



Gioia Angeletti,
*Nation, Community, Self:
Female Voices in Scottish Theatre
from the late Sixties to the Present*

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by Anna Caterino

During a post-show discussion, held after a production of *Knives in Hens* a decade ago, there was a debate surrounding the question “is it a Scottish play?” The play itself does not feature a single word in Scots and the question may therefore feel legitimate and yet, as duly noted by David Greig, “the play feels quintessentially Scottish” (National Theatre). While David Harrower did not comment on the matter, failing to provide an answer, the question was repeated at a panel featuring Professor Ian Brown in conversation with David Greig and Paul Henderson Scott. The resurgence of such a problem seems almost inevitable at a panel organized by the National Theatre of Scotland about Scottish plays. Here Greig tried to give an answer to the question by referencing an anecdote and said, “I was standing in the urinals at the Traverse and next to me was Simon Donald and he said, *two Scottish writers having a pish, but is it Scottish pish? That's the question...* and I suppose my argument would be, or my thought would be: if it's in a Scottish urinal from a Scottish author... No, I guess if it's in a Scottish bog, it's a Scottish play” (National Theatre).



David Greig's comment is explicative and highlights one of the thematic recurrences in Scottish theatre: the issue surrounding Scottishness and Scotland. Such questions are hardly new and seem to ceaselessly linger in the background of Scottish plays, even in those cases where a play is not strictly dealing with national identity (as in David Greig's *Dunsinane*). While it is true that plays written around the years of the 1998 Scottish Devolution and the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum have shown an increased engagement with that question, the tradition is, as a matter of fact, antecedent to twenty-first-century literature. The first decades, if not the entire century, after the insurgence of a national Scottish drama in the nineteenth century, the preoccupation was mostly British: theatre seasons had their fair share of *Hamlets*, English companies were freer to travel by train and their performances in Scotland were therefore more frequent, and a number of Scottish authors moved to London thus slowing down the creation of Scottish material (Brown). With the arrival of the twentieth century, however, Scottish theatre began to focus on Scottish topics abandoning Britain or, in some cases, denouncing Britain as a colonizing power aided by audiences' contribution through "advice, corrections, support, suggestions of great practical value, facts, figures, books, sources" (McGrath). A particular focus was also given not only to the problems of rural Scotland, but also Scottish Gaelic drama with playwrights such as Iain Crichton Smith, Iain Moireach, and Tormod Calum Dòmhnallach. Twentieth century Scottish theatre gained traction and led, between 1963 and 1973 to the establishment of Scottish theatre. This was partially aided by the opening of the Traverse Theatre, the creation of the Scottish Society of Playwrights, and the abolition of censorship thanks to the Theatres Act of 1968 (Blandford). Consequently, a large part of theatrical writing and production led to political theatre as exemplified by Iain Crichton Smith's *A' Chùirt* (1966) or by John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag, and the Black, Black Oil* (1973).

It is within this framework that Gioia Angeletti's book *Nation, Community, Self: Female Voices in Scottish Theatre from the Late Sixties to the Present* sets itself as an exploration of Scottish identity from a female perspective. The volume introduces Scottish female playwrights that emerged on the national scene in the 70s and 80s of the twentieth century with the aim of highlighting their existence and writing because, the author feels, they have gained less traction than their male counterparts and have therefore risked falling into oblivion. Whether one agrees with such a statement, considering that Ann Marie Di Mambro's *Tally's Blood* (1990) is the SQA English *National 5* Critical Reading paper, doesn't quite matter because the book offers an interesting exploration of the text either way.

Identity, as mentioned before, is at the heart of this volume. An identity both of Scottish people or second-generation immigrants that is shown by Angeletti as tripartite as she focuses on three different ways to explore it: the relationship with English culture, the presence of transnational communities in Scotland, and the connection between self and society.

