

## **Versions of ideological language and community identity in recent Scots-language drama**

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This article considers aspects of the ways Scottish playwrights since the mid-twentieth century have used Scots language on stage. In doing so, it argues that the underlying ideology of the playwrights' use of Scots shifted, to employ a pun, dramatically in the 1970s with regard to their approach to and apparent perception of the values embedded in Scots language and its theatrical use. The argument being developed is part of a wider one. This is that, willy-nilly, theatrical use of any of the languages of Scotland embodies ideologies of cultural value and community identity. By 'cultural value' is here meant perceptions of politico-social status, and so implied power, with regard to the prestige of aspects of varieties of Scottish linguistic cultural expression, whether in art forms, folkways or social practice generally, as distinguished from cultural expression based on post-imperial English Standard English language use within a critical so-called 'Great Tradition'. By 'community identity' is meant perceptions of the specific community – or rather interlinked communities – to which individual citizens consider themselves to belong. The argument here developed draws on work on ideology, language and art by the French/Lithuanian literary scientist A J Greimas, the Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci and the Scots-language scholars John Corbett and Katja Lenz.

Among other things Greimas explored relationships between history, mythology, ideology and language: 'Historians have been able to observe the emergence from mythology of presocratic philosophy. [...] the interpretation of myths has given rise to a new "ideological" language [...].' (Greimas 1963: 162). In *History as Theatrical Metaphor: History, Myth and National Identities in Modern Scottish Drama* (Brown 2016), I accept and move beyond Greimas's version of the relationship of history and mythology to language. The complementary argument here is that history embodies mythological elements and in some perspectives, to put it crudely, is in fact a series of quasi-mythological interpretations of the past based on selected 'facts of history', a term first coined in this sense by E H Carr in *What is History?* (Carr 1972).

The discussion of those 'facts of history' takes place in ideologically loaded language, often expressed most obviously when one talks of 'Whig historians' or 'Marxist historians', whose very historical discourse and language choice is imbued, often implicitly rather than explicitly, with their political ideologies' embedded values. This article, while focusing on Scottish theatre since the mid twentieth century, contends that theatrical language and semiotics generally embody ideological positions, just as, following Greimas, we can argue that language used by those creating or studying mythology or history is ideologically implicated. As John Corbett has observed,

For all critical linguists, all linguistic performance is ideological. The notion of ideological neutrality is a myth. One always speaks from a 'point of enunciation' just as any camera lens cannot escape its restricted but still powerful point of view. (2016)<sup>1</sup>

This article, therefore is not concerned with arguing for Scottish exceptionalism so much as being set within the much wider framework of the interaction of language and ideology and focuses on language written for spoken dialogue. It does this because, for Scottish playwrights, not least because of their trilingual context, the choice of language for dramatic speech has arguably always been an important element in addressing in the theatre the various historical and ideological perceptions of Scottish experience, whether national, within national and regional groups or as individual citizens. Their language choice implies a Scottish perspective and their vision of the nature of 'Scotland' and what 'Scottish history and identity' may be.

Underlying this discussion is a recognition that language is profoundly a cultural artefact and its definition and usage intensely political. If a text's language can be said to embody its ideology, then playwriting in any of the languages of Scotland, not to mention varieties within any one of these languages of the kind this article considers within Scots, demonstrably – that is to say, explicitly or by clear implication – expresses ideological attitudes to community identity or identities. This is because there is no single 'standard', while the selected variety is foregrounded and draws attention to itself and its implications. The mere fact of writing in Scots constitutes an ideological statement about the community and identity of those it is written about and for. *A fortiori*, then, writing in a particular variety or register or style of Scots, or in English or Gaelic, constitutes another more nuanced or precise ideological statement.<sup>2</sup>

This is so because language is a key means by which community may, in Benedict Anderson's term, be 'imagined' – and for Anderson, of course, nations are 'imagined communities'. For Anderson, it is not shared cultural values themselves that create a nation, but the dynamic act of imagination by people who may be culturally diverse. Corbett has suggested, in an email already cited, with regard to Scotland,

this sense of a shared culture is partly illusory since what an Aberdonian farmer imagines when he watches BBC Scottish news – and indeed many of his cultural attitudes – may differ very much from a Glasgow merchant banker, but both imagine they are Scottish (or British or European) through the acts of reading, listening to or viewing material that invites them to consider themselves as such. [...] So arguing that an imagined nation embodies shared settled cultural values is debatable. The values are always in negotiation through the ideologically loaded texts that invite audiences to Imagine themselves in a particular way. (Corbett 2016)

