition as a writer in Scotland because she was labelled an elderly person from a poor district (Gray, 2008, p. 9). On top of this, she was insufficiently recognised within the broader British literary canon because of her gender, class and national identity. The limiting of her reception in this way revealed a deeply-rooted classism and ageism in the publishing industry, and in the politics of reading it established. Owens's published works include *Gentlemen of the West*[40] (1984), a novel whose main protagonist is a male bricklayer; *Lean Tales* (1984), a joint collection of short stories with Gray and Kelman; *People Like That* (1996), the collection discussed in this chapter; the novels *Like Birds in the Wilderness* (1987), *A Working Mother (*1994)

40 Despite the support of her literary friends, it was not easy for Owens to find a publisher for her first novel, *Gentlemen of the West*. Because the novel (like her subsequent work) was a mixture of gloomy prospects and dark humour, her publisher thought it would be appropriate for renowned Scottish comedian Billy Connolly to speak favourably about it in public as an advertisement, to help guarantee a good reception. Owens sent Connolly her manuscript, but never heard back from him. The closure of this (true) story is genuinely Owensian: she was later employed to clean his house, where she found the manuscript and took it back (MacKenna, 2019).

and *For the Love of Willie*[41] (1998); two novellas under the collective title *Bad Attitudes* (2003); and the compilation *The Complete Short Stories*[42] (2008) (see Gray, 2008).

This brings us to the key issue of working class representations in literature, because Agnes Owens truly revolutionised how the lives of low-income people are written and read (especially women; working-class men have received far more attention in class fiction). She did so by subtly distinguishing between the complex layers of a social class whose members are usually lumped together in an amorphous, and relatively unlikeable, mass of misery. The short story form is particularly challenging in this regard because it requires precision of image and emotion, as in Raymond Carver's famous advice to writers: "Get in, get out, don't linger" (Lochhead, 2011, p. 9). As Jane Austen did for the rural gentry, Owens chronicles the daily routines of her working-class characters on her own "little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory" (Kelly, 1987, p. 115), not to depress us with their gloomy prospects, but to enhance our understanding of the world beyond our street, nation, social class, or other imagined community.

While Owens does this with an air of ease and unpretentious self-confidence, her mentor James Kelman identifies the politics of othering the working class as a deliberate project of the English middle-class literary establishment.[43] Accordingly, he argues that "the conflation of working-class lives with 'difficulty' is best understood as a product of an establishment that seeks to suppress difference" (Kelman, as cited in Garcia, 2019). Here, he implies that rather than providing a judgement-free space in literature for working-class characters, writers of all social backgrounds considered them incapable of

41 Shortlisted for the Stakis Scottish Writer of the Year award (MacKenna, 2019)

42 Agnes Owens was remembered in an interview shortly after the publication of the collection: "She told me that, at the age of 81, she felt like a writer for the first time. She held up the book in her hands, revelling in its heft. She flashed me one of her crafty, girlish smiles. 'This is the kind of book that writers have, not like the wee skinny books I do,' she said triumphantly. 'It's what I've been striving for: a thick book!'" (Ramaswamy, 2014).

43 Gifford (2005) considers Owens's writing "a voice more primitive, yet as truthful and in its own way as effective, as Kelman's" (p. 625). He describes her vision as "bleak, nasty, world-weary, detached, devoid of political and moral comment, but making its point in a way that Irvine Welsh works much harder to do" (p. 626).

speaking in an authentic voice worth listening to. The marginalisation of such characters suppresses difference and reinforces social hierarchies, thereby flattening our experience of the world through literature, instead of enhancing it.

In a postscript to her *Gentlemen of the West*, Owens's other mentor Alasdair Gray reflects on the representation of the working class:

> When authors attempt a larger view of them the usual angle of vision presents something like beetles crawling on each other at the bottom of a tank. There is no suggestion that such people can initiate anything of value, or *be* much, even to themselves. (Gray, 2011, p. 110)

Like Kelman, Gray does not consider this merely a matter of literary norms. For him it is a demonstration of the inherent inequality in a British society deeply uncomfortable at the thought of its poor. This, however, is not the result of moral qualms over whether "the nation's wealth should be used to create productive jobs with high wages and pleasant conditions for everyone, but [their profound belief] that talented people of lowly birth should have easier admission to the society of those who can make use of them" (Gray, 2011, p. 113).

In her intimate history of Britain's council estates, Hanley (2007) perceptively observes:

> In literature, broadcasting and newspapers, depictions of working-class life are often either hopelessly sentimental or offensively vilifying. As with any other set of cultural traits that are rarely written about and, by extension, poorly understood, the truth is somewhere in between. In many ways, what defines the state of being working-class is veering between sentimentality and bitterness like a drunk trying to walk down the aisle of a moving bus. I wanted to write about the shades of feeling that are passed on the disorientating trip from one to the other and back. (p. 20)

This chapter demonstrates that Agnes Owens gives texture and voice to working-class Scotland, squeezed as it is between sentimentality and bitterness. In doing so, she significantly deepens our understanding of Scottish society beyond the impersonal statistics about its social problems.

Theorising and Politicising Owens's "Revolting Subjects"

Inside Agnes Owens's fiction is an alarmingly disturbing place to be. Inhabited by people here referred to as wonderful "revolting subjects" (Tyler, 2013), it represents a Scotland that is menacing, and often bordering on grotesque suffering, while simultaneously making a bold claim to our own ethics of care. This makes it necessary to approach Owens's fiction through multiple frameworks, and to delineate the position from which she addresses the reader. The larger, outer framework is Butler's concept of ethical relation, which binds us to other people irrespective of how geographically, politically, ethnically or socially distant they are. Owens's low-income working-class protagonists suffer and act in ways that are often unspeakable, whereby they are essentially othered and estranged from readers who do not inhabit the same social space. "People like that" defy the act of naming, as the title of Owens's collection of short stories suggests, and accordingly, our first reaction is overwhelming discomfort at the thought of such abject poverty and cruelty. In Owens's world, physical, sexual and emotional abuse, as well as unbearable indifference to the suffering of others, dominate family and community life. Her exquisite sense of dark humour, and the minimalism and stoicism in the content and form of her writing, provide a much-needed counterweight to the suffering and cruelty. This contrast has a cathartic effect on the reader, who is led to the sober understanding that the characters in Owens's fiction concern us in ways not initially apparent, and that our ethical relation to them "is not a virtue that [we] have or exercise; it is prior to any individual sense of self" (Butler, 2012, p. 141). Rather than considering our ethical involvement in the suffering of the Other as a conscious decision undertaken by a rational individual, Butler argues that:

> something impinges upon us, without our being able to anticipate or prepare for it in advance, and this means that we are in such moments affronted by something that is beyond our will, not of our making, that comes to us from the outside, as an imposition but also as an ethical demand. I want to suggest that these are ethical obligations that do not require our consent, and neither are they the result of contracts or agreements into which any of us have deliberately entered. (Butler, 2012, p. 135)

Like other theorists of vulnerability and ethics of care (Noddings, 2002; Held, 2006; Ganteau, 2015), Butler effectively deconstructs the myth of the autonomous liberal subject who enters all relations, including the ethical, willingly and rationally, while remaining independent. She debunks the narrative of our self-sufficiency, claiming that we are essentially "dependent on a world of others, constituted in and by a social world" (Butler, 2012, pp. 140–141). This indicates that the discomfort we feel when reading Owens's fiction is triggered by the recognition that it is our pain too. Her Scotland is inhabited by compulsive killers, abusive fathers and mothers, sexual predators, ungrateful children, and disinterested social workers. Their plight transcends the boundaries of a particular social class or geographical or cultural domain and demands our attention, reminding us that we are all irretrievably bound to each other. The proximity of her characters may not be pleasant, but it is necessary because it reaffirms our own existence, and the deep connections across the spaces of humanity.

The specific moral landscape of Owens's fiction occurs in the context of social and political transformations in Scotland in the second half of the 20th century. The challenges of the transition from older industries, such as textiles and coal, to the manufacture of consumer goods and engineering products such as commercial vehicles in Scotland was part of the economic transformation in the UK as a whole. Its consequences were felt more acutely in Scotland, however, for a variety of reasons, including a pay disparity between England and Scotland in the new industries, and Scotland's greater depend-

ence on the old ones, which gradually led to mass unemployment among working-class men. Women were doubly affected, as workers and in their invisible labour as carers. Consequently, working-class voters were more likely to support Labour than Conservative governments on account of economic security. Since the 1950s, Labour governments had focused on state intervention in housing schemes and education through welfare programs, thereby reinforcing the spirit of collective action, and garnering a strong voting base in Scotland (Phillips et al, 2021, pp. 2–3). The energy crisis of 1973–1974, which additionally exposed the weaknesses of heavy industry and the UK's economy in general, called for immediate political action. It is in this period that the Conservative Party, under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher, started its relentless attack on state intervention polices and the collective spirit in all aspects of life, promoting instead competition and market forces as the only way out of the economic and social crisis (Oliete-Aldea, 2015, p. 31).

Margaret Thatcher won the UK general election in 1979 with the narrative that inadequate Labour policies had crippled enterprise and diminished the role of the individual by prioritising public ownership and state interventionism. Further, she endorsed the neoliberal values of individualism as a way to heal what she believed were the dire consequences of heavy dependence on welfare programs: "We want to work with the grain of human nature, helping people to help themselves – and others. This is the way to restore that self-reliance and self-confidence which are the basis of personal responsibility and national success" (Thatcher, 1979).

By re-inscribing in the British political narrative what many recognised as the typical Victorian values of hard work and self-reliance, Thatcher attempted to redeem the lost splendour of the great imperial Britain (Oliete-Aldea, 2015). At the same time, she anachronistically ignored the actual lives and bodies affected by the 1970s economic crisis in the UK in general, and Scotland in particular. Owens was especially interested in those marginalised individuals. In writing down their unrecorded lives, she gave visibility to a large section of Scotland's population otherwise entirely unrepresented or largely misrepresented in literature.

