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Part II
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Liz Lochhead, *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (1987)

Country: Scotland. Whit like is it? [...] It depends. It depends ... Ah dinna ken whit like your Scotland is. Here's mine. (11)

Introduction

Liz Lochhead is one of the most important contemporary Scottish writers, and *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (first performed in 1987) is arguably her best-known and most popular play. It is a highly entertaining, linguistically and technically daring revision of the popular myths about the sixteenth-century Scottish monarch Mary Stuart and her English cousin and counterpart Elizabeth. It raises questions of Scottish national identity, female/feminist perspectives, the uses of language and history, and of “postmodern” drama. It is thus eminently suited to be taught and discussed at various levels of secondary and tertiary education.

After a brief introduction on Lochhead’s life and work, this chapter will sketch four possible contexts for interpreting the play (and Lochhead’s work more generally): Scottish drama, feminist drama, postmodern drama, and historical drama. These will serve as background to the discussion of the text in the main part of the article, which includes a short sample interpretation of the first scene of the play. A few suggestions and ideas how to use the play for teaching purposes will conclude this contribution.

Elizabeth Anne Lochhead was born in 1947 in Motherwell near Glasgow into what she describes as a “posh working-class” family. She studied drawing and painting at the Glasgow School of Art and worked as an arts teacher before becoming a full-time writer in 1978. A first collection of poems, *Memo for Spring*, was published in 1972 (later reissued in *Dreaming Frankenstein*) when she was only 24 and made her name as an important new voice in Scottish literature. With four further collections of poetry, several plays (e.g. *Blood and Ice*, 1982, *Quelques Fleurs*, 1991, *Perfect Days*, 1998) and many translations and adaptations for the stage (e.g. *Dracula*, 1985, *Tartuffe*, 1985, *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays*, 1992, *Medea*, 2000) she has established a reputation as the “central Scottish woman of letters” and one of the key figures of the recent renaissance in
Scottish literature, particularly linked to the “Glasgow school” of writers such as Edwin Morgan, Alasdair Gray, James Kelman or Tom Leonard. Being something of a “token” woman writer in this predominantly male movement during the 1970s and 80s (though there were others), she paved the way for the confidence and success of more recent Scottish female writers such as Sue Glover, Rona Munro, Jackie Kay and Kathleen Jamie, but perhaps also the novelists Janice Galloway and A. L. Kennedy.

Among the hallmarks of her poetry, plays, scripts, revues and performances (she is well known for performing in her own plays) is a fidelity to living speech, frequently of a West of Scotland variety; the adoption of authentic voices and personae from different walks of life; a genre-defying quality of much of her work; the provocative tone of ironic feminism; the use of humour, fantasy and surrealism; and her subversion and revision (frequently observed from a feminist perspective) of tradition, history, cliché and myth, teasing out contemporary political, psychological and sexual implications and resonances.

**Contexts**

Because of the protean character of Lochhead’s work as briefly outlined above, it is not difficult to find contexts from which it can be fruitfully approached; indeed, it may seem there are too many directions to pursue. If I choose four particular contexts, therefore, it does not mean that these are the only, or even the most obvious, alternatives. They have been chosen for their usefulness in analysing and teaching the play under discussion here, and most of them are frequently commented on in the criticism of Lochhead’s writing. One should also be aware of the necessary generalisations involved in such categorisations, especially with the sceptical and ironic character of her work in mind – “forging ironies” being one her fortes (see Christianson 2000). Furthermore, the four approaches are not neatly separated, but overlap and interrelate at several points.

**Scottish Drama**

It has been remarked that there are in fact no British people, only English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh. The same claim can be and has been made about literature. To be sure, in the context of the revived Scottish nationalism of the past few decades which has led to some degree of political autonomy with devolution and the opening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, the Scottish tradition in literature and culture has been re-valued. Rather than being subsumed under the great tradition of “English” Literature, Scottish writers are increasingly placed in a separate national canon (see e.g. Gifford, McMillan 1997 and Gifford, Dunnigan, MacGilli-vray 2002), sometimes even with a reference to the post-colonial context. Whereas the line of literary ancestors in poetry and prose is long and illustrious, including names such as Henryson, Dunbar, Burns, Scott, Stevenson, MacDiarmid and others, the drama tradition in Scotland is much more patchy, with something of a “wasteland” between early classics such as Sir David Lyndsay’s *Ane Satyre of the Three Estaitis* (1540) and twentieth-century dramas starting with J. M. Barrie and James Bridie. This has sometimes been attributed to the Reformation in Scotland (1560), in which John Knox introduced his strict Calvinist version of Protestantism (cf. the negative depiction of Knox in Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off). Contemporary Scottish drama has benefited from the recent revival of Scottish literature and culture since the 1970s and 80s, which some critics see as a “new” or even the “real” Renaissance, in reference to the movement led by Hugh MacDiarmid in the 1920s and 30s, and which can in part be linked to political nationalism. Liz Lochhead is invariably mentioned as one of the major writers connected with this development; indeed, Douglas Gifford sees Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off as one of the key works that constitute a watershed in Scottish literature in the 1980s, together with Edwin Morgan’s *Sonnets from Scotland* (1984) and Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark* (1981). There were certainly forerunners like John McGrath’s popular political play *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973), performed by the theatre company 7:84, but Lochhead’s play is characterised by a new, more confident as well as more irreverent use of Scottish history and language, more in line with the increasing tendency towards representing the variety of “Scotland’s” rather than one monolithic and “true” Scotland.

