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The Trickster's Twist on Scottish History in Liz Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*[*]

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Abstract

Liz Lochhead's play, Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off (1987), offers a distinctive reimagining of sixteenth-century Scotland. Lochhead challenges the reader/audience's capacity to attain a clear glimpse of historical truth through the character of La Corbie, a female crow in the play. Crows have long served as symbolic metaphors in literature since they function as intermediaries that deepen our understanding of human nature and the cyclic nature of the natural world. Across diverse cultures, crows are associated with a wide range of meanings, encompassing mystery, intelligence, and wisdom. Given their protean nature and sardonic demeanor, they often embody the archetype of the trickster figure. In the given play, Lochhead draws inspiration from the trickster qualities traditionally associated with crows in (Scottish) folklore with an attempt to corporate these qualities with her feminist and nationalist concerns in one trajectory. Lochhead's employment of La Corbie and her role in framing the past, challenge conventional historical narratives and cast doubt on the unquestionable authority of historians. This, in turn, paves the way for a more inclusive and diversified comprehension of Scotland's historiography and national/gender identity. In line with this, this paper seeks to explore how Lochhead liberates Scottish history from historically prevalent anglocentric, androcentric, and anthropocentric perspectives, thereby offering a broader insight on the multifaceted dimensions of Scotland's history and the complex nature of historical storytelling.

Keywords: Liz Lochhead, Scottish Literature, Scottish history, History, *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*

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1. Introduction

The presence of animals such as crows, ravens, and coyotes in literature traces its origins back to ancient oral traditions, and these creatures are often associated with the enduring tradition of trickster figures. These animals, through the supernatural characteristics attributed to them, are utilized as a means to convey powerful social commentaries by transcending the established moral codes of a given society. They entertain the audience while simultaneously challenging the audience's preconceptions and encouraging deeper contemplation on some significant concepts such as life, death, war, peace, and human relationships. This tradition is widespread and can be found in many diverse cultures throughout history. In Native American oral stories, the abundance of these animals as trickster figures demonstrates their enduring role in storytelling (Ballingar, 2000). They are employed to suggest wisdom, lessons, and humor, often with a subversive twist. In Celtic and Greek Mythology, the crow, among various trickster figures, occupies a particularly notable position. It is a messenger which symbolizes transformation, mystery, and intelligence. The messages it carries often hold profound meanings, making it a complex and intriguing symbol that resonates across different cultures (Rosalind, 1987).

In *Mary Queen of Scots got her head chopped off* (1987), Liz Lochhead introduces a crow trickster figure through a character, La Corbie. She is half-crow and half-woman character and embodies "fantastically grotesque narrator" (2013, p.120) in Scullion's terms. As the narrator of the play, La Corbie carries the traits of unreliability, contradiction, and manipulation. Lochhead employs a diverse range of narrative styles, including fables, folktales, comical chorus-like drama, and historical voice, to illustrate La Corbie's ever-shifting roles and her playful use of language. Moreover, the structural framework shaped by La Corbie, along with

her frequent interruptions within the dialogues, establishes a good foundation for interpreting the historical play as a tale of a trickster to contribute a skeptical stance to the past. In this regard, La Corbie, as a trickster character, disrupts the conventional notions of unquestionable, fact-based, and objective scientific historiography. Her unique perspective, embodied as a hybrid creature - part bird, part woman - cleverly dismantles the stereotypical depictions that have often been associated with Scotland, Scottish identity, and the iconic historical female figure, Mary Stuart who is frequently portrayed in polarized images, vacillating between being viewed as a martyr or a villain. Within this context, this paper aims to delve into the narrative of this trickster figure by closely examining La Corbie's continuous transformations and linguistic shifts. By doing so, the paper seeks to elucidate how Lochhead challenges the traditional understanding of history, offering new perceptions on Scottish history and historical figures, transcending the confines of established stereotypes.