Such a position assigns registers of language a key role in identifying not only national communities as a whole, but communities within nations. What holds communities, whether national or local, together is surely that 'imagined' community's shared ideology, its sense of imagined shared values, its terms of reference – in short, its world views, philosophies, culture and self-perception – and, so, its distinction from other groups. In this, real group content is psychologically often less important than perceived distinction from other groups. As Antonio Gramsci expresses it, there is 'a fundamental problem' which faces

any conception of the world, any philosophy which has become a cultural movement [...] in which the philosophy is contained as an implicit theoretical 'premiss'. One might say 'ideology' here [...] implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life. This problem is that of preserving the ideological unity of the entire social bloc which that ideology serves to cement and to unify. (Gramsci 1981: 206)

In this perspective, the plays under discussion can be seen as part of a Gramscian hegemonic struggle to negotiate what the nation is by offering audiences different ways of imagining their community membership.

Part of this article's argument, then, is that ideologically the use of Scots language in dramatic dialogue over the last eighty or so years, and arguably both before that period and elsewhere in Scottish literature and culture generally, has been not only to 'identify' a community of Scotland as a whole and communities within Scotland, but to seek in Gramscian terms 'to cement and unify' such communities or, indeed, to bring them into being by 'performing' them. The play persuades the audience of the legitimacy of the community it portrays and, through that process, that community is in some way unified. Just as what an audience sees ideologically (and morally) in, say, an Ibsen play is derived from the dialogue between the characters, the Scots language that characters speak to each other in Scots-language plays helps collectively convey linguistically the play's 'ideology' of community identity to the audience. In a play in Scots, in other words, the spoken identity expressed through the characters' language seeks to validate the spoken community of the audience, or those audience members whose language is being heard on stage. Such validation cements, unifies and performs the relevant community's identity. A playwright's choice of language, whether of one or more of Scotland's three older languages, or one of its new ones, or of varieties within these languages, is fundamental to her/his imagination. Simultaneously, this imagination is fundamental to the nature or form of the 'Scottish nation' imagined – the kinds of communities, versions of Scotlands – as the creative imagination seeks to identify, and at least attempt to unify, an expression of cultural community.

One technique for conveying an ideology is by choosing older forms of the language. Katja Lenz has offered a helpful insight in an important discussion of the use of Older Scots forms in Scottish drama:

Dramatic functions of the use of Scots - and of obsolete Scots words in particular – include the evocation of a certain atmosphere, the characterisation of the dramatic figures and the creation of a (historical) setting. Archaic vocabulary may also be employed to achieve certain poetic effects in the stage language. Then, although this is less common, their use may have no predominantly literary function, but may be rather an aim in itself, an attempt to use the full scope of the writer's native dialect, to preserve archaic material, or even to extend the vocabulary and add to the prestige of the Scots language. All these

functions may of course combine and are brought to bear to different degrees in each individual play. (Lenz 2000: 4-5)

Part, therefore, of the fascination of twentieth-century Scottish playwrights' use of Scots-language dialogue for their characters lies in the tension between differing approaches to that use and the ways this forms part of a panoply of dramaturgical tools including characterisation and, often, satirical theatrical action.

A case in point would be the plays of Robert McLellan whose dramatic output spans the period from 1933 to 1967. He is a key figure in mid-twentieth-century Scottish theatre and Scots-language creativity in drama, prose and poetry. While the plays in the first arc of his work from 1933 to 1946 are often somewhat cosy, misogynist and even sentimental, the second arc, with its fore-runner *Jamie the Saxt* (1937), includes several challenging plays from *The Flouers o Edinburgh* (1948) to *The Hypocrite* (1967). McLellan in his later, more serious work addresses issues of cultural identity, generational conflict and artistic freedom versus censorship. Effectively a member of the twentieth-century Scottish Literary Renaissance, but without himself engaging with that movement's internationalist and modernist interests, McLellan can be seen to match much of Hugh MacDiarmid's summary of its aims. These MacDiarmid defined as being to 'escape from the provincializing of Scottish Literature [...] to carry on the independent Scottish literary tradition from the time that Burns died [...] to carry forward the reintegration of the Scots language [...] and at the same time to carry forward the tradition politically' (MacDiarmid 1962, in Morgan 1976: 6). In this agenda, the reintegration of the Scots language can be seen to have a key role to play in the fulfilment of the other three aims identified. While MacDiarmid's aim to re-establish the integrity of Scots at least as literary language can be seen to be distinct from a Gramscian conception of cementing and unifying communities, the parallel between the two Marx-influenced thinkers can be seen in the ways language for both expresses and embodies ideological purpose and value. For MacDiarmid, Corbett suggests, advocacy of an integrated Scots was exactly a means of unifying and cementing an apparently fragmented nation by offering everyone a revived linguistic medium capable of allowing localities to imagine in the same medium. In Corbett's view, in the email cited already, Stage Lallans identifies as Scots without restriction necessarily to class or region and was meant to enable rather than exclude.