**Feminist drama**

One of the most conspicuous developments in (British) drama since the 1970s has been the growing number of women playwrights and of plays dealing with gender issues. This can be seen in the wider context of feminism (and later post-feminism), and is often linked to the development of women’s (fringe) theatre groups such as The Monstrous Regiment (incidentally named after Knox’s pamphlet that is also alluded to in Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off). British women playwrights of the 1970s and 80s include Pam Gems, Sarah Daniels, Louise Page, Caryl Churchill, Timberlake Wertenbaker and others. They investigate the gendered (i.e. patriarchal) nature of language, representation and society. One recurring theme in feminist drama is the revision of (male) traditions, history, myth, etc. from a woman’s perspective. This is very clearly also Lochhead’s agenda, as can be seen in her poems, e.g. in The Grimm Sisters (in Dreaming Frankenstein) and her plays (see esp. Blood and Ice,
which deals with Mary Shelley, *Dracula* and *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*. She even once said that had she read feminist theory at that point, she would not have had to write many of her early poems. This also seems to be vindicated by her statement that “my country is woman” and that she stayed in Scotland to talk back to its “macho culture”. However, it is also important to note that Lochhead harbours suspicions of a separatist feminism and that for her the female gender is a basis from which to explore inter-subjective links across nation, time and class. For example, because of the significance of lower-class characters and perspectives in her work (typical for the “Glasgow school”, in fact), she has been called a “material feminist”. “Performative feminism” might be another term to be usefully applied to her writing, as we will see.

“Postmodern” drama

Postmodernism is certainly a controversial term and difficult to define, perhaps particularly in the context of drama. It can mean anything from simply contemporary or roughly post-1960s to a specified set of (technical) characteristics such as meta-theatrical elements, genre mixing and intertextuality, popularisation and commercialisation, sex and violence as central and explicit themes (e.g. as exemplified in the recent trend of “inner-face theatre” by writers such as Sarah Kane or Mark Ravenhill), post-colonial voices and ideas, and sometimes even the feminist and gender perspectives outlined above. My use of the term here refers mainly to the first of these, i.e. the deliberate emphasis on the artificial or performance character of the play, the mix of genres and texts, and the popular elements. All of these features have become characteristics of many contemporary plays, as any theatre audience today could certainly confirm, whose experience is a more difficult if at times more rewarding than it often used to be in the past. This active role of the audience, the “open text” or work that many plays have become, is typical of the postmodern problematisation of the nature of representation, i.e. the deconstruction or “laying-bare” of theatrical and more generally cultural, political and social structures and constructions. Many critics also see a political (mostly left-wing but in some interpretations also conservative-consumerist) agenda underlying this “movement”. This as well as the “alienating” element can be traced back to a Brechtian influence on post-war British drama, connected with playwrights such as John Arden, Arnold Wesker and Peter Shaffer, but also “political” writers of the 1980s such as David Hare or David Edgar. Most of these currents also run through Liz Lochhead’s work. Inter-textuality, to pick one obvious example, is never far from the surface in her writing, as testified by the many adaptations of other texts which she has created (e.g. from Molière, Stoker, Chekhov, Euripides and others) but also by the constant reworking of (clichéd) phrases, tales and expressions in all of her works. Intermediality, such as the use of song/music, dance and pantomime in her plays is another of the hallmarks of this playwright, who is moreover a scriptwriter for TV, radio and film.

Historical drama

The question of history and its representation in drama can be linked to all three preceding contexts. The idea that History as the one and only objective story of the past (usually from a male, white, anglocentric point of view) has to be deconstructed and challenged by “histories” from below (i.e. a female/feminist, postcolonial, Scottish point of view) is a priority that is at once Scottish, feminist and postmodern. As such it pervades all of Lochhead’s works, but nowhere does it play a more integral part than in *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*. Once again, she is thus part of a wider movement that also includes such developments as historiographic metafiction in the novel or New Historicism in literary criticism (connected particularly to Shakespeare studies but also to theorists such as Hayden White). The central idea, whether in adaptation or original play, is one of simultaneous affirmation and subversion of the (literary) historical model, of modernisation and alienation, of teasing out contemporary resonances in using historical material – a supremely paradoxical “postmodern” stance. Other examples of this type of historical play from British and Irish theatre are Brian Friel’s *Making History* (1980), or Alan Bennett’s *The Madness of King George III* (1991), which has also been made into a film.

Textual readings

In the following, I will use and refer to the above contexts without following this systematisation too rigidly. I will try to highlight several possibilities of reading and interpreting the text that seem to me central and fruitful for a discussion in the classroom. When I say “textual readings”, I am fully aware that dramatic texts differ from other literary texts in that they are written for performance rather than reading, and this is particularly relevant in the case of *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* since the text was the outcome of a co-operation between Liz Lochhead and the Communicado Theatre Company led by Gerry Mulgrew who first produced the play in 1987 (see “Acknowledgement” in the published version). However, for our purposes the published text will be the main point of reference (this is also the material most teachers will
use), while not neglecting the dramatic/performance elements. I will come back to this aspect more explicitly in the last section of this chapter.