2. Crow Imagery in Literature: An Overview

In the realm of literary writings, the crow represents a mysterious and dark aspects of life. Therefore, the secrets and insights associated with crows blur the boundaries between the physical and spiritual worlds. This dark creature can act as a harbinger of death, and its unique ability to transcend the divide between realms highlights its potential to lead the reader on a deep and intricate exploration of the human condition. Crow imagery is particularly abundant in poetry, where it is used as a powerful symbol for expressing complex and often ineffable concepts. Ted Hughes's "Crow" (1970), for instance, stands as one of the most significant examples of the crow's portrayal as a trickster figure. Within this work, Hughes constructs his own mythological framework, providing a vehicle to convey the unsayable and the ineffable in a society governed by strict social norms and conventions.

Scottish literature also often explores the symbolism and cultural significance of the crow, employing it as a multifaceted symbol that conveys a variety of themes and emotions. In Scottish folk culture, the crow facilitates a timeless and dynamic symbol that evolves in different contexts over time. Lochhead in *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (1987) incorporates crow symbolism by blending this cultural motif within Anglo-Saxon traditions with popular culture. Crows also play a central role in Celtic mythology, which has influenced Scottish and Irish culture (Clark, 1987). However, it is the widely renowned Scottish ballad "Twa Corbies" that encapsulates themes of life, death, and betrayal through the poignant dialogue between two crows conversing over the dead body of a fallen knight. Lochhead, as acknowledged by Gioia Angeletti, "has a unique talent in forging stories both new and drawn from popular traditions, history and myths" (2018, p.69). Indeed, the presence of a crow and the ballad "Twa Corbies" in the play is not a coincidence. The ballad and the image of the crow have a considerable influence on Lochhead's play as it inspires its central themes, structure, and the character of La Corbie. This influence is particularly evident in Act Two, Scene Six, where La Corbie directly refers to this ballad and sings it to foreshadow upcoming deaths and evoke similar themes and emotions. Moreover, just as the conversation between the crows in the ballad begins with the question, "'Where sall we gang and dine to-day?'" (Twa Corbies, Line 4), Lochhead's play starts with La Corbie's question: "CORBIE. Country: Scotland. What is it like?" (Lochhead, 1987, I.i. p. 11). This similarity establishes a thematic and structural link between Lochhead's play and the ballad by showing the extent to which folklore can be used for the exploration of Scottish identity in the play. Furthermore, Lochhead draws inspiration from Highland folktales, particularly from the "Hoodie Crow". These tales emphasize the shape-shifting characteristics of the crow, a quality that contributes complexity and ambiguity to the character of La Corbie.

Juxtaposition of cultural myths, legends and historiography is a common motif in Lochhead's oeuvre. As Adrienne Scullion (2013) postulates, Lochhead "deconstruct[s] both legitimate history and popular culture and activates metaphors of playing, acting, story-telling" (p. 120). What makes Lochhead's deconstruction distinctive and makes it more complicated is the use of the crow as a main narrator or a story-telling device. La Corbie, a female crow, who resides within the play's narrative but remains invisible to the other characters. Through La Corbie's voice, Lochhead nurtures and reshapes Scotland's cultural past during the 1600s with an attempt to providing new perspectives on the historical narrative surrounding Mary Queen of Scots. However, La Corbie's narration intentionally challenges the traditionally neutral and scientifically oriented approach often associated with historical writing. Besides, her gendered, sardonic, and Scottish voice allows for a deeper exploration of the dual exclusion of Scottish female identity within both historical and fictional narratives. Therefore, La Corbie, the crow character, transcends being a mere symbol and emerges as a bridge connecting the contemporary skeptical perception of the past to Scotland's historical representations. In doing so, she invites reader/audience to embark on a journey to consider power relations between nation, gender and texts by fostering female experiences within a distinct Scottish context.