Independently of MacDiarmid, but in parallel, McLellan considered his use of Scots, based in his own Lanarkshire dialect, a key signifier of his artistic ethos. He

observed in a statement of faith that reads like a quasi-politico-cultural agenda, 'When he speaks English, the Scot loses contact with the national elements of his unconscious' (McLellan 2013: 26). McLellan's plays certainly – to follow Lenz's analysis – use Scots to

- evoke a certain atmosphere
- characterise dramatic figures
- create a (historical) setting
- achieve certain poetic effects in the stage language.

Further quite explicitly, McLellan's use of Scots is intended, in Lenz's words already cited, 'to use the full scope of the writer's native dialect, to preserve archaic material, or even to extend the vocabulary and add to the prestige of the Scots language' (2000). On top of this, McLellan's use of historical matter – his plays largely deal with material from the mid sixteenth century to the early nineteenth century – establishes a discourse of national identity and linguistic identity separate from that of an English-language empire (issues directly dealt with in, for example, *The Flowers o Edinburgh*). This discourse is embodied in Scots dialogue which McLellan sees as related to his concept of the 'national elements of [the Scot's] unconscious'. (2013)

Here we stray into dangerous marshlands where be dragons, the imprecise concepts of essentialist nationalism, wetlands that can very quickly bog down rational discussion. It is hard to fathom what might in fact be meant in any sense by such a term as the 'national elements of [the Scot's] unconscious'. Or, indeed, any generalist conception of a specifically Scottish psyche shared by, and only by, Scots at large. The phrase seems to imply a common unconscious in which elements are shared by all Scots, an extraordinarily bold assertion, indeed one which could reasonably be accused of sharing standpoints with extreme right-wing conceptions of racial identity. Yet, one can more charitably take from this that McLellan is implying that the employment of Scots is a valid means of expressing a common cultural identity, part of which is unconscious in the sense that it is taken for granted or assumed in daily life and rarely if ever explicitly examined. In such a view, the Scots language expresses states of mind and feeling/emotion which, for the Scot, the English language cannot do and only Scots can. These intuitions are largely shared by Scottish people throughout Scotland and hence might provide a basis, however tenuous, for MacLellan's claim of a Scottish unconscious. McLellan can also be seen to be

conjecturing that Scottish people may share a common understanding of Scottish history, so that they may confer on historical characters in plays their present-day intuitions, the underlying ideologies of which the play may be either reinforcing or challenging.

If such a reading is made of McLellan's statement, then it is close to the views of his contemporary, the playwright Alexander Reid, on the interaction of language and identity. Reid in 1958 summarised those as follows:

The return to Scots is a return to meaning and sincerity. We can only grow from our own roots and our roots are not English [...] If we are to fulfil our hope that Scotland may some day make a contribution to World Drama [...] we can only do so by cherishing, not repressing our national peculiarities (including our language), though whether a Scottish National Drama, if it comes to birth, will be written in Braid Scots or the speech, redeemed for literary purposes, of Argyle Street, Glasgow, or the Kirkgate, Leith, is anyone's guess. (Reid 1958: xii–xiii)

'Braid Scots' in this context is, of course, the language used by Scottish Literary Renaissance writers like McLellan rather than the modern demotic of the cities, 'of Argyle Street, Glasgow, or the Kirkgate, Leith'. Again, one can be suspicious of such emotive terms as 'sincerity' or 'roots', with their potential for essentialist and even racist implication, but, despite the risk of its being dragged down – or indeed sucked under – by essentialist terminology and potential racist readings, the gist of the argument is clear. Reid in this passage opens up a different vista to that McLellan's work offers. It is often suggested that McLellan wrote about historical material because in periods in which he set his dramas unarguably all classes spoke Scots, without any substantial possibility of a Scots/English diglossia having developed. Yet, the concentration on historical topics could and often did, even in McLellan's own work, not to mention that of some of his colleagues, lead to a sense that Scots was of the past, backward-looking, that it was not feasible or sensible to write about contemporary issues in a Scots which reflected contemporary realistic use.