**Synopsis**

*Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* is a two-act play with fifteen scenes of varying length set mainly in (later) sixteenth-century Scotland and partly in England — only the last scene is set in (mid-) twentieth-century Scotland, presumably Glasgow. The six main characters are Mary Stuart, her second and third husbands Darnley and Bothwell, her secretary Riccio, John Knox, and Elizabeth Tudor. Apart from these, there is the chorus-like figure of La Corbie who introduces the play and offers comments on the action, as well as a Fiddler and a Dancer (the latter played by “Riccio”). Furthermore, there are about thirty additional minor roles, all played by the same seven actors (excluding La Corbie), most notably the maids of Elizabeth, Marian (played by “Mary”), and of Mary, Bessie (played by “Elizabeth”).

The play starts with a soliloquy by La Corbie, introducing and ironising the “Scottish question”, the opposition of Scotland and England, and the myths of Mary and Elizabeth. The characters of the play are paraded in “THE ENTRANCE OF THE ANIMALS [...] gorgeous or pathetic” (12). In the next scene, we see both queens receiving ambassadors of various suitors and notice the differences as well as parallels in their characters and situations. Scene three shows us the intimate talk of the queens and their maids (they swap roles in the middle of the scene) and highlights their dual roles as public and private persons, as queens and women. In scene four, Catholic Mary discusses religious questions with Calvinist John Knox, who is presented as a fanatic Ulster Orangeman and reduces her to tears. Scene five contrasts Elizabeth’s repressed love for Robert Dudley and her strong-willed and scheming personality (including her arranging of the marriage of Mary to Darnley) with Mary’s rather ineffectual attempts at disciplining Bothwell (who is accused of having raped a merchant’s daughter), being sexually attracted by him. The next scene shows two “tarty” beggar girls (Mairn and Leezie — again “Mary” and “Elizabeth”) and John Knox watching Mary’s splendid progress through Edinburgh, leading to Knox scolding the girls for their Godlessness (while being at least momentarily attracted to them); he then discusses Mary’s marriage to Darnley with Bothwell. The last two scenes of the first act deal with this marriage, scene seven showing Mary at Darnley’s sickbed (he has a fever), tenderly caring for him, and Elizabeth explaining her schemes, and scene eight presenting a Wedding Song shared by La Corbie and Mary, in the style of a Scottish Ballad.

Act two is almost exclusively concerned with Mary and her story, scene one showing her familiarity with her secretary Riccio, who helps her against Darnley, who comes in drunk and makes a fool of himself. Scene two shows an erotically charged encounter between Bothwell and Mary’s maid Bessie, in which they talk about rumours of Mary, Riccio, Darnley and the child that is to be born (a bastard?), a theme that is continued in the next scene. In scene four, Knox and Bothwell discuss Mary’s prospects in light of the rumours and the religious problem. Scene five has a group of Mummers (amateur actors) performing the “Masque of Salome” to Mary, Riccio and Darnley, all of whom are forced to take roles, and in the course of which Riccio is stabbed to death by the Mummers (possibly instructed by Darnley), leaving Mary desperate and thinking of revenge. Scene six starts with the new-born baby James being wheeled on stage in a pram by La Corbie and Elizabeth looking at his photograph (and being jealous), and continues with Mary attending again to a sick Darnley, but leaving him for a passionate encounter with Bothwell during which Darnley is blown up on stage, leading to La Corbie’s ironic lament “We Twa Corbies” (after a well-known Scottish ballad collected by Scott). The scene ends with Elizabeth and her advisers wondering what to do with Mary (and a premonition of her execution). The last scene of the play has the main actors dressed as sixteenth-century children, mirroring the cruelty and aggressiveness of the adult world and of history in their rhymes and games. “Marie” and “Wee Knoxxy” are treated particularly bad, above all by “Wee Betty”, and the scene ends with the children’s rhyme that gives the play its title, first shouted by the children, then spoken very quietly by La Corbie, and the following stage direction: “And all around MARIE/MARY suddenly grab up at her throat in a tableau, just her head above their hands. Very still in the red light for a moment then black.” (67)

