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The folk memory surrounding Mary, Queen of Scots is so powerful in Scotland that probably everyone there knows the story in some form. For that reason, when Gerry Mulgrew, the artistic director of the Edinburgh-based Communicado Theatre Company, contacted Scottish playwright Liz Lochhead about writing a new play, she suggested one to commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary, in 1987, of Mary's execution. Mulgrew liked Lochhead's idea for a play about Mary Stuart because it suited both Communicado's Scottish orientation and Brechtian techniques. Lochhead herself was drawn to the project for two main reasons: she finds it easy to care about characters from history in general and both Mary and Elizabeth I of England are the sort of "larger than life" women characters that she finds particularly appealing.[1] Her version of the Mary Stuart story, *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*, premièred at the 1987 Edinburgh Festival, where it won an Edinburgh Festival Fringe First.[2]

Liz Lochhead was born in Motherwell, Lanarkshire and brought up in a strict Scottish Presbyterian home. After studying at the Glasgow Art College, she worked as an art teacher for eight years. In 1978 she became the first holder of the Scottish-Canadian writers exchange fellowship for her poetry. At that time, she switched to full-time writing and earned a reputation as a performer as well as a poet. She enjoys performing her poetry because it establishes a dialogue between herself and the audience. It is not surprising, therefore, that she soon turned to playwriting. Her plays demonstrate a fascination with history, and a concern for feminist issues. Her first full-length play, *Blood and Ice*, uses Mary Shelley's life and art to question the validity of liberal ideas about "free love" in the face of the imperative of child-bearing. Her other full-length plays include an adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, *Same Difference*, and *The Big Picture*. Often Lochhead's work is consciously Scottish, as seen in her translation into Scots and adaptation of

Molière's *Tartuffe*, in *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*, and most recently in *Jock Tamson's Bairns*, which was produced by the Communicado Theatre Company at the 1990 Edinburgh Festival.

The Communicado Theatre Company was formed in Scotland by Gerry Mulgrew, Alison Peebles and Rob Pickavance in early 1983 as a small actors' company. Mulgrew writes, "In common with other actors' companies before and since it was begun out of a feeling of frustration. We were frustrated as actors with the kind of mediocre material we were being asked to interpret and by the myopic, low standards of the leadership we were under."[3] When doing new plays, the company works directly with the playwright to create a production that will be coherent both vocally and visually. In fact, Lochhead commented that many of her best ideas for *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* came from talking to Mulgrew after the rehearsal process had already begun.[4] Communicado's productions are noted for their strong physical and visual statements. Choreography and stage imagery are both essential to their productions. The company also utilizes music both as song and as background for movement. Communicado thus derive many of their methods from Brecht's epic theatre.

Most importantly, Communicado aims to be a distinctly Scottish voice in theatre, one that breaks away from the history of English theatrical domination of Scotland. Scotland's historic ties to Europe rather than to England can be seen in Communicado's approach to seeking theatrical ideas and influences. The company specializes in producing new Scottish plays and Scottish adaptations of classic continental European drama. "Our approach is to be Scottish by not being Scottish," explains Mulgrew, "tackling European subjects with Scottish voices and in so doing differentiating ourselves from English theatre."[5] They also make a point of hiring Scottish actors and designers.

Brechtian technique has suited itself particularly well to history plays such as *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*. Both playwrights and audiences naturally invest a dramatized historical world with contemporary meaning regardless of the amount of historical accuracy in a particular play. Brechtian epic theatre is an especially convenient vehicle for historical drama because it provides the audience with constant reminders not to become too involved with the actions depicted on the stage. This emotional distance therefore allows the audience legitimately to examine historical events through a filter of contemporary morality. In *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* contemporary society can be seen both in terms of the characters' costumes (Elizabeth, for example, is dressed as a Thatcherite Yuppie in leopard skin and Ray-Bans) and in the feminist issues the play examines.

The basic plot of *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* is familiar from history, folklore and previous dramatisations of Mary's life. The play's action begins with a scene that is set simultaneously in the Scottish and

English courts where the ambassadors of various European countries propose, on behalf of assorted kings or princes, marriage to Mary and Elizabeth. Mary chooses to marry Don Carlos of Spain; Elizabeth chooses not to marry anyone, although she admits she would like to have children some day. In the next scene Elizabeth interrogates her maid, Marian, to find out if it is true that Mary is as beautiful as everyone thinks. She also admits to Marian that she is in love with Leicester; but that if she ever marries it will be as a queen, not as Elizabeth.

We then meet John Knox as he preaches against women and the Catholic church. Mary confronts Knox, but the warning signs are now established that he has a greater hold over the Scottish people than she does. Bothwell, too, is first presented in confrontation with Mary. She is reprimanding him for raping a young woman. Mary wins this confrontation, however, and gains Bothwell as an ally against Knox. Bothwell leaves her promising not only to quit raping women but also not to fight with his enemy. The first act ends with a dance to mark Mary's marriage to Darnley and with Elizabeth's self-congratulations for engineering the marriage.