Once set in motion, the narrative of the undeserving poor – who 'deserved' their plight because they preferred dependence on social security benefits, drank away their giros, and refused to find decent work – its proliferation into all spheres of political discourse could not be stopped. It therefore remained fundamentally unchallenged, even with the transition to a Labour government in 1997, with Tony Blair's landslide victory. In a speech delivered symbolically at Aylesbury council estate in Southwark, south-east London, just a few hours after proclaiming his victory, Blair "announced the dawn of a new meritocratic and 'classless' society" (Tyler, 2013, p. 7); in the end, however, he only reaffirmed the stereotype of the problematic poor. Referring to them as "an underclass of people cut off from society's mainstream, without any sense of shared purpose" and pressed with "the dead weight of low expectations" (Blair, as cited in Tyler, 2013, p. 159), he inadvertently proclaimed them responsible for their own poverty. This firmly situated them on the margins of society, despite Blair's promise of a radical shift in values that would "bring this new workless class back into society" (Blair, as cited in Tyler, 2013, p. 159). Tyler (2013) argues that although the council estate was pathologised under Thatcher to promote home ownership, "it was under New Labour that a powerful consensus emerged that council estates were abject border zones within the state which were not only liminal with regard to wider societal norms and values but were actively antisocial spaces" (p. 160).

Unsurprisingly, the Conservative Party retained its old rhetoric in its campaign to return to power. In a 2008 speech referring to obesity, alcohol abuse, and drug addiction, David Cameron stated that "social problems are often the consequence of the choices that people make" (Cameron, as cited in Tyler, 2013, p. 176).

A brief overview of political campaigns throughout late 20th and early 21st centuries underlines the constancy of the image of the irresponsible, deserved poverty of the so-called underclass. Tyler (2013) calls them revolting subjects, and in doing so enacts an interplay of the revulsion they invoke in many people and their capacity for revolt, i.e., to rebel against the system that has turned them into liminal beings. Bauman (2004) places this delegitimisation of a particular social group (or the creation of "human waste") in a broader context: he connects it

with the rise of modernity, which, in Scotland's case, can be interpreted as the deindustrialisation process.

> The production of 'human waste', or more correctly wasted humans (the 'excessive' and 'redundant', that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay), is an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity. It is an inescapable side-effect of order-building (each order casts some parts of the extant population as 'out of place', 'unfit' or 'undesirable') and of economic progress (that cannot proceed without degrading and devaluing the previously effective modes of 'making a living' and therefore cannot but deprive their practitioners of their livelihood). (p. 5)

The order-building and economic progress implied in neoliberal capitalism largely deny political agency to Owens's protagonists. Hence, "her focus is not on those who rail against the economic and social forces keeping them down, but on those who have no choice or will but to survive from day to day" (Pirie-Hunter, 2015, p. 4). Paul (2018) contextualises such characters in the narrative of the *precariat*, which revolves around ideas of low-paid, insecure and temporary employment on one hand, and increasing profit margins for business owners while disregarding the career prospects of their employees on the other (p. 37). One consequence of the prolonged insecurity and alienation of "people like that" is anti-social behaviour. As Paul (2018) notes:

> There is clearly an element of moral panic about this subclass of the poor that threatens the rest of society by its very existence. Precarious refers therefore not only to the instability of their material status, but also to the unpredictability of their reactions to the chronic state of social and economic discrimination in which they are compelled to live. (p. 38)

This makes Owens's task as a writer even more daunting, as she does not create characters who win our sympathy through visible political action against the system, but instead hurt themselves and each other as they attempt to navigate their precarious daily existence.

What Is Wonderful About Owens's Revolting Subjects

Asked in an interview whether she sees herself as a specifically Scottish or woman writer, Owens responded playfully and unapologetically. Her complete answer is given here, to express its full force:

> Well, maybe I'd rather be seen as a Scottish writer rather than a female writer. I have that kind of attitude – because I'm far from a good person! – that sometimes I would rather read what men write. And I'm supposed to be all for women's rights, if I'm decent at all. But as far as writing's concerned, I think that men are getting shoved out of the road now, and it's the women that are taking over, and you see, I don't think men are up to much, but I like a male character, if you know what I mean. I think they have to be there these male characters. A lot of writing was brought out about women getting raped by their fathers, which can happen, I suppose, and does happen quite a lot. But I got a bit kind of *disbelieving* about these women writers who write for women and for women's causes. They seem to make a meal of it. I can't explain why I feel this, because I do think women are abused terribly by men, but they've got to maybe make it *believeable*. I mean, most men can't help being abusive to women, and they might be good husbands, they might be good fathers, but they might also feel, "I'm the boss", you know. And you get that. I have to live with that attitude as well, or else it's "clear off!"
>
> I would rather just be seen as Scottish, though. I know Scotland. I was born in Scotland. I think the character

> is entirely different from the English. I don't know in what way. I think Scottish people are also very treacherous, and they also don't like you being a success. It's okay for wealthy people, and people that are already established to be a success. That's okay because they're the untouchables anyway, but for the likes of me, I mean, people were totally amazed when I got *Gentlemen of the West* published because I was just an ordinary person. I even cleaned schools. I did a lot of different jobs apart from being a shorthand typist which was, oh, that was really something! But it's like: "Who does she think she is? Because I knew her faither." You know, that kind of attitude? "I knew her faither!" I don't know if the English are like that. Maybe they're actually a bit more sophisticated than what we are. Having a wee bit clue what like Scots people are, I would say they're generous and treacherous and vicious and kindly, as I said in *Gentlemen of the West*. (Gray, 2008, p. 9)

Here, Owens instinctively rejects the concepts of women's writing and Scottishness as forms of identity, as they are far too abstract to reflect the realities of (her) life. She clearly distinguishes between a woman's life and a woman's writing, possibly because writing came to her rather late in life when she no longer had to take care of her children and work long hours. She therefore considers the idea of her rite of passage as a writer being inseparable from her as a person to be a foreign, even romanticised concept. Consequently, Owens situates her arguments in the personal domain, shunning literary and theoretical concepts in favour of a slice of life in the form of laconic observation, such as not considering herself a nice person, and accepting her husband as the boss without attempting to justify her views. The playfulness of her argumentation does not go unnoticed; it provides an antidote to the critical lens of feminism, which is often unselectively applied, and therefore inadvertently imposes a collective identity on all women writers in Scotland. Refusing to take a position on women's writing as a self-contained political, cultural and literary category in

itself positions her as a knowing but detached observer, and implies certain politics that will be explored further in the analytical part of the chapter.

Owens's observations on Scottishness are firmly interwoven with a sharp sense of inequality between the social classes; she implies that class identity transcends national identity, and states that the Scots are especially unforgiving when it comes to low-income people "getting above themselves" by, for example, publishing a book. Contrary to, for example, James Kelman, Owens refrains from socio-political commentary about Anglo-Scottish relations and the hierarchical nature of British society. Instead, she roots her writing in what appears to be a depoliticised and deaestheticised local context. In most cases it is west-central Scotland, but at times it is a non-Scottish local setting, whereby she transforms Andersons's concept of nation as an imagined community (2006), and embodies it in shared hardship in place of more abstract forms of kinship.

Owens's first short story "Arabella" (1978) encapsulates her narrative strategies and peculiar views on small financially deprived communities in remote parts of Scotland, and the role of women within them. Lochhead summarises the story's exquisite effect: "From the shift in the second sentence when it had me doing a double take, it began its work of filling me with a mounting, irresistible and exhilarating black glee. It shocked, amazed and delighted me" (2011, p. 9). This refers to the fact that the story's seemingly unremarkable first sentence about the protagonist pushing the pram towards her cottage is soon followed by the narrator's bland statement that Arabella has four dogs in the pram, which she refers to as her children. The suddenness of this shift increases our alertness and makes us smile in disbelief at the thought of this bizarre protagonist, whose reality is an inverted version of our own social norms. Arabella lives in unspeakable filth; her dogs relieve themselves in her cottage while she is busy making potions from cow dung, mashed snails, frogs and other dead creatures. Shockingly, she applies these potions – as well as her physical charms, however grotesque – to her male visitors, casting herself as a healer and a respectable member of the community. She is a dutiful daughter who visits her parents regularly, but these attempts at daughterly kindness are met with open hostility by her mother, who spits on her, and

coldness by her ailing father, who refuses to look at her.

These narrative signposts clearly indicate mental illness in the protagonist, but also a climate of abuse in her family, who have denied her both love and education, the latter to the extent that she is illiterate. These frightening details are casually interspersed throughout the story, and the discrepancy between them and the matter-of-fact tone of the narration subverts our attempts to assign fixed meaning to either insanity or normality. Further, as Jane Gray (2008) indicates, the narration shifts between the third person and free indirect speech, "thus insisting on the disparity between what Arabella takes herself to be and how other characters (as well as the reader) see her" (p. 3). The third-person narrative voice renders the story's tragic dimensions visible to the reader, but not to the characters, thereby emphasising how little control they have over their lives (Stark, p. 113).

Arabella's blissful dirt-ridden existence is interrupted by a close encounter with a sanitary inspector, who comes to tell her that she must clean her house (which is probably owned by the council), or be forced to leave it. The sanitary inspector, as the Latin root of the word (*sanitas*) implies, here represents both health and sanity, as well as established social norms (Gray, 2008, p. 3). To save her home, Arabella offers her "healing" services and the sight of her naked bulging body to the inspector, who can barely breathe for shock, and for the unbearable stench in her room. Utterly unimpressed, she decides he is beyond help and dumps him in a rubbish container in her garden, which she uses to make potions and provide manure for her beautiful dandelions: "The barrel was large – it was handy – and there would be an extra fillip added to the ointment. She felt humbled by the greatness of her power" (Owens, 2011, p. 19).

Arabella's delusional world has its own structure of normality that enables us to laugh at her thoughts and actions, however unacceptable. This is because Owens gives form and meaning to her insanity, so that we can experience it in its complexity from Arabella's point of view instead of judging her exclusively from an omniscient and rational perspective. Rather than being represented as an absence of reason in line with the Enlightenment worldview, her mind is revealed

on its own terms and with its inherent fulness and logic, which makes her a wonderful (in the true sense, full of wonders), albeit revolting (both repulsive and rebellious) character. Despite this, many critical approaches to Owens are centred around identifying recognisable patterns of powerful womanhood, the oppression of the working class, or the mindless violence of those outside respectable society. Several critics have identified a gender reversal in Arabella's literal overpowering of the sanitary inspector, who embodies institutionalised power (see Paul, 2018; Satayaban, 2018). Toussaint (2022), however, adds that it is "difficult to see a psychotic murderess who is something of a monstrous ogress as a role model for women's emancipation". Our urge to explain and categorise is understandable, but Owens persistently eschews the snares of identity politics, refusing to create role models, and offering in their place unspeakable truths for us to dismantle and, hopefully, learn more in the process about the ways in which our own worldview is constructed.