What this kind of summary cannot convey, however, is the very important theatrical or performance element of the play, including La Corbie’s constant ironic commentary, several songs and musical interludes, the dances, the different parallel actions on the stage, the often anachronistic props (pram, typewriter, photograph, bowler hat, etc.), the hilarious humour and comedy, and above all the quality of the language and different voices of the characters. Some of this will be highlighted in my comments below, but obviously it cannot be a substitute for actually seeing a production of the play (as far as I could ascertain, there is regrettably no easily available video recording of *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* yet).
Scottish voices and identities
Apart from Mary, the central character of the play, the most obviously "Scottish" element of Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off is the language. It uses historical and contemporary variants of Scots as well as English, and differentiates in their usage not only from character to character but even within one and the same character, as Katja Lenz (1999), among others, has shown. This might worry teachers initially, as the first speech by La Corbie is already quite heavily dotted with Scottish expressions and phrases, some of which might be difficult to understand. However, this need not be an impediment, as I will try to explain in my last section. On the contrary, it is central to the interpretation of Lochhead’s play from at least one perspective. Not only since MacDiarmaid’s reinvention of a synthetic Scots literary language in his “Lallans” has the use of Scots in literature been seen as an expression of cultural nationalism or at least an affirmation of Scottish cultural and linguistic identity. It is conspicuous in the works of several writers of the “new Renaissance”, such as James Kelman, Tom Leonard or Irvine Welsh. Lochhead has always used Scots in some of her performance pieces and revues (see True Confessions and New Cliches) but started on a grander scale with her rhyming translation into what she calls “theatrical Scots” of Molière’s Tartuffe in 1985. This was a huge success, and to date she has translated two more plays by Molière, two by Euripides and one by Chekhov into Scots. Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off is her first non-adapted play to use Scots almost throughout. One of the reasons certainly is that this is the language the people at that time would have used (i.e. before the Union of the Crowns 1603 and of the Parliaments 1707 brought England and Scotland together): Lochhead did extensive research on these questions when writing the play. At the same time, it fits her agenda of creating a range of authentic living voices and personae and to be close to ordinary speech patterns, which is so obvious in all of her work. She has remarked that one of the attractions of Scots is its wide range of registers to express social and individual differences, and she uses it to the full in Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off. Mary, for example, is characterised as a double outsider by her “strange accent” – a Frenchwoman speaking Scots, not English, with, at the beginning of the play, getting subtly less as it proceeds, quite a French accent”, as the stage directions indicate (13). Elizabeth, in contrast, uses a rather distanced and stilted English (the royal “we”, “methinks”). Frequently, language is used to reveal hypocrisy, as when Knox suddenly changes his biblical Anglo-Scots into coarse broad Scots in scene I.6, or in the case of Bothwell, who commands a wide range of registers to be used according to situation and interlocutor. The most linguistically consistent and thus most authentic voices are the lower-class characters, the maids and commoners. This reflects Lochhead’s interest in the people “whose play it isn’t”, as she once said (as quoted in Nicholson 1992: 222), but it can also be seen in more general terms as a typically Scottish championing of the people’s voice, the underdogs, the disaffected – going back at least to Robert Burns but still burning bright in the works of Kelman, Leonard and Welsh. This might also have to do with a special importance of the oral tradition in Scotland, as expressed in the use of songs and ballads in the play. We have at least three longer songs here, the Wedding Song in I.8, the anti-Catholic Good and Godly Ballad in II.4, and We Twa Corbies in III.6 (slightly changed from Scott’s “The Two Corbies” – see Lenz 1999: 229f.), as well as the children’s rhymes in II.7. These are clearly among the most densely Scottish passages, but it is difficult to interpret them as “nationalist”, since they are also often comical, ironic or even cruel and aggressive. This goes along with Lochhead’s generally free and undogmatic use of Scots which is applied for dramaturgical purposes, characterisation, etc. and highlights the variety, hybridity and ambiguity of the concept of the nation rather than pointing out its essential nature.

The same can be said about the characters of the play that somehow symbolise the Scottish nation, particularly Mary and La Corbie. The relationship of Mary Stuart to Scottish national identity has always been rather ambiguous. Even though she was a “Frenchified” Catholic and had stayed in Scotland for only a few years before she was first imprisoned and then chased out (in 1568) by her own subjects who had become Protestant and did not tolerate her “unfortunate” choice of husbands, she was later turned into an icon of Scottish identity (partly because of her execution by Elizabeth in 1587), a romantic martyr queen who had been wronged and used by others. It is clear from the play that it is this myth which is being revised rather than the historical “reality”. Mary is never quite comfortable in her role (she complains about the Scottish weather and the quarrelling nobles in I.3) and is drawn in different directions by her advisers, her religion and her feelings. In one of the first scenes she says: “My Kingdom. Alternately brutal and boring. And I canny mak sense o’ it at a.” (17) Her love for Darnley, which seems to be motivated by motherly feelings (see I.7), cools very quickly and transfers first to Riccio and then to Bothwell. At several points in the play she is brought to tears and humiliated, not least as the outsider child “Marie” in the last scene. In many ways, it is a rather conventional presentation of the Mary myth that is iconoclastic only in so far as it lays bare the contradictions in her personality and the unsteadiness of her affections. In any case, if this is meant to further national identification, the result can only be a highly ambiguous sort of collective consciousness. In fact, the idea of a divided
Scottish identity is itself almost a cliché and has achieved wide currency in the twentieth century under the term of “Caledonian antisyygzy” (first used by Gregory Smith in 1919 and subsequently taken over by MacDiarmid and others). If we allocate emotion, irrationality and romanticism to Mary, then John Knox could be seen to embody the rigid, cold and “realistic” dimension (the relationship Mary-Elizabeth is discussed below), bringing in the religious/Calvinist aspect. It is this problematic and divided presentations of Scotland that are echoed in Lochhead’s answer to the question whether she would like to be seen as some kind of “Miss Scotland” (referring to one of her poems called “Almost Miss Scotland”): “This is enough to depress anybody.” However, she has also said that she has become progressively more interested in the question of (her own) Scottishness, and Anne-Kathrin Braun sees Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off as the culmination of Lochhead’s analysis of Scottish identity. Therefore, the matter of Scotland is openly addressed in the play, as the initial soliloquy by La Corbie makes clear (see my discussion of I.1 below). La Corbie herself is another such problematic symbol for the nation, “an interesting, ragged ambiguous creature in her cold spotlight” (11). It is half bird, half androgyneus human, detached from but also involved in the play, ironising and yet pitying Mary, constantly commenting on the action, and has the first as well as the last words in the play. It is perhaps the “definitive” conveyance of the evasive and unrepresentable nature of Scottishness (or national identity in general).