The second act opens with Mary, pregnant, dictating a letter to her secretary, Riccio. Darnley enters and, insanely jealous, attempts to murder Riccio. Next comes a scene in which Bothwell and Knox have a bitter confrontation over Mary's right to rule Scotland. We then return to Mary and Riccio, who are playing dominoes. Darnley enters with a troop of travelling players, who turn out to be Scots nobles who have turned against Mary. The players kill Riccio, call Darnley "King Henry" and inform Mary that she is now their prisoner. Mary decides to smuggle a letter to Bothwell or anybody else who will help her. Then we return to Elizabeth, to see her musing that Mary's new baby will become heir to the English throne.

Mary goes to Bothwell, and they kiss and sink to the floor making love. As they roll around, there is an explosion as Kirk o' Field, with Darnley in it, blows up. Knox's people begin chanting, "Burn the hoor! Burn the hoor!"[6] Knox comes out and begins scrubbing the stage as if he were ridding it of blood. Meanwhile, Elizabeth is on another part of the stage complaining that Mary came to her in England for help when she could have gone to Catholic France. Mary appears on her side of the stage, questioning the wisdom of her decision to go to Bothwell. From her side of the stage, Elizabeth protests that she loves her cousin Mary. She declares, "my so-called 'wise advisers' would have to trick me before I would consent to sign a warrant for her death. Would have to trick me. Trick me. Trick me! (*Her manic repetitions begin to sound like instructions to invisible advisers*)." Knox continues his scrubbing: "*Is it bloodstains on an executioner's block that are proving indelible*?" (p. 63). For the final act of the play, the characters are transformed to twentieth-century children whose games recall the action of the play. They act out the folk rhyme, "Mary Queen of Scots got her head

chopped off." Then, as the final stage direction spells out, the characters who are "*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*" (p. 67).

Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off has an episodic structure reminiscent of contemporary film or television, tied together by a narrator, La Corbie, who is on stage throughout the play, acting as its chorus and sometimes as its conscience. Occasionally she speaks directly to the characters or the audience; other times she sings, dances or just watches the play's action. A corbie is the Scots name for a crow, which, of course, is a scavenger bird. La Corbie carries a whip, as if she is some sort of perverse circus master who waits to devour the carrion of her performing creatures. She is described as an "*interesting, ragged ambiguous creature in her cold spotlight*"; and she calls herself a "Ragbag o' a burd in ma black duds, a' angles and elbows and broken oxter feathers, black beady een in ma executioner's hood. . . . Ah think Ah ha'e a sort of black glamour" (p. 11). Black, after all, is the color of death. As a scavenger dressed for the kill, La Corbie's wisdom seems to come from her proximity to death. The idea for La Corbie came about partly because Lochhead felt that the play needed a narrator to get the audience's attention and partly because Mulgrew told her that with Communicado she "can have *anything*: talking animals, etc."[7] When La Corbie cracks her whip, the scene changes for the next episode of the plot.

It is La Corbie, as omniscient narrator, who poses what becomes the central question of the play: "I ask you, when's a queen a queen/ And when's a queen juist a wummin?" (p. 16). La Corbie's question applies not only to Mary. Lochhead asks us to see that both Mary and Elizabeth struggle, although in different ways, with the problem of reconciling their political power with their personal desires. Although the choices each of them makes are very different, each pays a price and ultimately suffers as a result of her choice. Lochhead thus links Mary and Elizabeth together as women forced to work against their patriarchal societies.

Elizabeth realizes that she must choose between love and power, and that the choice is difficult. She eventually gives up her chances for love to maintain her strong hold on the English throne. She ends up jealous and lonely, despite her political power. Mary, in contrast, considers love to be equally important. In fact, Mary devotes more effort to securing her political position, which requires significant effort, than to developing romantic attachments, which happen without her actually trying. Mary does not realize that she must make a choice between love and power until it is too late. Twice she marries for love, thinking that as queen she can love whomever she chooses. But after each marriage Mary loses some of her hold on the Scottish throne, until eventually she loses her life.

At the beginning of *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* Mary

and Elizabeth seem to be equally balanced. The same actresses who play Mary and her maid Bessie double as Elizabeth and her maid Marian. Bessie and Marian are not intended to be realistic characters. Instead, they are personifications of aspects of their respective mistresses' personalities. The two queens sit on equally raised platforms when the suitors and ambassadors come to propose marriage to each of them in turn. Mary and Elizabeth are offered marriage to some of the most eligible bachelors in Europe, including King Philip of Spain, Don Carlos of Spain, Henri de Valois, and the Archdukes Charles and Ferdinand of Austria; yet Mary actually does not marry her choice and Elizabeth refuses them all. Neither queen worries about whom she might love; they both accept or reject their suitors based on the potential political ramifications of each marriage. In choosing Don Carlos Mary says, "Aye, Don Carlos looks braw ... He'd be the most *politik* marriage ..." (p. 15).