3. La Corbie, The Trickster: A Provocative Voice in History of Scotland

The connection between history writing and La Corbie's role, is presented in Lochhead's stage directions in Act Two, scene one, as follows: "*Riccio rips out the sheets of paper, takes them over to Mary. She plucks a feather out of La Corbie's coat sleeve and signs flamboyantly*" (Lochhead, II.i.39) This flamboyant act of signing with La Corbie's feather carries meaningful symbolism, representing the past and the act of historical writing from La Corbie's unique perspective as a female bird-like creature. In this context, La Corbie's feather assumes the role of a mediator between actual events and their textual representation.

This portrayal aligns with Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of the trickster figure, as outlined in "The Structural Study of Myth" (1955). Lévi-Strauss's Trickster, within his model, serves as a complex mediator between various "polar terms" which encompass the moral ideals of a society and their raw instincts, between different modes of survival (such as hunting and gathering), and even between humanity and the divine (1955, p. 440). This type of mediation goes beyond being a mere compromise but it involves dynamic interplay and interaction between opposing forces. It, therefore, creates a state of mind that help one simultaneously grasp both extremes, as observed in the realms of myth and ritual.

Drawing a parallel with Levi-Strauss' model, La Corbie's role as a trickster figure can be understood as a mediation between the realms of fiction and reality, with a focus on questioning the reliability of historical narratives. While Lévi-Strauss's trickster navigates between moral ideals and instincts, Lochhead's La Corbie, in her own unique way, navigates the boundaries between fact and imagination. She challenges the conventional understanding of history by questioning its reliability, thus functioning as a mediator between the sayable and the unsayable, between the known and the unknown, to prompt critical reflection on the nature of historical truth and representation.

La Corbie's introduction in the play emphasizes these blurring boundaries between real and imagination. She appears as chorus, accompanied by a melancholic fiddler's tune. The stage directions describe her as "[a]n interesting, ragged ambiguous creature in her cold spotlight" (Lochhead, I.i.p.11). As clearly suggested in her description, La Corbie embodies a manifestation of the indefinable but later she furthers into the role of representing both Scotland itself and the other characters in the play through her own distinct voice. She starts her monologue with a pivotal question: "Country: Scotland. Whit is it like?" (Lochhead, 1987, I.i.p.11). Her inquiry sets the stage for a captivating exploration of Scotland's portrayal, framed

through the lens of a female Scottish trickster. What follows this is a series of potential definitions of Scotland which offer stereotypical perspectives. They are inflicted upon dichotomies perceived from the standpoint of individuals, depending on their societal positions within the multifaceted entities of Scottish life. These definitions embrace a broad spectrum of contrasting images in a panoramic view:

> It is a peatbog, it's a daurk forest.
> It's a cauldron o lye, a saltpan or coal mine.
> If you're gey lucky it's a bonny, bricht bere meadow or a park o kye
> Or mibbe… it's a field o' stanes.
> It's a tenement or merchant's ha'.
> It's a hüre hoose or a humble cot. Princes Street ot Paddy's
> Merkit. (Lochhead, I.i.p.11)

The excerpt articulated by La Corbie conveys a plethora of contrasting images that collectively contribute to the definition of Scotland's complex historical identity. Employing a series of dichotomies, La Corbie challenges and deconstructs the oversimplified and monolithic characterizations that have been historically imposed on Scotland, which often reduced it to a singular image of a mountainous, green, and poor nation. Instead, she introduces a diverse array of images, including the mysterious peatbogs, dark forests, industrious cauldrons and coal mines, as well as the idyllic meadows and rugged fields of stones. La Corbie, with her supernatural abilities, juxtaposes different eras of Scotland's history. Thus, she sheds light on its enigmatic past of Scotland as a remembering figure or rather an embodiment of collective memory.