Feminist perspectives and female subjectivities
Despite her fairly obvious feminist agenda, Liz Lochhead prefers the more neutral adjective “female” and is clearly opposed to essentialising and separatist feminism. The choice of focus on Mary Stuart and partly Elizabeth Tudor in Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off is in itself a feminist act, highlighting the role of women (rulers) in history and their specific problems. It is in line with several other such attempts in 1970s and 80s literature by women and continues Lochhead’s earlier exploration of similar themes in both Blood and Ice and Dracula. Even there, however, “feminist” themes such as women’s bonding/sisterhood and women as victims had been problematised and the emphasis had shifted to a close examination of individual subjective positions and roles adopted by different women, including an interest in “the monstrous”, in female masochism, etc. This is certainly also the case in Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off and parallels a more general shift in feminist drama and feminism away from the propagandist and overtly political stance towards the psychological and to questions of subjectivity and performativity in the context of gender roles. One of the obvious themes of the play in this respect is the struggle between the public and private personae of Mary and Elizabeth, their (possible) relationship, and the multiplication of female identities with the introduction of the maids, the “tarts” and the children characters, all played by the same actresses. In the very first scenes, especially I.2 and 3, the topic of the public-private opposition is introduced through the marriage issue and how both queens deal with it. Though the different approaches and personalities of the two women are obvious (Mary seems enthusiastic and intent on choosing the right husband while Elizabeth is superior to her partners and seems to play with the ambassadors), the underlying dilemma is the same, highlighted by the parallel action showing both courts on the same stage (with the same ambassadors proposing to both queens in turn), and helpfully summarised by La Corbie at the beginning of I.3: “I ask you, when's a queen a queen and when's a queen just a wummin?” (16) The third scene goes even further with this paralleling device by having the actresses of Mary and Elizabeth playing each other’s maids and discussing the other queen amongst them. If there is a prospect of sisterhood here, of feminist utopia even (see Beissie’s “gin ye talk theither it'll a' be saotred out. Ye ye hunt a' they courtiers and politicians an' men awa!”, 16), it is immediately undercut by Elizabeth’s superior stance and by La Corbie’s dry comments: “She shall never meet you face to face.” (16) In scenes I.4 and 5, the vulnerability of both women is shown when they break down in tears, Mary before the strict preaching of John Knox and Elizabeth after a dream about her father and/or Robert Dudley including a beheaded doll (her mother? Mary?). But easy identification with either character is again complicated when Elizabeth represses her love for Dudley (“What shall it profit a woman if she can rule a whole kingdom but cannot quell her own rebellious heart”, 25) and starts meddling in Mary’s affairs, and Mary is clearly attracted to the “rapist” Bothwell, who also seduces Beissie.

Other “feminist” issues raised in the play are the queens’ sexuality and the question of motherhood. At the beginning of the play (e.g. I.3), the “Virgin Queen” Elizabeth is clearly implicated in a sexual affair with Robert Dudley, while the widow and “immoral and reckless beauty” Mary is in fact a virgin. However, in the course of the play Elizabeth negates her sexuality for political reasons whereas Mary wreaks her “political career” through her emotional attachments. On the other hand, Mary fulfils her traditional role by bearing a son (James, who in reality succeeded his mother on the Scottish and later Elizabeth on the English throne, as we know), and the positive aspects of this as well as Elizabeth’s jealousy are clearly shown. This conflict between private and public selves, between successful career and motherhood is one of the major
themes of feminist drama, and Lochhead has treated it at length in her more recent play *Perfect Days* (1998). As a rule, gender relations are complicated in the play, the (male) gaze on the queens is inverted and confused, and the final interpretation is left to the audience. A case in point is the play within the play in II.5, the “Masque of Salome”, in which Mary is allotted the role of Herod and Darnley the role of Salome – this echoes the point made by the many role swaps during the play: that (gender) identities are generally fluid, plural and fragmentary; “performative”, to use a fittingly theatrical term.