Political marriage is a complicated thing. Mary is left wishing that Elizabeth were a man so that she could marry her and "make an end of all debates." La Corbie bleakly and tidily points out the impossibility of this wish:

> But she isny. Naw, she isny. There are two queens in one island, both o' the wan language – mair or less. Baith young ... mair or less. Baith mair or less beautiful. Each the ither's nearest kinswoman on earth. And baith queens. (p. 15)

La Corbie's speech informs us that dramaturgically balanced as Mary and Elizabeth may be, the two queens are not equal in youth and beauty. Just as sixteenth-century Scots and sixteenth-century English are not the same language, Lochhead's Mary is not the same as Elizabeth, but is "mair" young and beautiful than her cousin. Elizabeth knows this and is jealous. She spends much of the play scheming against Mary, and at the end rails against her cousin, surprisingly not referring to herself with the royal "we": "I do think it's hard to think of her so happy and me not! Dark deeds, bloody murders, plots against her life and throne, and she wins out again and again. ... All her people love her, she has a husband and a fine healthy son" (pp. 58–59).

La Corbie's assessment of Mary and Elizabeth presents the two as being somehow tied together. They are "nearest kinswoman" of one another by their political positions as well as by their common genealogy. Both women demand, as queens, the right to rule their respective nations regardless of the fact that they are women. However, their countries force both Mary and Elizabeth to choose between their personal desires and their political power. Elizabeth maintains her position as a powerful monarch but loses her chance at love; Mary loses her throne but has gained several chances for love. Of course Mary also loses her political competition with Elizabeth. Despite the

fact that Mary and Elizabeth share common demands as women monarchs, Elizabeth maintains her power only at Mary's expense. Likewise, the location of their respective countries on the same island joins Mary and Elizabeth together yet divides them; their relationship to each other becomes emblematic of Scottish-English relations. Like the Scottish and English languages then, Mary and Elizabeth are similar yet different. And in the end the clue to understanding both queens lies in recognizing their common battle to maintain their own strength against that of the men around them.

Although the play is about both queens, it still focuses on Mary and on Scotland. Lochhead says, "I tried to write about two queens. The nationalism went along with it. ... I can't not be Scottish."[8] Scottishness is an essential quality of *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off.* The most obviously Scottish quality of the play is its language; the Scottish characters speak not English but a synthetic Scots which Lochhead had developed for her earlier translation of Molière's *Tartuffe.* This language draws on the different accents of various regions of Scotland to create one unified stage language that nonetheless echoes the sound of old Scots. Lochhead is, in fact, insistent that her play never be produced with English accents. Just reading the "funny words" as they are spelled should create a sound close enough to the one she wants.[9]

Mary describes her country as "Alternately brutal and boring" (p. 17). Likewise, the Scotland that La Corbie describes is neither a beautiful nor a happy place:

> 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.
> ...
> National flower: the thistle.
> National pastime: nostalgia.
> National weather: smirr, haar, drizzle, snow. (p. 11)

With her sixteenth-century Scots, La Corbie becomes the voice of the past, carried into the present. She is the reminder to the audience that the rough and wild yet cold and repressive North that Mary failed to rule has changed little since the sixteenth century.

Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off also addresses the minds of the Scottish people. It examines the mythology that has formed around Mary's life by pointing out the relationships among the sexual, political and religious attitudes of both sixteenth-century and contemporary Scotland. Lochhead's re-examination provides a simultaneous liberation of Queen Mary from her myths and a condemnation of the Scottish psyche. Lochhead attacks

the notion that a woman cannot be a queen and the mentality of a people that would not allow her to rule.

Many of the myths surrounding Mary are passed on through Scottish folk memory rather than through written history. After all, in all countries history lives on through children's games. For the final scene, then, Lochhead transforms all her characters to children to bring out the folkloric background of her play. Scottish children all seem to know the rhyme recited by the children in *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*:

> Mary Queen of Scots got her head chopped off.
> Mary Queen of Scots got her head chopped off!
> ...
> And eftir you're deid
> We'll pick up your heid
> Up aff the flair
> By the long rid hair – (p. 66)

Lochhead's children are not innocents. Their rhyming game represents the basic cruelty of the Scottish society that would not allow its queen to rule them. They also display the same sexual cruelty as do the adult versions of Bothwell and Knox. At one point during their "game," they pick up Wee Knoxxy and shove his head up Marie's skirt. They quit when they hear Wee Knoxxy's cries of genuine terror. However, they feel no remorse over what they have done to poor Marie, and they leave her crying alone, a shamed victim.