Further aspect to be considered is her characterization as a ringmaster in a circus, a choice that invokes ritualistic elements often associated with crow imagery in literature. Crows have traditionally been used as shamanic, trickster, and ritual figures in literary works, particularly in the works of Ted Hughes (Panecka, 2018). While Lochhead's use of the crow motif seems inspired by Hughes, she subverts the familiar connotations commonly linked to crows. La Corbie, instead of conforming to the expected trickster role, takes on the

commanding role of a narrator within the play. La Corbie takes on the responsibility of orchestrating the actions of other prominent characters in front of the audience. Thus, Lochhead acknowledges her role as the authoritative narrator directing the unfolding narrative. Significantly, her use of a whip, in line with Brechtian techniques, prompts the reader/audience to reassess the influence of representation within narratives. It fosters the idea that the act of representing can be used for various ideological objectives through means of manipulation, redirection, and even punitive measures. In this context, Lochhead assigns La Corbie the pivotal role of representing not only Scotland but also the nation's complex past and historical figures. From this vantage point, La Corbie evokes the role of a historian. Like a historian, she prepares the presentation of characters according to her own narrative agenda and exercises the authority to be selective and editorial in the portrayal process. Amos Funkenstein's following postulation is quite relevant to La Corbie's position: "'facts' gain their meaning and even their very factuality from the context in which they are embedded, a context reconstructed solely by the historian, whose narrative makes and shapes the fact" (1992, p. 68). Just as historians choose what aspects to emphasize and what to conceal in constructing historical narratives, La Corbie, too, engages in a selective presentation of characters, highlighting preferred facets while obscuring unwanted elements. This parallel between La Corbie's role as a historian-like figure and the narrative power she exerts has great resonance in play's commitment to the past and history by calling for a reconsideration of how history is constructed, perceived, and presented.

Another remarkable dimension in Lochhead's skeptical interpretation of the past takes its premise in La Corbie's partiality. La Corbie emerges as an assertive and self-conscious storyteller in a postmodern context. She places a significant emphasis on her unique voice and perspective as the narrator. Her proclamation, "Ah dinna ken whit your Scotland is. Here's mines" emphasizes her subjective lens and her role as a symbol of Scotland within the play

(Lochhead, I.i. 11). This non-neutral stance becomes even more evident in La Corbie's deliberate fusion of her mystical or mythical identity with the authentic socio-cultural diversity of Scotland. This amalgamation is shown by her self-definition as a crow in three distinct languages: "National bird: the crow, the corbie, le corbeau, moi!" (I.i. 11). As observed in the given quotation, Lochhead also links her partiality identity to multicultural population of Scottish culture and, more specifically, frenchified Queen Mary's perspective.

The connection between La Corbie and Queen Mary is particularly evident in La Corbie's efforts to evoke sympathy for Mary and is emphasized by his use of the French language. Queen Mary is portrayed as a character distinctly different from Elizabeth, driven by her emotions and sensuality. Her upbringing in France alienated her from her native Scotland and its culture. However, La Corbie's depiction of Queen Mary portrays her not as a martyr or a victim, but as a human being with flaws and shortcomings. The link between La Corbie's voice and the depiction of Queen Mary can be relatable to the deceptive characteristics of trickster and the stereotypical misrepresentation of Queen Mary in historical narratives. Analyzing the concept of the crow as trickster in the narratives of various cultures, J. Ramsay (1978) observes that the typical trickster figure in West Indian mythologies exhibits qualities such as greed, hypersexuality, selfishness, mischievousness, and a capacity for cunning and wit. Actually,this figure, according to Ramsay, represents ""all too human" in his imperfections; and whose incredible survival despite repeated fatal come-uppances points to the persistence in us of the unreconstructed id" (1978, p. 114). While it may seem difficult to draw a direct parallel between Mary and the trickster crow suggested by Ramsay, Mary's enduring reputation and La Corbie's persistent voice in the play convey important insights into the enduring impact of the past on the present and survival of these ideological constructs.