Revisions and contemporary resonances
As the above discussion has shown, the focus on two historical queens in *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* allows Liz Lochhead to investigate issues of gender, nationality and power that have a decidedly contemporary relevance. This is surely the point of revising old stories, myths and clichés not only for Lochhead but for contemporary literature/drama more generally, and it raises the question of the uses of history in and for the present. The original production of *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* was timed to coincide with the 400th anniversary of the execution of Mary Stuart. If such a date is in itself already an ambiguous cause for celebration, the play itself is anything but a glorification of a national icon, as we have seen. In so far, it can be seen as a reaction to more celebratory depictions of Mary in Scottish drama of the 1960s and 70s, the time when devolution and political autonomy for Scotland first became an issue and before hopes were dashed (temporarily, as it turned out) by the failure of a referendum on devolution in 1979. It is thus clearly a product of the 1980s, a time when Margaret Thatcher “reigned” over the UK and when Scotland was experiencing an “identity crisis”, which perhaps triggered the cultural revival of which *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* is such a shining example. Therefore, it is a play about “Thatcherland” (along with so many other British plays of the 1980s) as much as about Mary and Elizabeth, as the first scene makes clear. These parallels were not missed by the critics at the time of its first production; the Thatchertite traits of Elizabeth and the English attitude towards Scotland (or the representation of a politically divided Britain) were much commented on. The presentation of John Knox as an Ulster Orangeman (see I.4) highlights both contemporary problems in Northern Ireland (and their universality) and the disabling legacy of Calvinism for Scotland – a theme that continues to run through much of twentieth-century Scottish literature. This history play is clearly meant as a “metaphor for the Scots today”, as Lochhead herself put it (Crawford, Varty 1993: 148-169). It is also a meditation on the nature of history in many ways. Far from taking history as a fixed, authoritative textbook version of the past, Lochhead here highlights it as a cultural narrative, a collection of myths to be retold, revised and rewritten for a modern audience. Through the many anachronisms, different voices and personae (significantly including the “view from below” so popular in contemporary history/historiography) and above all through the irreverent framing of the play and the (hi)story by La Corbie, history is treated as a spectacle, as carnival and performance – which leads on to my last interpretative angle.

Playing to/with the audience
The emphasis on performance in the play is quite obvious, if not always explicit. The sheer theatricality of *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* is certainly one of its main attractions and must therefore be addressed here. It can be explained from different angles: Lochhead’s own background in performance and acting, her cooperation with Communicado in writing the play, but also the more general Scottish theatrical tradition, including above all the music hall. All of this leads to the mix of genres and media, the comedy and the explicit emphasis on play and role-taking in *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*. Lochhead’s interest in the performance element is already signalled in the titles she has chosen for every scene, some of which have an interpretative element (such as II.1: “Seigneur Riccio, a Fortune, a Baby, and a Big Baby”; 39), and above all in the elaborate stage directions (a trademark of her plays) that often contain descriptions of atmosphere and effect of the scene as well as seemingly inconsequential asides rather than concrete directions, and are themselves sometimes in Scots. The play starts with the following directions: “Alone, FIDDLER charges up the space with a lilting tune, wild and sad, then goes.” (11) And at the end of the scene, there is a “Burst of dance from DANCER, a sad or ironic jig.” (12) Almost every scene has this musical and/or dance element, sometimes related to the action on stage but more often quite independent of it. In some ways this is reminiscent of music hall or variety theatre (and perhaps constitutes a “Celtic” or fairy-tale element), but it can also be interpreted as a Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt, an alienating device breaking up the theatrical illusion and implicating the audience. Together with the other related elements of the play, such as the role swaps (often indicated simply by a drumbeat or “freezing” effect), the anachronisms, several instances of actual “playing” on the stage (Tarot cards in II.1, dominoes and the play-within-the-play in II.5, the children’s games in II.7, etc.), and of course the stylised and ironic commentary of the pseudo-“Greek” chorus La Corbie, this amounts to a wholesale deconstruction of generic expectations, a foregrounding of performativity and thus a general problematisation of
representation and truth that is typical of postmodern theatre. It is also hugely enjoyable for the audience, even though or perhaps precisely because they have to produce most of the meaning themselves. This is indeed an important point, not only because it illustrates contemporary drama’s interest in the “popular” but also because it has always been Lochhead’s professed aim to be popular as well as “serious”, the two being far from mutually exclusive.

Since \textit{Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off} is such a multi-layered and sprawling play, there are countless other interpretative avenues open to the reader/theatre-goer in addition to the ones sketched above. As an example to briefly substantiate some of the foregoing claims by textual references, I will now discuss the first scene of the play.

\textit{Sample analysis: Act One, scene 1, “Scotland, Whitt Like?”}

The play starts with the following stage directions, which I have already (partly) quoted:

\begin{quote}
\begin{quote}
Alone, \textit{fiddler} charges up the space with eldritch tune, wild and sad, then goes. Enter into the ring, whip in hand, our \textit{chorus}, \textit{La Corbie}. An interesting, ragged ambiguous creature in her cold spotlight. (11)
\end{quote}
\end{quote}

The surreal, alienated atmosphere is clearly stressed here, by the eldritch (i.e. strange, ghostly, unearthly) tune as well as the ambiguous chorus. The peculiar tone of the stage directions is also immediately apparent, yet they are clearly effective in suggesting the atmosphere that should be created. \textit{La Corbie} then starts her soliloquy:

\begin{quote}
\begin{quote}
Country: Scotland. Whitt like is it? / It’s a peat bog, 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 house or a humble cot. Princes Street or Paddy’s Merkit. / It’s a fistfu’ o’ fish or a pickle o’ oatmeal. / It’s a queen’s banquet o’ roast meats and funketts. / It depends ... Ah dinna ken whitt like your Scotland is. Here’s mines. (11)
\end{quote}
\end{quote}

First of all, the audience will notice the strong Scots element in this speech (e.g. \textit{gey}=very, \textit{bere}=shining, \textit{bricht}=bright, \textit{kye}=cattle, \textit{ken}=know), perhaps even have difficulties in understanding it (as was indicated by the reviews of the first production of the play in England). This seems to suggest the identification of \textit{La Corbie} with Scotland. However, this is immediately problematised by the list of clichés and stereotypes that follows (peat bog, coal mine, Princes Street, fish, oatmeal, etc.) and the admission that “it depends”. The ironic undertones are brought to the fore in \textit{La Corbie}’s “version” of Scotland that follows:


This highlights the ragged state of Scotland (in the 1980s), the ambiguous role of \textit{La Corbie} as a national symbol (“a sort of black glamour”) and some of the themes of the play (“national pastime: nostalgia”, “executioner’s hood”). It is also of course funny and entertaining, both because of what is being said (cf. also the later “I live on lamb’s eyes and road accidents.”, 12) and how it is said. This undercuts a nostalgic or nationalistic reading but nevertheless introduces “Scotland” (with all its contradictions and clichés) as the theme – or at least one theme – of the play.