"People like That" is another story that explores mental health problems. It lends its name to the whole 1996 collection, and best encapsulates the unnameable and unclassifiable category of people who inhabit Owens's narratives. The story's masterful opening, a recognisable trait of Owens's writing, pulls us into the mind of Mary, a kindly and slightly insecure 46-year-old woman who is waiting at the railway station for her son Brian to arrive on the Manchester train. Our perception of Mary is seriously challenged by the end of the first page, as she insists on starting a casual conversation with another woman, sharing with her typical stories of motherly affection for her son, who moved to Manchester for a good job but continues to visit her regularly during the holidays. The woman's kid gloves remind Mary of her son's gerbils which he "accidentally squashed", although he was "always good with animals". This introduces an eerie undertone to Mary's attempted normality, to which the woman promptly reacts by terminating the conversation. Just like Arabella, Mary inhabits her own reality, based on bizarre associations; the reader is allowed to oscillate between her mind and the outside world. The woman's rude reaction and her lack of interest in Brian lead Mary to see her as a pig-faced creature with "legs as thick as tree trunks" and here we get a glimpse of Mary's view: "Likely she was off her head. You were bound to meet

people like that in a railway station. That pale-blue coat she had was a ridiculous colour for a woman of her age" (Ownes, p. 210; see Gray, 2008, p. 3). However comic, the split in the narrative voice ominously indicates Mary's dissociation from the external reality, which makes her vulnerable and stigmatised.

This failed attempt at conversation is followed by a much darker incident, when Mary mistakenly believes that she has encountered the husband who apparently abandoned her years ago. While she is determined to tell him about their son Brian, the man – who is, like her husband, a "foul-mouthed drunkard", preying on potential victims on the railway station – takes advantage of her mental disorder and rapes her. He is not sexually aroused by Mary – she is just the only available distraction from his alcoholic stupor. The following excerpt demonstrates Owens's subtle and controlled handling of the sickening rape scene, which, ironically, is when the incursion of reality takes place in the form of retrieved memories:

> Then he began to pump away at her as though his life depended on it. Mary's head hit the wall and as if this jolt had done the trick she remembered suddenly that Brian had died of an overdose two years ago when he'd gone down to Manchester with his junkie friends. 'There's nothin' to dae up here,' had been his excuse.
>
> 'Oh, my poor Brian,' she said aloud, wanting to cry but unable to do so with the man's weight crushing against her.
>
> 'Never mind poor Brian. Think o' me for a change,' said the drunk. After what seemed like an eternity, he gave a shudder and became still. It seemed to be over. He must have had some success yet she expected a blow on the mouth. Her husband had always done that. (Owens, 2011, p. 2015)

The effect of the passage is gut wrenching, as the act of sexual assault is blended with the memories of an abusive husband and an irresponsible son who chose drug addiction over the uncertainties of

the job market. The story ends with Mary, now identified as a runaway patient from a psychiatric clinic, being duly returned 'to the state of order' by well-intentioned but indifferent staff who remain unaware of the horrible violence she endured.

Stark (2011) beautifully captures the discrepancy between Mary and the outside world:

> Compelled to exist in a hopeless environment, characters respond by creating their own strange, self-contained universe. Owens allows the reader to enter this private landscape and then exposes it, and them, to a brutal public gaze. More often than not, the mutual incomprehension fostered by imposed social categories has tragic consequences. (p. 114)

The emotional and behavioural instability associated with dementia dissociate the self from the external reality, with the purpose of self-preservation. Mary's dementia, either caused or aggravated by the emotional and physical violence to which she has been exposed throughout her life, rewrites her painful memories, and transforms them into imaginary acts of spousal kindness, and treasured (although largely fictionalised) moments, like a mother and son going on a day trip on the latter's 12th birthday. The jarring dissonance between Mary's inherent kindness and the imagined concept of a home to which she instinctively gravitates on one hand, and the sordid realities on the other, dislocates us from our assumed position of knowledge, thereby enhancing our ethical understanding of lives on the social margins.

Dysfunctional families feature prominently in Owens's stories. "The Marigold Field" exemplifies the clash of perspectives in a family broken by drug addiction and the treachery of attitude that Owens sees as a universal feature of human beings (see Gray 2008, p. 8). The romantic title refers to the field where the family (the parents, their two daughters, and a son) used to go for picnics when the children were small, but it remains unclear whether the place ever made them happy, or whether it was the cause of a rift. The story is told from the perspective of the older daughter, who remains unnamed, as if she is

attempting to obliterate herself from her own narrative. This character strongly believes that she saw her father push her younger brother Hughie into the pool, almost drowning him. The (imagined) incident lurks near the surface of the memories of all family members, conveniently bursting forth whenever they need to blame each other for their estrangement. The narrator discusses the incident with her down-to-earth sister Celia, in an intersection of memories past and present:

> Mother, who had been sitting under a tree, came running up to ask what had happened. "The sun was so hot I must have fallen asleep," she explained. When it dawned on her Hughie had nearly drowned, she shrieked and clasped him to her, stifling his sobs so that he appeared to be smothering. Later, I plucked up courage to tell her I'd seen Father push Hughie into the pool but she said I had imagined it and I had read too many trashy books.
>
> And now Celia was saying, "I don't know how many times I've asked this before but why on earth would Father want to drown his only son, for God's sake?"
>
> I felt my temper rising. "You don't seem to understand. A father can be as jealous of his son as he can be of a lover. Gorillas are known to kill their sons from jealousy and they are as near human as you'll get."
>
> "You can't compare Father to a gorilla," said Celia. "And what was there to be jealous of? Hughie was always a weakling. How could anybody be jealous of him?"
>
> "Weakling or not," I shouted, "Mother loved Hughie best. That's why Father was jealous! I don't think you ever knew what Father was like." (Owens, 2011, pp. 216–218)

It is indicative that the narrator's arguments come from books that her mother considers lowbrow, rather than real-life experience. Although the narrator's apparent treachery seems to tower over the

family's disintegration, it is far more likely that the mother's drug addiction drives the father away, and steers Hughie towards a life of indolence and addiction too.[44] Celia, although selfishly pragmatic, seems to be the only reliable interpreter of the past:

> Celia then said, if Hughie had been Mother's favourite why did she let him smoke the stub ends of her roll-ups from the time he was ten years old?
>
> "Maybe she never knew," I said.
>
> "She knew all right. She just didn't care."
>
> I couldn't argue. Mother had smoked dope from the day she married, or so I gathered from an aunt who came to her funeral and said that was why Father had left us. He couldn't stand having a dope addict for a wife. This didn't stop me loving her, not even when she began taking stronger stuff than hash. I could never condemn her. She was like a child with her small delicate bones and pale skin. Sometimes, if she was in a good mood, she let me brush her long flaxen hair and tilted her head backwards and closed her eyes. In a few years her face grew as lined as an old woman's, her hair fell out and she was obliged to wear a wig. (Owens, 2011, p. 219)

Celia's sober remark exposes the vastness of the narrator's loneliness and the scars caused by their mother's negligent and selfish parenting. The narrator becomes Hughie's carer after her mother's death, and keeps finding excuses for her mother's lack of love to

44 Contemporary Scottish author Douglas Stewart, whose novel *Shuggie Bain* won the Booker Prize in 2020, acknowledged his admiration of Agnes Owens: "Owens was declared 'the most unfairly neglected of all living Scottish authors' and although I agree, I also think she was the most special, because her writing brings a tenderness, and a kindness to a hard, industrial landscape that is usually dominated by men" (Stewart, 2020). The relationship between Hugh "Shuggie" Bain and his mother Agnes in Stewart's novel is strongly reminiscent of Hughie and his mother in Owens's "The Marigold Field", which suggests a subtle literary kinship among authors who attempt to do justice to the complexity of Scottish working-class realities.

the very end. Poverty is the background of the family's frustrations (the children always wore cast-offs rather than new clothes), which is probably why the mother loved to fantasise about a better life, drawing inspiration from books (just like the narrator). Even the name of the marigold field was her invention, as Celia informs us there was not a single marigold in it. Nevertheless, the story is held together by the narrator's unrequited and hungry love, which is strong enough to turn figments of unreliable memory into truth, and for her to blindly accept the selfish scraps of her mother's attention instead of love.

Two strong female characters remain to be examined in this chapter: Ivy, from "When Shankland Comes", and the unnamed autobiographical narrator in "Marching to the Highlands and into the Unknown". Both women struggle to manage motherhood, work, and gender expectations in small economically depressed Scottish towns. Ivy, who is in her 40s, works as a cleaner in a small village hotel, which used to be bustling, especially in the summer, but is now experiencing a rapid decline in visitors as a consequence of the economic crisis. The single mother of 17-year-old Dennett, who has "no talent, no ambition and no pride" (Owens, 2011, p. 197), Ivy serves drinks and cleans to pay the bills, as she tries to set an example for her son while proudly keeping the identity of his father to herself. Eventually we learn it is Shankland, the hotel owner who rarely visits the village, as he is occupied with managing his other private businesses. One day, Ivy is informed by hotel manager Sproul that her services are no longer needed "due to increased overheads and poor trade", and that "as soon as trade picked up they would send for her again" (Owens, 2011, p. 197). Angry and hurt, Ivy is determined to talk to Shankland, who happens to be visiting the village with his wife that day. After having a few drinks to garner courage, Ivy confronts him, but is humiliated by his cold reaction and the public imposition of his masculine authority. This charged atmosphere leads her to expose Shankland in front of his wife:

> "Don't listen to her," Shankland said. "She's just upset and a bit drunk. That's all there is to it." He led his wife towards the table, bending over her slightly, while the minister followed close behind.