Moreover, La Corbie's favor of Queen Mary and Scotland is evident during Queen Mary's confrontations with characters like John Knox, where La Corbie feverently supports her. La Corbie calls him as "nox as black as nicht, nox lik' a' the bitter pousons, nox lik' three fearfu' chaps at the door, did ding her doon" (Lochhead, 1987, I. iv. p.20). Her sharp and sarcastic language against Knox paints a vivid picture of defiance and resistance. She reflects her condemnation of Knox's rigid and misogynistic views, which have had a lasting impact and great resonance on Scotland, contributing to the prevalence of patriarchal and religious authoritarianism in the country. Through La Corbie's narrative, Lochhead dismantles the biases found in male-dominated official history and religious authority. This invites reader/ audience to engage in a critical evaluation of various forms of authoritarianism, whether in real-life contexts, politics, religion, or narrative constructions.

Furthermore, in the play, La Corbie enacts the provocative voice of history by drawing attention to the traditional norms and roles of historians by questioning and distorting their authority in the perception of the past. The following quotation unmasks her enigmatic identity by intersecting her identity with Scotland's long historiography:

> How me? Eh? Eh? Eh? Voice like a chocked laugh. 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 a 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 eyes 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, I. i. pp. 11-12)

In the provided quotation, La Corbie's self-identification is aligned with the representation of Scotland and its past. She makes use of Scottish clichés such as "The Skating Minister" on

Duddingston Loch and the "Parish priest" and locates her place on those clichés. However, it is also worth to note that her references to religious figure of Scotland as "dirty beast" surprise the reader/audience as she, as a Scottish character, is expected to embrace the Scottish national church. However, with her sarcasm by "dirty beast", she evokes John Knox, the founder of the Scottish Church (the Kirk) in somewhat derogatory manner. The attempt to vilify John Knox, a historically remarkable and religious character through a crow character evinces how past is elusive and discursive and it is based on the ideological standpoint of the narrator. As Thomas Skouteris (2012) points out, "the same historical fact can be read differently by different discourses while within each discourse there are different readings over space and time" (p. 170). From this vantage point, it can be said that the religious heroic and iconic figure of Scotland, John Knox can be historically humiliated in the representation of feminist history writer.

The employment of fragmented, almost stream-of-consciousness language and the metaphor of a "rickle o' sticks" as La Corbie's nest also symbolize the vulnerability of her voice as a remembering figure and the fragile political landscape of Scotland. Moreover, her mention of "lamb's eyes" reminds the reader/audience of power dynamics, often depicted as a lamb and wolf or victim and predator, between Scotland and England. The reference to a "feast" following the battle further strengthens the argument, as Scotland's history teems with conflicts and independence wars, during which crows, symbolic of carnivores or Anglo-Saxon beasts of battle, could benefit from the bloodshed. Through these clichéd depictions of Scotland, La Corbie disrupts the linearity of history and offers an irreverent interpretation of history. Her amoral and cawing voice deconstructs stereotypical representations of Scotland.

Lochhead also forges a connection between the narrator, La Corbie, and the national identity of Scotland. This cultural bond is made clear as she introduces La Corbie as "our

chorus" instead of merely "chorus", positioning her as an emblematic representation of the Scottish collective consciousness. Such framing attributes La Corbie to the role of narrator or a storyteller deeply entwined within Scotland's cultural entity. Her use of Scots in her narration also accentuates La Corbie's Scottish identity by evoking "place, weather, culture and history" Gish, 2013, p.52). However, La Corbie's national role goes beyond blind nationalist connotations but instead, her speech carries the traits of a cunning trickster, skillfully wielding various forms of Scots which is, as Nancy K. Gish (2013) puts it, "both defamiliarized and accessible" (p.52). This exuberant plurality constitutes a hallmark feature of Lochhead's literary corpus as she strips the sense of nationalism from monolithic and masculine definitions to make it more multivocal. Within this context, La Corbie exhibits a fluid linguistic dexterity, adeptly transitioning between playful and pun-full language to more solemn and poetically rendered expressions. This linguistic versatility is notably exemplified in her rendition of the longstanding rivalry between Scotland and England and the binary opposition between Mary Stuart and Elizabeth Tudor. Rather than adopting a traditional serious historical narrative style with a sole focus on veracity, La Corbie embraces a storytelling style reminiscent of fairy tales, fables, and myths as observed in the following lines, "Once upon a time there were twa queens on the wan green island, and the wan green island was split intae twa kingdoms..." (Lochhead, I.i.12).