The relationship with English culture is explored through the relationship with Britain's national bard, William Shakespeare. It is well-known that some of Shakespeare's plays, such as *Macbeth* (1599-1606), *Edward III* (1606), and *King Lear* (1603-1606), are ripe



with Scotophobia—setting commonplaces and prejudices that are still in use today. Scottish Shakespearean re-tellings, which here are put in the same category of post-colonial retellings of Shakespeare, are the means by which specific authors assimilate the story, adapt it and make it theirs, and ultimately create something new out of it. Something closer to their history and point of view than the original. Joan Ure, Liz Lohead, and Sherman Macdonald who approach Shakespearean plays of all genres—from tragedy to romances—all work within this framework. Through a comparison of their work emerges the delineation of the influence that contemporary issues have in approaching those texts which may be rendered more suited for a younger audience. More suited, mind, not because of the difficulties of the original text, which one may or not agree with, but rather the proximity between the audiences' experiences and the experiences of the characters in the play. It is, in some ways, Shakespeare brought home: it closes the distance and allows direct commentary on contemporary society without having to rely on anglicized foreign countries. Furthermore, in those cases where the setting of the scene is left to be settled by the director, there may be a complete overlap of locations.¹ What happens isn't just the modernization of Elizabethan texts but rather the re-appropriation of specific texts of a canon which then become means by which exploring a familiar reality without having to rely on monolithic plays, allowing much more freedom of movement and interpretation and making them apt for a younger audience.

Transnational communities are deeply connected to the relationship between self and society, thus making sections two and three a continuation one of the other. Diasporic communities are recurrent within Scottish theatre, even Scottish theatre written by female authors, but Angeletti focuses on Ann Marie Di Mambro, Sue Glover, and Jackie Kay. The nationalities vary, of course, with a particular focus on Irish and Italian communities as well as African people, but the common denominator is the notion of identity and Scottishness in the aftermath of a movement of migration. Angeletti digs deeper and divides the depiction of migration within those plays into two categories: on the one hand, a migrant is someone who was born elsewhere; on the other, they are someone who keeps looking back to an idealized version of their mother country, therefore fuelling expectations that may or may not be upheld. Furthermore, what the book does while approaching the plays, is reminding the reader of Scotland's position as a victim and perpetrator alike. Angeletti therefore focuses on history in order to underline how the plays taken into consideration tackle and challenge British national amnesia: on the one hand, Scotland suffered from England's colonizing power; on the other, it took part in the Slave Trade and, during the World War Two it was subject to Winston Churchill's "Collar the Lot." With this awareness, the subaltern is allowed to take centre-stage and be the voice of Scotland's history as the audience, especially a foreign one, is reminded of darker moments of Scottish history told from the perspective of its victims.

¹ Not *After Juliet*. Or, rather, *After Juliet* can be set anywhere but Glasgow as one of the characters (Rhonda) is Glaswegian and is said to be far from home.



Self and society, on the other hand, are explored in the context of family and nation and their potential crisis in plays by Joan Ure, Marcella Evaristi, and Liz Lochhead with a partial focus on retellings such as the case of *Medea* (2000). There is a strong preoccupation surrounding the self of an immigrant as highlighted in Evaristi's *Commedia* (1983), a claustrophobic play that verges on tragedy. Here, second-generation immigrants, Elena's two sons, cannot be regarded as fully integrated, thus moving away from the depiction of migrants in *Tally's Blood* and making things more difficult by muddling them. While Carla Dente, a critic, has argued that "the second generation Scots-Italian were already integrated to the point of speaking the local language and sharing state education with the others" (201), Angeletti contradicts her, pointing out that the world in *Commedia* is characterized by scepticism surrounding such a multicultural idea as evident in I.i of the play. What emerges here, therefore, is the feeling of rootlessness to which no end can be put. The existence of a double belonging which endlessly iterates itself causes displacement, placing the characters in two places at once but without having them fully home in either. At the end of the play, although much thought has been given to identity and self in relation to a country, the characters are not set free from that struggle. Rather, the noose around their necks is tightened as they remain trapped by familial responsibilities and everyday life, thus creating a sense of alienation.

Even though the book could have benefitted from a clearer perspective and a more specific approach, especially its takes on and departure from feminist criticism, it provides a clear and concise introduction to some of Scotland's most famous female writers. *Nation, Community, Self: Female Voices in Scottish Theatre from the Late Sixties to the Present* plainly and objectively articulates the intricacies of the topics it deals with without shying away from contradicting historical situation. This makes the book suitable for readers who know nothing about Scottish theatre or female Scottish dramatists, but also for those who are looking forward to either investigating the topic of identity as analysed in twentieth and twenty-first century theatre or simply learning more about the authors mentioned in this book.

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