> Ivy stood for a moment, dazed, her mind fuddled by the slow, monotonous rhythm of the band. She noticed Geordie Forsyth dancing with Babs and looking genteel. A taste of bile was in her mouth and her head was in a turmoil. She saw Shankland turn his back on her and offer his wife a sandwich from a plate. Then all at once her mind was made up. She rushed across to the table.
>
> "That's no' all there is to it!" she said in a voice loud and clear. "What about Dennett, my son and yours, whom I've kept for seventeen years without a penny off ye? I took the blame on myself, aye, they say it's always the woman to blame, don't they? But since you think so little of me I might as well admit in front of everybody here that you're Dennett's father. I think ye owe me something for that." (Owens, 2011, p. 200)

This moment of personal triumph is inseparable from Ivy's public usurpation of male-dominated and neoliberal capitalist power. In her familiar style, Owens remains suspicious of ideas such as female solidarity or gender equality. Instead, she views the scene through the eyes of Ivy's envious co-worker: "The trouble wi' Ivy,' said Babs, 'is that she's aye been too big for her boots, and now she's been sacked she cannae take it.' She sniffed loudly. 'If you ask me, it serves her right'" (Owens, 2011, p. 201).

"Marching to the Highlands and into the Unknown" is an interesting incursion of autobiography into Owens's oeuvre. She admits to her discomfort about including it in the collection because it draws attention to her as a writer, and suggests she might be one of those strange "people like that". Her mentor Alasdair Gray, however, insisted on publishing this story (Gray, 2008, p. 11), which opens with a powerful and sharply satirical autobiographical narrative voice:

> June 1949 my first husband, baby daughter of two months, and myself set forth for the North of Scotland. This venture was prompted by an article in a pa-

> per saying that people were wanted to work land in the Highlands, with accommodation provided. I was not keen on marching into the unknown, but it was a case of squaw follows Indian brave and asks no questions. So with £11, our baby, our clothing, a two-man tent and pram we took the train from Glasgow to a station beyond Inverness called Garve. (Owens, 2011, p. 259)

Although the title romantically suggests adventure, the story recounts the young family's desperate journey in search of work from Glasgow to Inverness, and beyond to the remote Scoraig and then Keith. From the squalor of their tent they become squatters in an abandoned building, where they are largely dependent on their neighbours' kindness, and have three more children along the way. Their life is filled with bitterness and mutual resentment, caused not only by poverty, but also by the husband's drinking. Interspersed are sporadic moments of simple happiness, when they have coal and a paraffin light, and the narrator enjoys walks by the river while her husband is at work. After a few years they return to a small town near Glasgow, where the narrator convinces a councillor to allocate her family a prefabricated house in which they "lived not particularly happily ever after until [her husband] died at the age of forty-three" (Owens, 2011, p. 262). Throughout her life, simple jobs in shops, offices or factories bring her pleasure and security. Her decision to attend a writing class in Alexandria – taught by Lochhead, Gray and Kelman – once the children were older is seamlessly tied to her other work, and she often takes cleaning jobs, as her writing does not pay the rent even when she becomes a published author.

Both the autobiographical narrator of "Marching to the Highlands and into the Unknown" and Ivy from "When Shankland Comes" are strong women defined by their hard work, albeit keenly aware of the limitations of a 'woman's place'. Ivy criticises her unambitious son severely when he refuses to work, and in doing so entrenches his stubbornness, thereby making his social security money their only source of income apart from Ivy's meagre pay. She bravely confronts the father of her child who is in position to deprive her of work, although

she accepts her lot as a woman responsible for raising an illegitimate child. Likewise, the narrator in "Marching to the Highlands and into the Unknown" follows her husband on a reckless and uncertain journey, in her genuine belief that finding work will make the family happy. At the same time, she takes pride in her audacity to brave the unknown, be it the Highlands or the literary world:

> At least I can tell my grandchildren (if they are interested) that not only did I publish a few books in my time but I once was 'irresponsible' enough to set off with my first husband and child into the unknown wilds of the Scottish Highlands where we wandered about with scarcely a penny in our pockets. (Owen, 2011, p. 263)

These stories are visceral portrayals of abject poverty ("Marching to the Highlands") and profound insecurity accompanied by meticulous planning, to keep one's head above the water before the next giro ("When Shankland Comes"). Nevertheless, it is work rather than political agenda that gives the female protagonists their much-needed dignity, along with the pleasure of self-fulfilment, which embodies the communal spirit about to be swept away by Thatcher's deindustrialisation and the subsequent rise in unemployment. Significantly, neither woman acknowledges the beauty of the landscape. Ivy condemns the cold weather, because it drives the tourists away from the hotel and reduces her employment prospects, while the autobiographical narrator, who braves the Highlands in search of a job with her family, makes only a passing note on the landscape: "We set off back through this mountainous region, possibly beautiful if you were a tourist, but to me desolate and harsh, gushing rivers and jagged rocks" (Owens, 2011 p. 260). By reducing the natural landscape to an irrelevant backdrop for her protagonists' economic hardship, Owens runs counter to the narrative of heritage tourism in 1990s Scotland that was supposed to fill the gap created by deindustrialisation by offering a new service economy, and turning Scotland into a monolithic cultural heritage product to be profitably sold to international audiences.

In contextualising her writing within the spectrum of the

low-paid jobs she performed throughout her life, Owens deliberately rewrites the established patterns of class fiction centred on social mobility through education and writing. It is for this reason that her fiction is sometimes considered "non-ameliorative" (McKibbin, 2012), as it seemingly offers no possibility of improvement. Although "Owens's women-centred stories are read in terms of passive suffering" (Satayaban, 2018, p. 340), the discussion in this chapter shows that many of her protagonists transform and appropriate the space of social and personal suffering. They do so not to transcend or abolish social boundaries, but to create opportunities for meaningful work and personal relationships, even within narratives of dementia, mental instability, psychological abuse, or extreme poverty. This makes Owens's position unique, and worthy of acknowledgement in the Scottish literary canon.

This analysis has shown that the arts of understatement, absence and cruel satire frame Owens's worldview. In a few simple strokes and with cunning and chilling precision, she magnifies the invisible unspeakable lives on the social margins, and in doing so captures the reader's attention. She does not attempt to imagine the lives of her characters in a different social milieu, or imply anger and frustration that they are stuck in the wrong place. She simply takes them for what they are, and lets them teach us about the layers of life most of us do not see, because they fall outside the range of our own reflection in the mirror, and of our "moral community" (Morris, 1996). As Alasdair Gray famously stated, only "someone who knew and liked building-workers" and, we might add, all sorts of 'people like that', could create such wonderful revolting characters in Scottish literature; Owens, "without approving the harsh parts of their lives, found release, not confinement, in imagining them" (Gray, 2011, p. 116).

EMBRACING CHANGE AND UNCERTAINTY IN OUR LIVES ON THIS PLANET: KATHLEEN JAMIE (1962–)

Placed at the end of this collection of essays on Scottish women writers, Kathleen Jamie inhabits a position that emerges naturally from her poetic convictions. Rather than closing the collection with a sense of finality or anything resembling an organic wholeness, Jamie looks outward, claiming kinship with other communities living at the edge of the continent (or island, in her case). Born in Johnstone, Renfrewshire in 1962, she was raised in Currie near Edinburgh, and currently lives in a small town in Fife, in the east of Scotland. Like many other Scottish authors of her generation, she comes from a pragmatic, hard-working family that did not encourage education or the pursuit of a literary career. This is probably what has kept her views on literature and life firmly grounded, although she eventually graduated from the University of Edinburgh with a degree in philosophy. Jamie enjoys the gentleness of the Fife landscape, and is happy that most tourists head straight for the Highlands, leaving Fife's inhabitants to get on with their lives, blissfully undisturbed (Dósa, 2009, p. 138). Landscape, in its more-than-human dimension, appears to be her natural habitat, rather than gender or national identity, and this will be the vantage point from which a selection of her essays will be read.

Jamie is primarily a poet, and she published her first poetry collection *Black Spiders* (1982) at the age of 20. It was followed by *A Flame in Your Heart*, co-written with Andrew Greig (1987); *The Way We Live* (1987); *The Queen of Sheba* (1994); *Jizzen* (1999); *Mr and Mrs Scotland Are Dead* (2002); *The Tree House* (2004); *Waterlight* (2007); *The Overhaul* (2012); *The Bonniest Companie* (2015); and *Selected Poems* (2018). Her early poetry was inspired by her experiences of woman-

hood, motherhood and childbirth, and also reflects on issues of politics and national identity. She has received many prestigious awards, both in the early stages of her career and as a poet of the middle generation.[45] Throughout her 20s she travelled extensively, notably in the Near East and Central Asia. Out of these travels emerged *The Golden Peak* (1992), about her encounter with Pakistan (published and updated in 2002 as *Among Muslims*), and a book about Tibet, titled *The Autonomous Region* (with Sean Mayne Smith, 1993). In the early 2000s Jamie's writing career took a different turn, as she switched her focus to non-fiction, i.e., essays. Consequently, she explored the non-human realm in three successive essay collections – *Findings* (2005), *Sightlines* (2012) and *Surfacing* (2019) – and in her latest collection of "personal notes, prose poems, micro-essays, fragments" (Sort of Books, n.d.), titled *Cairn*, released in 2024.[46] The turn to non-fiction, however, was not a radical shift in a formal sense, because Jamie thinks of her essays "as expanded poems" (Jamie, n.d.). The change in her stance on poetry marks not only a transition to a new sense of maturity, but also embodies an act of deliberate silencing and decentring of the self in order to acknowledge other forms of life on the planet:

> When we were young, we were told that poetry is about voice, about finding a voice and speaking with this voice, but the older I get I think it's not about voice, it's about listening and the art of listening, listening with attention. I don't just mean with the ear; bringing the quality of attention to the world. The writers I like best are those who attend. (Evans-Bush, n.d.)

45 Jamie's awards for poetry include: the Eric Gregory Award (presented to poets under 30) in 1981; the Scottish Arts Council Book Award for *Black Spiders* (1982); the Somerset Maugham Award for *The Queen of Sheba* (1995); the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize for *Jizzen* (2000); the Scottish Arts Council Creative Scotland Award (2001); the Forward Poetry Prize (Best Poetry Collection of the Year) for *The Tree House* (2004); the Scottish Arts Council Book of the Year Award for *The Tree House* (2005); and the Costa Prize Poetry Award for *The Overhaul* (2012). For an extensive bibliography see Falconer (2015).

46 Jamie was awarded the John Burroughs Medal and Orion Book Award for *Sightlines* (2012) in 2014, and the Royal Geographical Society's Ness Award "for outstanding creative writing at the confluence of travel, nature and culture" in 2017 (Royal Geographical Society, 2017). Both *Findings* and *Surfacing* have also been shortlisted for several prestigious awards.