After her introduction \textit{La Corbie} presents the other characters:

\begin{quote}
Laughing, \textit{La Corbie} cracks whip for \textit{the entrance of the animals}. In a strange circus our characters, gorgeous or pathetic, parade: \textit{Mary, Elizabeth, Hepburn, Dancer/Ricchio, Knox, Darnley} all dirty and down on his luck. They circle, snarling, smiling, posing. And hail. Drumbeat ceases. (12) [Hepburn is of course Bothwell – the full name in the play is Hepburn o’ Bothwell DB]
\end{quote}

Here the \textit{Verfremdungseffekt}, the highlighting of spectacle and the undermining of conventional theatrical traditions is central: \textit{La Corbie} is the ringmaster and the characters “parade” in a “strange circus” as “the animals”. Again, we can see echoes of music hall or perhaps earlier forms of popular theatre here. \textit{La Corbie} then presents Mary and Elizabeth to the audience with the following soliloquy:

\begin{quote}
Once upon a time there were twa queens on the wan green island, and the wan green island was split inty twa kingdoms. But no equal kingdoms, naebody in their richt mind would insist on that. For the northern kingdom was cauld and sma’. [...] The other kingdom in the island was large, and prosperous, with [...] at the mouth of her greatest river, a great port, a glistening city that sucked all the wealth to its centre which was the palace and a court of a queen. [...] Twa queens. Wan green island. [...] (12)
\end{quote}

It is obvious that the Scots element in the language here is much weaker than in the first speech, testifying to the linguistic variability of \textit{La Corbie} (and thus her ambiguity) that is one of her characteristics in the play. The start of the passage with the fairy-tale formula is also significant, since it highlights the narrative construction of the (hi)story, the cultural constructedness of the myth. Furthermore, the contrast between the two
kingdoms is stressed and the prosperity of England emphasised, which brings to mind the discourse of the north-south divide in the UK of the 1980s (and after), particularly with the formulation about “the glistening city that sucked all the wealth to its centre which was the palace and a court of a queen” referring to the boom-city of London and perhaps to Margaret Thatcher as well as Elizabeth. It is also interesting to note that in this prologue the play is explicitly presented as the story of the two queens, rather than of Mary Queen of Scots alone. This can be seen as stressing the element of feminist revision and the possibility of an element of sisterhood, especially since La Corbie herself is, though androgynous, arguably more female than male (as expressed in the feminine article and vindicated by the fact that she was played by a female actress in the first production of the play). Just before the end of her speech she is interrupted by the already mentioned “Burst of dance from Dancer, a sad or ironic jig” (12), again breaking the theatrical illusion and highlighting the performance element by its open “sad or ironic” instruction, which leaves the decision to the dancer himself.

To conclude, the first scene encapsulates many of the general characteristics of the play outlined in the preceding section, as my brief analysis here should have indicated. It is therefore also suited for an initial discussion of the play and its themes in the classroom, perhaps in combination with the last scene, which uses similar alienating devices with its different focus on the characters portrayed as twentieth-century children.

**Using the text**

I hope to have demonstrated that Liz Lochhead’s play *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* is a highly rewarding text for reading, watching, performing and not least for teaching. It is in fact already being widely taught in Scotland, both at secondary and university levels, as well as in other countries such as Hungary (see Parkinson, Reid Thomas 2000: 136). One approach would be to follow my systematisation in this chapter and discuss the relevance of the play, its form and themes in the context of one or several of my headings. In this last section, I will address a few more concrete or practical questions and problems relating to the use of the play in the classroom and make suggestions for possible study tasks and activities.

**Experiencing the language**

One of the problems for both teacher and students in using this play clearly is the (at first sight) difficult language, particularly at the beginning. However, when reading or watching the play as a whole, it quickly becomes obvious that this should not be a major obstacle for understanding and much less for enjoying it. There are, of course, dictionaries of Scots available, such as *The Concise Scots Dictionary* by Aberdeen University Press, which will be helpful in understanding the more difficult terms and expressions. However, before using these, one should try to have students read the first bit aloud, and see whether there really is a serious problem of understanding. It will be noted, for example, that several words such as “whit”, “daurk”, “bricht”, “mibbe” or “stanes” are simply versions of well-known English words (what, dark, bright, maybe, stones) reflecting Scottish pronunciation (a glossary of the more difficult ones is provided in Parkinson, Reid Thomas 2000: 184). Moreover, this unfamiliar linguistic dimension can be a source of curiosity and enjoyment. Thus it can serve as a starting point for a discussion of the importance of dialect and language (in literature) for local/regional/national identity, including the students’ own background as well as the Scottish example. It would certainly be helpful to give students some sample input of how Scots and Scottish English actually sound, ideally through a video recording (or even better: live performance) of the play but alternatively through sound recordings of Scottish authors reading their work, etc. There exists a tape recording of Liz Lochhead reading her poetry (together with three other Scottish poets) in *The Poetry Quartets* series of The British Council and Bloodaxe Books.\(^1\) Another helpful source for a linguistic interpretation of the play is Katja Lenz (1999).