La Corbie's narrative shift assumes profound significance. This change in storytelling strategy can be understood as a playful reflection of the establishment of the relationship between the two nations and the two women, constructed within the framework of time-honored and stereotypical dichotomies. The adoption of a fairy-tale narrative form serves as an astute choice, aptly suited to encapsulate the didactic and dialectic representation of opposing forces—a characteristic frequently found in the narratives of children's stories, such as the dichotomies of good and evil, poverty and prosperity, beauty and ugliness. La Corbie's

preference for narrating in the voice of a crow enables Lochhead to delve into the complexities of the historical relationship while embracing the familiar tropes and patterns of fairy tales. This narrative strategy, by design, encourages readers and audiences to engage in contemplation concerning the role of storytelling and interpretation in conveying multifaceted historical themes

La Corbie's cynical tale also disrupts the male-dominated historical narrative by advocating for the visibility of females in both text and context. Act One, scene five lays bare Lochhead's feminist refusal of male domination as she allocates a chapter to Mary's assertive voice and the murder of Alison Craik, a raped and murdered female figure in the past, who is also portrayed by John Knox with pejorative terms in *The History of the Reformation of Religion in Scotland*. In the play, Queen Mary reprimands Bothwell, emphasizing her desire for women to feel safe in her country. As her feminist concerns overweigh in the inclusion of this mispresented or neglected historical female figure, Lochhead, through the voice of La Corbie, creates a sort of counter-history against the anglo-centric, male-dominated historical accounts. This attempt is quite meaningful when considering Alan Munslow's following remark: "precision in the generation of facts is literally meaning-less unless and until those facts are turned into stories, explained further with arguments, and offered as sustained and coherent ideological positions" (1992, p. 172). The attempt to incorporate female agency and increase their visibilities can be argued as main ideological agenda of the play. This feminist movement resonates in the play with Bothwell's excuse his actions with history. Yet, Mary refuses to listen to his excuse and facts and she expresses her rejection with a crescendo, "I dinna want to hear your history! / *Doom. A drumbeat*" (Lochhead, 1987 I.v.p. 28). Indeed, La Corbie's narrative role in the play compels the audience/reader to perceive the play as part of Lochhead's "herstory" project, which aims to record history from a feminist perspective and rectify historical gaps and misrepresentations related to women.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, through the portrayal of La Corbie as a female narrator and author-figure within the play, Liz Lochhead not only empowers marginalized voices but also disrupts established concepts of truth and authority. La Corbie's narrative strength holds a strategic and political significance with the aim of liberating women mispresentations and promoting their agency as narrative subjects. This is evident in the narratives of Alison Craik and Mary Queen's execution, where La Corbie's presence redefines the representation and perception of women in historical contexts.

Also, La Corbie takes shape not merely as a gendered persona, but rather as an elusive and ever-evolving concept. La Corbie's character eludes a fixed definition due to its dynamic nature, which consistently shifts in style and perspective throughout the play. The subject matter also transforms, ranging from her involvement in Mary's political struggles to her introspective reflections on Scotland's history. To sum up, Lochhead's clever use of La Corbie as the character re-framing the happenings in the past draws inspiration from Scottish folklore but expands the traditional role of the crow into a Scottish remembering or re-telling figure of the Scottish past in a trickster tradition. Her partiality, sardonic voice and cunning narrative slipperiness create an atmosphere of unreliability, so it allows for multiple and varied perspectives on the past and characters.

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