Along with producing her own work, Jamie has taught creative writing, first at the University of St Andrews and then at the University of Stirling. She was awarded a poetry fellowship at Queens University Belfast in 2019, and another at the University of Otago, New Zealand, in 2024. Her contribution to Scottish culture was recognised when she was appointed Makar in 2021, a position she held until 2024, and in which she followed Edwin Morgan, Liz Lochhead and Jackie Kay. Throughout her three-year tenure, Jamie championed poetry as a vital element of Scotland's cultural identity, at home and on the global stage:

> In 3 'collective poems' I curated pieces from lines provided by hundreds of members of the public. We wrote a National Nature Poem, a Letter to the People of Ukraine, and a Letter to World Leaders. I was happy to be asked to extend this to the prison population and develop a poem on the theme of hope.
>
> The role of the Makar is vital in engaging a vast audience with poetry. Rather than speaking to or for the nation, I am most proud of enabling the nation to speak for itself, and keep poetry at its heart. (Scottish Government, 2024)

Scottish and Female by Accident of Birth

Although Jamie has been aware of the importance of gender and nation as potentially defining forces in her writing throughout her long career, she has consistently rejected the reductive dualism inherent in both categories.[47] The three interviews and one mini essay selected for this section illustrate this, while providing an insight into the gradual transformation of her views in line with the change of Scotland's socio-political climate. In a 1990 interview (part of a collection of interviews that included one with Liz Lochhead), Jamie was asked whether she thought of herself as a woman writer and a Scottish writer. The conversation between Jamie and the interviewer is framed

47 For a more detailed exploration of dualism and pluralism in Jamie's work, see Boden (2011).

by their shared unease at their youth – both were only 24 years old – and by the interviewer's attempts to establish a rapport with her interviewee. Jamie not only denied the significance of being perceived as a woman writer or a Scottish writer, but also rejected the label of 'poet', preferring to assume the identity of an artist. In other words: being female and Scottish were her accidental identities, and the concept of poetic inspiration was worthy of satire – she saw herself rather as a person going about her life, and noticing the things around her (Wilson & Somerville-Arjat, 1990, pp. 93–94).

Jamie's mini essay – published as part of Brown and Paterson's guide (2003) to British poetry in the second half of the 20th century – provides a more detailed insight into her perspectives on nation and gender. Looking back on her writing in the 1980s and 1990s, Jamie remarks:

> Those avenues (Scottishness, woman-ness) were interesting enough, and I've discovered things, and rid myself of bogles. As if, by examining and throwing off (laughing off) the constraints imposed on me by being a Scottish girl, I was giving myself permission to go a wee bit farther. (Brown & Paterson, 2003, p. 126)

The extent to which Scotland's political destiny was intertwined with her personal life and creative work can be glimpsed in this reflection on poetry collections *The Queen of Sheba* and *Jizzen*:

> The poems in this book were written between 1995 and 1999. My two children were born in '96 and '98. The Conservative government, which came to power when I was a lassie of seventeen, eventually fell. The referendum on the issue of the Scottish Parliament was held in '97, and this year we took the two infants to Edinburgh on the day of its opening. Births of children and of nations. Acts of Union and of Separation. New life. Stuff like that. (Brown & Paterson, 2003, p. 127)

The closing remarks of the mini essay bring together Jamie's notion of (ecological) space and the lived experience of womanhood and motherhood she invokes in *The Queen of Sheba* and *Jizzen*:

> I'm still puzzling about these things – What is authority? What is tradition? What does lie at the heart of women's experience? I'm surprised at myself, but I think it is an act of choice. As women we still find ourselves in a tangle of briars. We are told what to write, and then told that real art can't be made from those experiences anyway. We have to spend energy clearing space. Having cleared the space to do otherwise, I seem to have chosen, for the time being, to write from women's experience. (Brown & Paterson, 2003, pp. 127–128)

In another interview published as part of Dósa's influential book *Beyond Identity: New Horizons in Modern Scottish Poetry* in 2009, Jamie's growing discontent with concepts of nation and gender is evident. Although she openly supported the idea of Scottish devolution in late 1990s, in the 2009 interview she claimed it was simply a job one had to do, clarifying that "it was important to get a parliament established, and now that it's done I feel that we seem to have established a parliament which is going to do nothing, except tinker at the edges of the Western social and economic project" (Dósa, 2009, p. 139). Jamie's disillusionment with the Scottish Parliament seems to reflect her awareness of the neo-colonial scaffolding of Western politics, within which the political aspirations of the Scottish nation occupy a relatively insignificant position. This is in contrast to romanticised narratives of the nation as an organic whole, which still feature prominently in the Western worldview, and in eastern and southeastern Europe. In this interview Jamie oscillates between the contexts of Scotland, Europe, the West and the world as a planet, to highlight the necessity of challenging the absolute dominance of political boundaries of nation-states, and nurturing "a sensibility that understands cultural or ecological areas". In doing so, she brings to our attention the fact "that what is at stake is bigger than ourselves and our own states, and we've

got to deal with that" (Dósa, 2009, p. 141). Unwilling to replace her Scottish identity with a European one, Jamie is quick to observe that Europe cannot be perceived as a spiritual entity, because it has been entirely subsumed into its joint (neo-colonial) project with North America, to dominate the world's economy and identities (Dósa, 2009, p. 139). Moving away from what she perceives as the limiting self-referential concept of nation, Jamie invites us to embrace a sense of belonging to a wider community that extends beyond Scotland to include other countries and continents, as well as the non-human realm. Acutely aware of the mixture of discomfort and condescending denial her attitude might invoke, she notes:

> I think that more and more we have to come to terms with the fact that change and uncertainty is the nature of the universe, and we have to learn to live with that, and even embrace that. It's just what fundamentalism can't bear. It can't bear uncertainty. And if you don't want to be a fundamentalist, you have to learn to navigate it, and deal with it, even when it's difficult. (Dósa, 2009, p. 140)

Throughout the interview, Jamie anticipates an important shift in her writing, which would be fully enacted in her trilogy of essays on nature and landscape. Although nominally dismissive of the relevance of national identity to her writing, her essays redefine Scottishness to make it inclusive of its "northernness" and "marginalness" – an expression of the country's geographical position on the Atlantic and the fringes of Europe, rather than its contested (political) relations with England (Dósa, 2009, p. 142).[48]

Similarly, Jamie finds the concept of women's writing inadequate because, instead of liberating women, it provides a convenient

48 Interestingly, Jamie's response to Brexit and the ensuing rise in Anglo-Scottish tensions – particularly the sense that Scotland was overruled by England – intertwines the possibility of a new independence referendum with a stronger emphasis on Green policies: "Will there be an Indyref2? Maybe. Not soon, I hope, and not a mere reaction to Brexit. The Yes movement needs to be huge, positive, Green, creative and all-embracing, even more than last time, with the SNP playing only a small part in it" (Jamie, 2016).

non-category that reduces their creative space. Her views appear to stem from her discontent with the closed spaces of gender (and nation) (Mulalić, 2023), which has allowed the lived and ever-changing reality of womanhood to occupy a central place in her writing. Instead of abandoning the categories of woman writer and Scottish writer, however, she proposes redefining them to better reflect the provisional and shifting nature of identities. Her final comments in the 2009 interview best summarise her views on identity politics and literature:

> I feel I am, and guess always will be, in negotiation with the languages and cultures and tradition which surround and pressurise me. Not to mention gender. Not to mention negotiation with the wider world around us – you mentioned Europe. Not to mention the other negotiations one carries out between self and God, self and world, and yes, private self and public self. People sometimes say writing is about "expressing oneself", which is ridiculous. It is the scene of our constant negotiation. (Dósa, 2009, p. 144)

The last and most recent interview to be considered in this section was conducted in 2024, during Jamie's writing residency at the University of Otago in New Zealand. The fact that the issue of her identity as a Scottish poet dominated the interview again suggests the persistence of categories Jamie is passionate to dismantle. Because her residency was affiliated with the Centre for Irish and Scottish Studies, though, such a question was not unexpected. In reply, Jamie claimed to be a Scottish poet by accident of birth, and explained that the Scottish landscape was the only one she knew well. In doing this, she privileged the tangible and deterritorialised concept of land(scape) over more abstract political notions of Scotland as an "imagined community" (Anderson, 2006). Because language is politicised in the narratives of nations, Jamie underlines the importance of Scottish writers embracing the Scots language and finding ways to work with it within the shifting space of identity, but not for political reasons. Finally, she proposes that we consider science, rather than politics, as a potential cohesive force to facilitate much-needed communication between the arts, the imagination and the self (RNZ, 2024).

Positioning Kathleen Jamie Within New Nature Writing

With the previously plotted coordinates of Jamie's writing from the past two decades in mind, this section will contextualise her non-fiction works – the essay collections *Findings* and *Sightlines* – within the New Nature Writing genre. In an editorial for *Granta: The Magazine of New Writing*, Jason Cowley (2008) enthusiastically announced the emerging genre of New Nature Writing with Jamie's essay "Pathologies", among other notable contributions in the issue. He identified two strands of nature writing that merged to produce the new, vital genre. The first was a lyrical and, to a large extent, privileged, educated, largely male middle-class approach, which urged us to reconnect with the nature we had rejected in favour of lifeless culture. The second, in place of a romantic pursuit of wilderness and a perpetual search for self-reflection in the non-human world, advocates a more scientific approach, and acknowledges the irrevocable change of landscape due to manifold external influences. Cawley claims these two approaches negotiate their differences in a renewed interest in nature, which abandons the old-fashioned binary human vs. non-human domain, and is reborn as New Nature Writing. Referring to writers who belong to this category, he notes:

> They share a sense that we are devouring our world, that there is simply no longer any natural landscape or ecosystem that is unchanged by humans. But they don't simply want to walk into the wild, to rhapsodize and commune: they aspire to see with a scientific eye and write with literary effect. (Cowley, 2008. p. 9)

New Nature Writing is also characterised by formal experimentation and a rediscovery of the wonders of our immediate natural environment, rather than a yearning for distant, exotic habitats – an orientation that aligns with a growing awareness of the carbon emissions associated with long-distance travel (Cowley, 2008, pp. 10–11).