The voice of Scottish moral passion and national austerity is John Knox. He is also a misogynist who admits to beating his wife and children. Knox tells Bothwell that Mary must forget marrying a Catholic, because when a queen weds, she chooses a ruler for her nation: "We, the people, should choose a husband fur a lassie raither than a silly wee furrin lassie should choose a king for a hale people" (p. 34). Knox cannot see Mary as a queen capable of ruling a nation by herself. He only sees her as a woman, and he believes that women must be controlled by men.

Lochhead's Bothwell becomes Mary's defender, yet he too sees women as inferior, to be raped or seduced. He fights with Knox about Mary's right to rule, insisting to Knox that Mary is their queen, anointed by God. He also reminds his opponent that she could have, but did not, "cowp the kirk and cut your heid aff, John Knox" (p. 34). Of course, Bothwell is a man of violent actions. Lochhead presents Bothwell's violence as being threatening to women in general, and Mary in particular. Mary eventually questions her decision to go to him, dancing around the stage with an imaginary Bothwell: "Dinna think it wis lichtsomely or in love that I lay me doon wi' ye, in the daurk. Naw, it wis in despair. Oh and wi' a kinna black joy I reachit oot for you to

cover me and smother me and for yin moment, snuff oot the hale birlin' world in stillness" (p. 62). Perhaps a queen should marry for politics. Both of Mary's marriages for love turned into disaster for herself and for Scotland.

Above all, *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* is a feminist play. Lochhead says, "I see myself as a feminist in the sense that I am more interested in writing about women and their lives."[10] Mary's, and even Elizabeth's, situations demonstrate that when a queen is left to herself, or to other women, she remains a queen. When she is forced to deal with men, however, she is reduced to the level of an ordinary woman. Mary, despite her comment to Bessie that she must marry before she can begin her reign in earnest, questions neither her right nor her ability to rule over Scotland. Likewise, Elizabeth never doubts that Mary is a legitimate queen. Elizabeth's scheming and plotting have been arranged to keep Mary so busy with domestic Scottish problems that she would not have the time to cause religious dissent in England. Obviously Elizabeth does not doubt her cousin's political strength.

Even Lochhead's nationalism is implicitly feminist. She has said that "the longer I live in Scotland the more assertively feminist – in the sense of longing for 'womanly values' in both men and women in this repressed, violent, colonised society – I get."[11] Thus in the play it becomes the men, and not Elizabeth, who explicitly or implicitly want to deny Mary her strength and legitimacy to rule Scotland. Knox states repeatedly that all women must be ruled by men, and therefore are unfit to rule nations. More dangerous, however, is the fact that both times Mary marries for love she loses political power. The marriage of a queen becomes an issue of public consequence, rather than of private discussion between two people. The marriage of a king is also subject to public debate; however a king does not risk forfeiting his political power when he chooses someone to marry. Elizabeth, who remains unmarried, retains her crown. But she is forced to wear it not only alone, but lonely. *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* demonstrates that a woman can be a queen, but if that queen acts like a woman she will lose not only her crown, but also the head on which it sits.

Lochhead's perspective on Mary and Elizabeth is feminist in that it is woman-centered. *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* represents neither Mary's nor Elizabeth's sexuality in traditional, pre-defined terms. Mary is not promiscuous; neither is Elizabeth a virgin. Lochhead also does not place a moral value on each woman's sexual choices. Instead she provides the audience with the opportunities to judge, or not judge, each woman's behavior. Likewise, Lochhead does not present Mary's relationship with Elizabeth in simplistic, antagonistic terms. She focuses instead on the common problems faced by women monarchs ruling patriarchal societies and uses this focus to tie together Mary and Elizabeth rather than set them in opposition to each other.

NOTES

1 Liz Lochhead, personal interview, 11 May 1990.

2 *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* was first performed by Communicado Theatre Company at the Lyceum Studio Theatre, Edinburgh, on 10 August 1987. It was directed by Gerard Mulgrew and designed by Colin Macneil. Anne Lacey played Mary and Alison Peebles played Elizabeth.

3 Gerry Mulgrew, "The Poor Mouth?" *Chapman*, 43–44 (1986), 63.

4 Lochhead interview.

5 Gerry Mulgrew, telephone interview, 14 May 1990.

6 Liz Lochhead, *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off & Dracula* (London, 1989), p. 60. All further quotations from Lochhead's play will be cited parenthetically.

7 Lochhead interview.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Liz Lochhead, interview by Joyce McMillan, *Scottish Theatre News*, 1982: scrapbook in the Mitchell Library, Glasgow.

11 Liz Lochhead, interview, *Twelve More Scottish Poets*, 1986: article in a scrapbook in the Mitchell Library, Glasgow.