**Possible Tasks and Activities:**

- Why do you think Lochhead uses Scots in the play, rather than standard English?
- How does the use of language differ throughout the play and what is the relevance of this?
- How is La Corbie characterised linguistically? What about Mary and Elizabeth?
- With a partner, try to read the first scene of the play aloud (perhaps several times) and note down the words that you cannot understand at all. Rhetorical question: Does this prevent you from enjoying the scene?

**Experiencing the play**

One of the advantages of teaching drama is that it can and perhaps should be “play” in the sense of including the actual *performance* of (parts of) the dramatic text. That this is particularly important in the case of *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* should be clear from this chapter. It can be done in different ways, always depending on the condi-

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tions, students and time available. The most basic and traditional way is certainly to simply read the text with different students taking the different roles. This can be quite effective, particularly when the language of the play is so clearly spoken and colloquial as here. It is perhaps best to pick out a scene (perhaps I.2, II.1 or 5) and have students discuss the different parts before starting to rehearse and read/act it. The rehearsing phase can be an opportunity for weaker students to overcome their possible inhibitions and actually enjoy the play. The discussion about how to read or act the different characters is central, since it involves an analysis of the structure and characterisation of the respective scene by the students. Another possibility would be to pick out one character (La Corbie is an obvious and surely popular choice) and analyse/read/act her different speeches and thus her development throughout the play. If this is done simultaneously by several (groups of) students, it will offer the opportunity of actually comparing different possible renderings/interpretations of one and the same character. From there it is not a big step to discussing an actual production of the play: what would the stage and costumes look like? (there is very little concrete information on that in the text), who would be chosen for which role?, what about the music and dancing? could the play perhaps be adapted to local circumstances? Even though a real production might not be possible (though it would surely be the best way to teach any play), the discussion of these issues provides important insights into questions of performance and the theatre today as well as leading to a thorough analysis of the play. Many of the issues raised in this chapter can in fact be integrated into such performance-oriented approaches to teaching (the gender question could be discussed in connection with the decision who would be playing La Corbie, Mary, Elizabeth, Darnley, Knox).

Possible Tasks and Activities:
- What do you know about the historical background of MQS? Does Lochhead get her history right?
- Compare the play with other representations of the same characters that you know, e.g. in Schiller’s Maria Stuart or Shekhar Kapur’s film Elizabeth (1998).
- How would you adapt the play for a local production? What would you leave out, what would you change?
- How would you deal with the character of La Corbie? Would it be played by a man or woman? Tall or short, young or old? What would he or she wear?

Select bibliography

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Albert-Reiner Glaap

**Daniel MacIvor, Marion Bridge (2002)**

**Who is Daniel MacIvor?**

Daniel MacIvor, born in 1962 in Sydney, Nova Scotia, is a writer, performer, director and a film and video artist. In 1986 he co-founded a touring theatre company, da da kamera, and still serves as its Artistic Director. His plays include *See Bob Run* (1987), *Yes I Am and Who Are You?* (1989), *2-2 Tango* (1991), *House* (1992), *The Soldier Dreams* (1997), *Monster* (1998), *You are Here* (2001) and *In On It* (2001). Most of his plays are solo works in which he also performs. He has created some of his work with director Daniel Brooks. In his latest collaboration with him, *Cul-de-Sac* (2005), MacIvor plays the role of Leonard, who narrates the events leading up to his murder while trying to understand them himself. His work has been produced in the U.S., Israel, Australia, Norway, the UK and throughout Canada.

**Where is Marion Bridge?**

Nova Scotia is the easternmost of the Canadian mainland provinces. It consists of a peninsula off the mainland, and Cape Breton Island, which is connected with the peninsula by the Canso Causeway (2 km), built in 1955. No part is farther than 50 km from the sea. Nova Scotia became part of the newly created Dominion of Canada on July 1st, 1867. According to latest Statistics Canada data (April 1st, 2005), the total population of this province is 936,025. Young people up to the age of 19 make up about 24%, or 222,746 of that total. The unemployment rate is 7.9%. The population of Cape Breton, one-fifth of the province, is 166,116. The island is surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean, the Gulf of St. Laurence and the Strait of Canso.

The tiny community of Marion Bridge (Cape Breton) is still a quiet, unassuming community, its population being about 400. It is located halfway along the Mira River on Route 327. This community celebrates summer every year during Mira Gala, a Marion Bridge festival, a two-week celebration with concerts, pageants and dances. Other activities during Mira Gala are the canoe race, the bathtub race, Cape Breton music, dinner theatre, a flea market and hay rides – to name but a few. Marion Bridge was put on the map by Allister MacGillvray’s anthem to the simple pleasures of natural life, entitled “Out on the Mira”: “Can you imag-