Jos Smith (2017) recontextualised Cowley's inauguration of the new genre to include works from the 1970s onwards, rather than from

the early 2000s. In doing so, he drew closer to what is today believed to be the beginning of the Anthropocene, a geological era beginning around 1945, and characterised by an unprecedented human impact on the land, the oceans and the atmosphere, whose effects become more harmful every year.[49] New Nature Writing is therefore closely tied to the concept of the Anthropocene. Within a relatively short period of time, humanity – mostly the traditionally wealthy countries, but recently including China, India, Russia, Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia, and others – "has become a planetary-scale geological force", to the extent that "we are now living in a no-analogue world" (Steffen et al., 2015, p. 94). Because the consequences of human intervention in the non-human realm now have a serious effect on our lives and can potentially create or uncreate our future, the treatment of these issues in New Nature Writing acknowledges the complexity and controversy of humanity's relationship with nature. This calls for a transcendence of the thematic approach of conventional ecocriticism, and a move towards postmodernist tools, such as deconstruction, to problematise the notion of environment and the human's positionality in nature writing (Morton, 2007). In Kathleen Jamie's case, this may be related to her mistrust of 'describing', which objectifies nature as something entirely other to us, and of 'expressing' our state of mind through nature, which she sees as a selfish anthropocentric act of appropriation.

Morton (2007) makes a crucial connection between the harmful effect of seemingly disinterested worship of nature and the position of women in patriarchal societies, stating that "putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration" (p. 5). Such ominous overtones of "sadistic admiration" indicate an essentially hierarchical worldview,

49 Although the start of the Anthropocene is sometimes traced back to the early days of the Industrial Revolution and its massive increase in the use of new energy sources, the evidence of large-scale shifts in the Earth system before 1950 is scant. Conversely, ample evidence suggests that the start of Anthropocene corresponds to the beginning of the Great Acceleration: "On Monday 16 July 1945, about the time that the Great Acceleration began, the first atomic bomb was detonated in the New Mexico desert. Radioactive isotopes from this detonation were emitted to the atmosphere and spread worldwide entering the sedimentary record to provide a unique signal of the start of the Great Acceleration, a signal that is unequivocally attributable to human activities" (Steffen et al., 2015, p. 93).

embedded in inequality.[50] Here, the woman's elevated position is an example of inverted hierarchy, whereby she is set apart from her natural and social environment. These strands of feminist and eco-critical thought converge in a complex set of theories and practices known as ecofeminism, which, from its outset in the early 1990s, was torn between the disapproval of social justice-focussed feminists on one hand, and ecological scholars suspicious of theory on the other. Ecofeminism defined itself as "a practical movement for social change arising out of the struggles of women to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities. These struggles are waged against the 'maldevelopment' and environmental degradation caused by patriarchal societies, multinational corporations, and global capitalism" (Gaard & Murphy, 1998, p. 2). Further,

> Ecofeminist politics does not stop short at the phase of dismantling the androcentric and anthropocentric biases of Western civilization. Once the critique of such dualities as culture and nature, reason and emotion, human and animal has been posed, ecofeminism seeks to reweave new stories that acknowledge and value the biological and cultural diversity that sustains all life. These new stories honor, rather than fear, women's biological particularity while simultaneously affirming women as subjects and makers of history. (Diamond and Orenstein, as cited in Gaard & Murphy, 1998, p. 2)

Another important focal point of ecofeminism is the materialist turn that manifests in its interest in the body – traditionally seen as 'feminine' and antithetical to intellect, which is typically perceived as masculine. Ecofeminists such as Stacy Alaimo perceive the body as "a locus of knowledge transmission and reception, a source of information just as valuable as the intellect" (Gaard & Murphy, 1998, p. 9). Alaimo (2010) further imagines human corporeality as "trans-corpo-

50 A similar practice can be found in some European traditions, which gender the nation: i.e., represent the nation in the form of a woman. Stirling (2008) notes, "this use of the female figure elevates and semi deifies women on the symbolic level but can contribute to disenfranchising them from the position of citizen on a practical level. The symbolic elevation appears to value women's role in the nation but it masks the political powerlessness of actual women" (p. 11).

reality", emphasising that the human is constantly engaged with the more-than-human world, with nature "as close as one's own skin—perhaps even closer" (p. 2).

Although Jamie is decidedly uncomfortable with the label of 'woman writer', which she perceives as thematically and formally limiting, her vision of womanhood can be traced in her essays by examining and following her 'findings', i.e., material traces of social and environmental changes, in the natural world and our incessant interaction with it. Ecofeminism is therefore a useful framework for exploring, reading and theorising Jamie's essays. The essays constantly redefine all previously mentioned categories, as they negotiate between the scientific and the lyrical to forge a new language with which to think and write the more-than-human world. As Smith notes, this "post-natural" view of landscape includes not only a changed perspective of nature as something distant, idyllic and permanent, but also a shift in our perception of what it means to be human, and the true nature of humanity's relationship with the more-than-human world (2017, p. 15).

The notion of this *relationship* is central to the concept of the more-than-human world that defines Jamie's non-fiction. The aspect of relationality implies a dynamic exchange and interdependence, thus revealing the static human vs. non-human binary as an entirely man-made construct. The purpose of this binary logic has always been to justify the Western, Christian view of the supremacy of the human world over the natural one, in which the latter is a mere reflection of the former, and, more importantly, a limitless reservoir of resources to be exploited. David Abram (1996) captures the potentialities of the more-than-human relationship, and in doing so sensitises our language to make it more inclusive of our non-human environment:

> Humans are tuned for relationship. The eyes, the skin, the tongue, ears, and nostrils – all are gates where our body receives the nourishment of otherness. This landscape of shadowed voices, these feathered bodies and antlers and tumbling streams – these breathing shapes are our family, the beings with whom we are engaged, with whom we struggle and suffer and celebrate. (p. ix)

Abram justifies his claim by reminding us that the first European interpreters of the shamanistic practices and indigenous lifestyles of the non-European colonised world were Christian missionaries, who shared the Church's belief that only humans have intelligent souls, while the non-human world was created to serve humankind (1996, p. 8). This view was further solidified in the Enlightenment's fascination with binary oppositions such as mind vs. body and culture vs. nature, the purpose of which was to deepen the gap between humans and their environment, and endorse human superiority. Aware of the potential for his views to be simplified, Abram clarifies that he does not advocate a complete renouncement of complex technologies and a reclamation of our union with the non-human realm. In place of a new romanticised vison of humanity, he simply warns us of the precarity of our condition, which is rooted almost exclusively in our interaction with other humans and human-made technologies, and invites us to "renew our acquaintance with the sensuous world in which our techniques and technologies are all rooted" (Abram, 1996, p. x). Abram – an ecologist and philosopher, but also a trained magician, who studied and lived with indigenous magicians in Nepal, Indonesia and the Americas – sees shamans as mediators between the two realms. A similar idea of the poet-as-shaman can be found in Jamie's reflections on her own work. To distance herself from the reduction of the poet's role to that of spokesperson for Scotland's political independence, Jamie evokes her interest in ecology to speak of the poet as a shaman, an intermediary between human and non-human worlds. To this she adds another shamanistic role, in which the poet re-creates the connection between poetry and its readership, which has been lost in the misconception that only academics and fellow poets are natural audiences (Dósa, 2009, p. 161).

The Permeability of Boundaries in Jamie's Essays

Structuring a chapter on Jamie's essays is beset with challenges, because her writing defies categorisation in many unforeseeable ways. This is visible in Jamie's ambiguous response when asked about the genre of *Findings*: "There didn't really seem to be a word for it, […]. It's not nature writing, but it is; it's not autobiography, but it is; it's not

travel writing, but it is" (Jamie, as cited in Gairn, 2015, p. 134). Genre fluidity may also be glimpsed in her previously referenced statement that she thinks of her essays as "expanded poems" (Jamie, n.d.), to which the inclusion of evocative photographs adds the striking sensory impact of visual experience. Throughout her career, she has been "cast as a feminist poet, a Scottish poet, a woman writer, a travel writer, an avant-garde writer, a writer in the medical humanities, and, perhaps most of all at the present juncture, as a nature writer and/or ecopoet" (Yeung, 2021, p. 442).

Similarly, Jamie eludes the geographical and cultural boundaries of Scottishness, being considered a European poet with a keen interest in the non-Western spaces of Pakistan, Tibet and China (Falconer, 2015, p. 1). It is, however, precisely through her ironic stance on national identity – which she no longer has to promote since a devolved parliament was achieved – that her Scottishness is rewritten in new forms. For these reasons, the present chapter takes the notion of border-crossing as a poetic and ontological concept with scientific undertones as its starting point, thereby elucidating the permeability of boundaries between human and non-human worlds, nature within and without, and the notions of past and present, using examples from *Findings* (2005) and *Sightlines* (2012).

The essay "Peregrines, ospreys, cranes" (Jamie, 2005) illustrates how the non-human world seeps into the human domain. Here, the author narrator's newfound passion for bird-watching is reflected in a depiction of birds imbued with agency and complexity, with their mating calls demanding our full attention. Jamie, however, oscillates between preparing meals for her family, fetching her children from school, and observing and listening to the birds. She is not particularly meticulous in any of these activities, but embraces the sense of incompleteness – her vigils are often interrupted by her children demanding attention, and her lack of knowledge about birds prompts her to learn from J. A. Baker's *The Peregrine* (1967), a classic of English natural history. In Jamie's more-than-human world, uncertainty is stripped from the stigma imposed on it through the legacy of the Enlightenment. It is a welcome respite from the human obsession with final answers and unequivocal hierarchies: "The birds live at the edge of my life. That's okay. I like the sense that the margins of my life are semi-permea-

ble. Where the peregrines go when they're not at their rock ledge, I couldn't say" (Jamie, 2005, "Peregrines, ospreys, cranes", p. 39). Instead of an overtly analytical approach that rests on the hierarchy of observer and object, where the latter is mentally pinned down for closer inspection, Jamie pays homage to birds through detailed descriptions. Her scientific rigour is blended with a lyrical invocation of cultural images, which translate the birds across the occasionally non-navigable straits of science. When a bird hurls from the heights like a stick that transforms into a cross-shape and almost collides with her, the boundary between discourse and species dissolves:

> Like some medieval peasant granted a vision, I was kneeling in a field, fixated by this uncanny cross in the sky. Then, as it moved slowly out of sight, I raced for home excited as a child, holding its image in my head like a bowlful of blue water – mustn't spill a drop. (Jamie, 2005, "Peregrines, ospreys, cranes", p. 41)

Her self-effacing approach to the non-human realm goes hand in hand with a demystification of her own positionality as a human being. When visiting the Hebridean island of Coll to see its corncrake reserve, the narrator confesses: "Not content with having heard several corncrakes by night, I want to see one. It's a species thing. As humans, we privilege sight; it confirms the other senses" (Jamie, 2005, "Crex-crex", p. 94). Parallel to a "poetics of listening" (Lawrence, 2015), Jamie's essays embody a "poetics of noticing" (Kalajdžisalihović & Mulalić, 2024), which favours the loosening of boundaries and hierarchies between the human and non-human over rational acts of selecting and subordinating the latter to the patronising, albeit admiring human eye.

The non-human seamlessly transitions into more-than-human so as to include the plastic products of human activity, when the narrator, after running into a dead whale on the shore, encounters the remains of a plane crash on Ceann Ear, one of the Monach Islands:

> At the tideline of every inlet, where the dunlin foraged and fulmars rested, were seals' vertebrae and whalebones, driftwood and plastic garbage. I wonder now

> if we shouldn't have been more concerned about the plane. A plane had crashed, sometime, and we were unconcerned. Little wonder, when there were winds and currents strong enough to flense whales and scatter their bones across the machair. Here in the rain, with the rotting whale and wheeling birds, the plastic floats and turquoise rope, the sealskins, driftwood and rabbit skulls, a crashed plane didn't seem untoward. If a whale, why not an aeroplane? If a lamb, why not a training shoe? Here was a baby's yellow bathtime duck, and here the severed head of a doll. The doll still had tufts of hair, and if you tilted her she blinked her eyes in surprise. (Jamie, 2005, "Findings", pp. 59–60)

What this excerpt suggests is that plastic is not necessarily an intruder in the landscape, but an integral part of it. This in turn implies that finding pristine nature is impossible, even on a remote Hebridean island. When the group of visitors gather their 'findings', the narrator wonders how strange they must appear to the seals watching them from the water. In doing so, she frames her narrative within multiple perspectives, with humans just a link in the chain of inhabitants. When considered in this context, Jamie's Scotland is not a fixed political and national entity, but a landscape whose smells, sounds, textures and sights claim affinity with similar northern landscapes – like that of Arctic waters and icebergs, which is central to some of her essays in *Sightlines* and *Surfacing* – and reflect the myriad uneasy coexistences of the human and unhuman realms.

The next concept to be considered is the permeability of boundaries between nature within and without – i.e., life and death – which requires us to rethink the meanings of nature and the body. Jamie explores the proximity of death in several of her essays, in an attempt to find new ways of seeing that go beyond religious metaphors and the enraptured laments of environmentalists who mourn the disappearance of pristine nature. In "Fever" (*Findings*, 2005), Jamie revisits her husband's severe case of pneumonia, which nearly killed him. Moments of deep anxiety during his stay in hospital make her

think about his malfunctioning lungs and imagine the unpacking of lung alveoli, which would, according to the scientists, spread like an elastic cobweb to cover the area of a tennis court. She wonders about the nerves, "the hundreds of miles of neurones in our brains. […] all that awareness and alertness spread out around me. All that listening" (Jamie, 2005, "Fever", p. 105). In making this imaginative leap to her husband's insides – i.e., the nature within – she learns to look at death as an ever-present fact, rather than an unnatural intrusion into our lives. Many people pray to a deity in an attempt to deal with the anxiety and overpowering helplessness induced by the proximity of death. Jamie considers this an act of 'haggling with God', and looks for solace not in distant mental images, but in the textures and objects around her. In doing so, she resituates us within a concept of nature that removes the boundaries between inside and outside, and invites us to relearn the physical language we rejected in favour of the sanitised concepts of life and death:

> Could I explain to Phil that – though there was a time, maybe 24 hours, when I genuinely believed his life to be in danger – I had not prayed? But I had noticed, more than noticed, the cobwebs, and the shoaling light, and the way the doctor listened, and the flecked tweed of her skirt, and the speckled bird and the sickle-cell man's slim feet. Isn't that a kind of prayer? The care and maintenance of the web of our noticing, the paying heed? (Jamie, 2005, "Fever", p. 109)

On a visit to the Surgeons' Hall Museums in Edinburgh to look at specimens of human organs and bodies preserved from the past – including the corpses of babies and toddlers, the severed arm of a paraffin worker from 1936, conjoined twins from a Neolithic burial, and a human kidney preserved with mercury, so lovely that "one could wear it as a brooch" (Jamie, 2005, "Surgeons' Hall", p. 140) – Jamie marvels at the anatomical landscapes hidden in such an urban setting as a city museum. Although a repository of the past, the museum is reimagined as a space of perpetual transformation that enables us to enhance our understanding of nature:

> We consider the natural world as 'out there', an 'environment', but these objects in their jars show us the forms concealed inside, the intimate unknown, and perhaps that is their new function. Part art gallery, part church for secular contemplatives. 'In the midst of this city, you think you are removed from nature', they say – 'but look within'. (Jamie, 2005, "Surgeons' Hall", p. 141)

Similar conclusions are reached in the essay "Pathologies", but in a more nuanced way. Although Jamie's mother miraculously survived pneumonia at the age of 4, when there were no antibiotics because they were needed at the front lines, she eventually died of it at an advanced age, despite the availability of medical care. Her death, as well as Jamie's attendance at an environmentalist conference shortly afterwards, prompt Jamie to reconsider the intersection of nature within and without. While advocating a reconnection with nature, impassioned environmental scholars and activists at the conference eat local venison for lunch – enacting, perhaps unwittingly, our animal instincts. After the break, they go back to descriptions of 'transformative experiences', such as encountering a polar bear or a sea-lion in a far-away region. In the manner of a true scientist – a role she finds complementary to that of a poet – Jamie conducts her research in the pathology lab, with the help of a friend who gives her access to microscopes and the autopsy section. This allows her to find answers to questions she believed were entirely misunderstood by the experts at the conference. Inspecting a specimen of a tumorous liver and a *Helicobacter pylori* infection under a microscope, she encounters enthralling landscapes of the bustling life and nature within our bodies:

> Between the oval structures were valleys, if you like, fanning down to the shore. Frank wanted to show me something in one of these valleys and I couldn't find it at first; it took several patient attempts—this microscope didn't have a cursor device to point at things. It was a very human moment, a collusion of landscape and language when one person tries to guide the oth-

> er's gaze across a vista. What vistas I'd seen. River deltas and marshes, peninsulas and atolls. The unseen landscapes within. You might imagine you were privy to the secret of the universe, some mystical union between body and earth, but I dare say it's to do with our eyes. Hunter-gatherers that we are, adapted to look out over savannahs, into valleys from hillsides. Scale up the absurdly small until it looks like landscape, then we can do business. (Jamie, 2012, "Pathologies", p. 34)

In this brilliant meta-analysis of the ways of reading and writing the inner landscape, Jamie points out the crucial connection between language and reality. While we exoticise and construct images of nature in line with our anthropocentric need to yearn (thus assigning meaning to our lives), she expands our perception of the vulnerable multilayered body as an integral part of nature. This reinvigorated vision of the body deserves our most beautiful metaphors to capture a sense of border-crossinsg between the two domains. Likewise, she "seems to draw on a phenomenological point of view, where the apparent divide between mind and body, or self and world, is rejected in favour of holistic lived experience, the world encountered through the senses" (Gairn, 2015, p. 136).[51] In addition to the previously mentioned discursive aspect of the body, which is extensively treated by feminist theory and cultural studies, Alaimo (2010) implores us to extend our interest beneath the skin and above the purely anthropocentric interest in humans, to include the trans-corporeal dimension where "through multiple, often global, networks" […] the "human" is always already part of an active, often unpredictable, material world" (p. 16; p. 17). Jamie demonstrates that we achieve such bodily immersion by being "sufficiently watchful" and receptive to "the non-verbal language", which she "translate[s] […] into poetic speech" (Szuba, 2019, p. 100). An example of this is when, while waiting for news about her husband's pneumonia, she remarks that "the wind packed itself into our lungs and hair" (Jamie, 2005, "Fever", p. 111).

51 For a more detailed analysis of knowledge, temporality and body in the context of theoretical concepts developed by Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, see Szuba (2019).

The last topic to be considered is the permeability of boundaries between the past and present, enacted through the landscape. In "Markings" (*Findings*, 2005), Jamie explores the Central Highlands in search of shielings, simple huts that were occupied during the summer months, when the crofters brought their cattle from the lower regions to the summer pastures on higher ground. The shieling dwellers would mostly be women and children who made butter and cheese, and preserved the stories and songs that defined the connection between people and place. This practice is known as 'transhumance', and it is "an ancient herding practice that lies at the heart of Highland culture and reaches all the way back to the Iron Age and possibly further" (The Shieling | An Àirigh, n.d.). Jamie informs us that transhumance died out in the second half of the 18th century, and although her search initially seems futile, she soon runs into a cluster of shielings. They afford a view of the surrounding area, which is "not a great vista of peaks and ridges, but a contained place, almost domestic and serene" (Jamie, 2005, "Markings", p. 121). In place of a spectacular landscape, she finds traces of a simple domestic life that was meaningful and fulfilling, particularly for women. She enters one of the dwellings, "nodding an acknowledgment to the woman of the house" (Jamie, 2005, "Markings", p. 121). In this long-lost tradition when women and children ascended into the hills, leading the cattle before them, Jamie retraces familiar aspects of contemporary life, such as long summer holidays. The landscape embodies the merging of past and present, not through heritage interventions that freeze the past in a repository of politically desirable monolithic interpretations, but by foregrounding the discontinuities of social and gender patterns:

> The top of the year, the time of ease and plenty. The people would come up from the farmsteads below around the beginning of July – 'the girls went laughing up the glen' as the poem says – and return at harvest time. Up here they made milk, butter and cheese, and it was women's work. What a loss that seems now: a time when women were guaranteed a place in the wider landscape, our own place in the hills. I'd taken that grey cow for a man. The presence in this valley of another woman, as I say, would have surprised me. (Jamie, 2005, "Markings", p. 122)

These discontinuities reflect the impact of 18th-century agricultural and economic reforms, which centred on enclosing and privatising the land in favour of permanent commercial farming. The reforms were largely imported from England after the 1707 Act of Union, and were part of the larger effort to 'modernise' the Highlands, which rendered transhumance redundant and backward. Jamie feels acutely the distinctly masculine (and English) origin of this intervention into the centuries-old union of land and people, which granted women a prominent role in society (see Smith, 2017, p. 87). She therefore writes about transhumance in its capacity as a strong social commentary with a feminist agenda. The connection of women to the maintenance and preservation of land and community, while promoting solidarity and common wellbeing, also implies an ecofeminist undertone in this essay. This, however, is the point when poststructuralist feminist theory and Jamie's writing reach a point of productive friction, which can be explained by Alaimo's (2010) argument that "because woman has long been defined in Western thought as a creature mired in 'nature' and thus outside the domain of human transcendence, rationality, subjectivity, and agency, most feminist theory has worked to disentangle woman from nature" (pp. 4–5).

Jamie is harshly critical of the commercial simplifications of the past and incessant interference with nature rooted in anthropocentric narratives of the landscape, and the pervasive construct of the 'wilderness':

> Sometimes you hear this land described as 'natural' or 'wild' 'wilderness', even – and though there are tracts of Scotland north and west of here, where few people live, 'wilderness' seems an affront to those many generations who took their living on that land. Whether their departure was forced or whether that way of life just fell into abeyance, they left such subtle marks. And what's natural? We're having to replant the forests we cleared, there's even talk of reintroducing that natural predator, the wolf. (Jamie, 2005, "Markings", p. 126)

An interplay of the personal and historical permeates Jamie's writing, and firmly roots her historiography and autobiography in

landscape. These narrative strands elegantly intersect in "The Woman in the Field" (*Sightlines*, 2012), which reads like a many-layered poem, extending a metaphor of deep time over various stages of life and history. The essay opens with a note on the practical demonstration of the metaphor through the placement of Neolithic and Bronze Age artefacts deep in the basement of the National Museum. Jamie's visit to the Neolithic section of the museum takes her 'down memory lane' to her teenage years when, upon finishing high school, she faced the gloomy prospect of secretarial college and no support from her parents to go to university. It is 1979: Margaret Thatcher's election posters have done their work, and nobody cares for Jamie's extravagant interests. To escape, or at least prolong, the idea of secretarial college, she travels to a Neolithic excavation site on a farm called North Mains, which had been rediscovered from the air two years earlier. One of a large group of young people, she joins a commune of 'diggers' under the supervision of architects. The tedious routine of digging gives her ample time to think about, though not fully understand, the meanings of Neolithic markings on the landscape. The site functions as a locus of information exchange and social cohesion among the young people, inadvertently reflecting the communal function of the henge 4,000 years ago. Although the word 'digger' summons the exciting spirit of political and social radicalism of 17th-century English revolutionaries, and lends an air of importance to her personal rite of passage, Jamie is now convinced that their act of excavation actually amounted to the site's swift and meticulous destruction. This is compounded by the fact that the excavation was required by the owner of the estate, who planned to a extend a runaway for his plane – a beautiful wartime Lancaster he had recently bought – over the top of the site.

The metaphorical tunnel through the historical and personal past culminates in the daylight of a spectacular discovery, when they unearth a Bronze Age cist burial containing the remains of a woman. Jamie, then 17, was deeply moved by the position of the woman's body, "the turn and grin of the skull" and the untold stories of her life and death. Haunted by this experience and fleeing the prospect of an office job, she spent the following winter in a cottage on the Orkney Islands, and wrote a short poem called "Inhumation":

No-one noticed if he opened his eyes,

acknowledged the dark,

felt around, found and drank

the mead provided,

supposing himself dead

(Jamie, 2012, "The Woman in the Field", p. 65)

Jamie is quick to note that she uses "he" instead of "she" to avoid the limitations of autobiographical writing. This reads as an ironic subversion of the genre she personally redefines through her non-fiction:

> The opening of the cist under that thunderclap was thrilling, transgressive. So, in its quiet way, was writing poems. The weight and heft of a word, the play of sounds, the sense of carefully revealing something authentic, an artefact which didn't always display 'meaning', but which was a true expression of—what?—a self, a consciousness. This was thrilling too.
>
> In the cist it wasn't a man, but a woman. Had I written 'she', 'supposing herself dead', my poem would have read like a metaphor, as a poem about myself. It wasn't about me. It was about the body in the cist. (Jamie, 2012, "The Woman in the Field", p. 66)

"Markings" and "The Woman in the Field" demonstrate that the past and the present exist simultaneously, their paths converging and refusing to be contained and compartmentalised in archival research. The words "you are placed in landscape, you are placed in time" (Jamie, 2012, "The Woman in the Field", p. 71) suggest a visceral experience of the past, achieved by remembering and feeling the presence of those who inhabited our landscape before us. This allows us to avoid the danger of exoticising and fetishising parts of the land as 'wilderness', which action is a typical example of the erasure of marginal

histories – be they Highland shielings or Bronze Age women – in the interests of the dominant narratives of progress and profit or rebranding the present by rewriting the past.

This chapter has demonstrated that, as a nature writer, Jamie is fully cognizant of the implications of the word 'ecology' as the study of the home (Burnside and Riordan, as cited in Gairn, 2007, p. 236), a concept that includes our environment in its broadest sense, and the relationships between the organisms within it. With this in mind, it is impossible to perceive her writing as an "escape from social and political responsibilities", because she is "asking crucial questions about 'being in the world'" (Gairn, 2007, p. 236). Moreover, Jamie claims that nature writing for her is "not a safe haven, but a place for quite radical thought" (Johnston, 2015, p. 171).

The chapter situates Jamie in a space of uncertainty and discontinuity, which appears to be her home in the ecological sense. This space enables her to traverse freely between the lyric and scientific shores of her writing, while generously including the vast domains of the social, cultural and historical vistas in between. Using examples from *Findings* (2005) and *Sightlines* (2012), both of which embody the hybridity and flexibility of her non-fiction, the chapter demonstrates the permeability of boundaries between the human and non-human worlds, between nature within and without, and between the past and the present.

The analytical 'findings' reveal the contours of Jamie's Scotland as a vibrant landscape, imprinted with the powerful 'markings' of its contested histories. Its 'northernness' and 'marginalness' challenge the confining and inward-looking concept of national identity, and turn our gaze towards Scotland in the global, planetary context. It is still Scotland, but enriched through an endless 'web of interconnections and interdependences'. Lilley (2013) thoughtfully observes that "recognised as integral components of the ecosystem, neither we nor our actions can be separated out or partitioned off. This recognition carries a sense of responsibility and a sense of vulnerability" (p. 18). This is precisely how Jamie's writing creates a powerful sense of agency, which encourages us to acknowledge and wield the instability of identities (gender, national or any other) and the world we live in.

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BIOGRAPHIES

Ifeta Čirić-Fazlija is an Associate Professor at the Department of English Language and Literature, University of Sarajevo, where she teaches several courses on Anglophone literature(s) and cultures. Specialising in modern and contemporary American and British drama and theatre, her research interests include cultural studies, feminist theatre, gender studies, Pinteresque drama, postmodern and postmodernist theatre(s), Renaissance and Restoration drama, Theatre of the Absurd, and women's studies. She is a member of the Organising and Programme Committees of CELLTTS (International Conference on English Language, Literature, Teaching and Translation Studies); Co-Chair of the Fourth CELLTTS Organizing Committee; a member and Vice-President of the Association for the Study of English in Bosnia and Herzegovina (DAuBiH); and a member of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE), and the Gender Studies Network of ESSE. Čirić-Fazlija has authored, co-authored and edited a range of articles, reviews, book chapters and books, most notably: *Britanska drama s kraja dvadesetog stoljeća (1970.–2000.): postmodernizam i feminizam* (2025); "Humor and Women: Contemporary American Comedy" (2024); "Westward ho!: African American Women's Movement to the American West" (2024); "'Slings and arrows of outrageous fortune': Post-Pandemic Anglophone Theatre and Drama" (2024); "Staging Race and Gender in the Era of Contemporary Crises: Dramas of African-American Female Playwrights" (2022); *Re-Examining Gender Concepts and Identities in Discourse(s) and Practice(s) Across Periods and Disciplines* (2022); *Leaping across the Miles: Essays in British and American Drama* (2019); and "Star-crossed Lovers in Sarajevo in 2002: Shakespeare My Contemporary?" (2016).

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This monograph stands out for its selection of a highly relevant topic and its systematic analysis grounded in an appropriate methodological framework. Its scholarly value is reinforced by the extensive, diverse, up-to-date, and carefully curated body of recent literature, which situates contemporary Scottish women writers within a broader socio-cultural context and examines them primarily through a feminist theoretical lens. The study's clarity is further enhanced by a well-balanced style which rests upon a carefully nuanced interplay between academic and accessible discourse, the general and the particular, as well as the theoretical and the practical. Alongside analyses of representative works by [Rona] Munro, [Sharman] Macdonald, [Liz] Lochhead, [Agnes] Owens, and [Kathleen] Jamie, the monograph also provides valuable contextual insights from literature, history, politics, science, and medicine, thereby making it an informative and substantial scholarly contribution. …

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The study … represents an exceptionally valuable contribution to the field of contemporary Scottish literature. Through a rigorous examination of women's writing, it extends the scope of existing interpretations and academic paradigms, offering a thoughtful and nuanced analysis that deconstructs national myths and re-evaluates historical narratives from a feminist perspective. It illuminates the complexity and uniqueness of different social strata, foregrounds the significance of the female perspective in marginalized contexts, interrogates the interaction between the private and public spheres, while simultaneously revising identity boundaries and opening horizons for new ecological and cultural reflections. The book's carefully structured chapters, with their judiciously selected and thematically compelling foci, provide scholars and readers with the means to view and situate Scotland—its past and present—within a transnational framework. In doing so, the study establishes a critical foundation for further scholarly inquiry and debate. Ultimately, this work represents a distinctive contribution to literary studies, offering students of English the rare gift of a scholarly "letter to the world." Authored by two immensely talented researchers, it creates an innovative interpretative space and charts new directions for the recovery and reassessment of neglected and marginalized women writers, to whom this study lends renewed vitality. …

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