Even, however, when McLellan began writing plays in a Scots which did not, nor was intended to, reflect everyday realistic use, the speech realism of the work of Joe Corrie in the 1920s had given the lie to this perception that Scots-language dialogue could not address contemporary issues. This initiative of Corrie's was soon

reinforced by the various Glasgow Unity writers of the 1940s, perhaps pre-eminently Ena Lamont Stewart, especially in her *Men Should Weep* (1947). Those playwrights wrote in Scots about important contemporary issues. Yet, they themselves brought another form of ghettoisation of Scots to McLellan's historical ghettoisation, that it was, in contemporary terms, a language of the workers, a version of Reid's modern demotic, and theatrically could only be used for popular working-class, often radical, drama. In short, while comic or sentimental Kailyard use of Scots was always available, the position seemed to playwrights at the end of the 1960s to be that Scots could conventionally be used for serious drama only for either historical drama or radical plays addressing political issues.

It would be unfair to characterise McLellan as simply backward-looking. His language ideology, like MacDiarmid's, had, as we have seen, a perfectly rational basis in a cultural agenda concerned with retrieving and revitalising a slighted and, to an extent, neglected language resource. This revitalising agenda embodied to his mind and the minds of many contemporaries a lively sense of the dynamism of Scottish culture. Nonetheless, however unfairly, many writers of the next generation, including this – now shamefaced – author, took the view his plays were retrogressive. Part of the fascination of twentieth-century Scottish playwrights' use of Scots-language dialogue for their characters lies in the tension between the use of Scots to mark the 'tradition-bound' (in other – perhaps unkind – words, the backward, a school in which to the generation emerging in the 1960s and 1970s McLellan was a leading dominie) and its use as a flexible forward-looking modern language throwing off the bonds of Kailyard and striving to use Scots for contemporary concerns. This different possibility is one Reid had hinted at in 1958, that the speech of Glasgow or Leith streets (in that wonderful phrase of his – 'redeemed for literary purposes') might offer a different linguistic embodiment and, so, one might add, different ideological embodiments for the modern playwright. In fact, the word 'redeemed' hints at one way socio-political attitudes or ideologies may be embedded in what seem to be views simply about language. The idea that demotic language might need to be 'redeemed for literary purposes' already suggests a difference in socio-political attitude to the language to be employed. Reid as a member of the older school, even in contemplating free use of contemporary demotic, seeks to constrain its freedom. He endorses the traditional 'standard language' ideology: one variety (and not the 'unredeemed' demotic one) carries the prestige necessary for specifically literary purposes.

In fact, the first stirrings in the early 1970s of such unconstrained use of demotic Scots dialogue – led by figures like Bill Bryden, Hector MacMillan, John McGrath and Donald Campbell – often tended, ironically, to employ historical material. Rather than using that material, however, to imagine a nostalgic community and passé version of Scotland, they used Scots to question sentimental views of the past and seek to create a vision of a radical country – urban rather than rural, forward-looking rather than backward-looking, working-class rather than peasant or middle-class, more industrial than agricultural.

Others, meantime, used Scots for more contemporary work, for example, Tom McGrath in *The Hard Man* (1977) with visceral seriousness, Marcella Evaristi in *Scotia's Darlings* (1978) and *Mouthpieces* (1980) with satiric wit and John Byrne in *The Slab Boys Trilogy* (1978-82) with radically self-satirising humour, opened up new ways of employing the language of Reid's 'Argyle Street, Glasgow, or the Kirkgate, Leith'. Their linguistic vulgarity and demotic freshness probably was not, in Reid's term, 'redeemed' at all, but it was sure of its ideological implication and its imbrication in a dynamic language community, rather specifically West Coast class-bound, mainly industrial Scotland. In Byrne's case, further, as Cairns Craig has demonstrated, the dramatic language drew on characteristic behaviour and linguistic tropes and rhetorical devices, especially in the language of the characters Phil and Spanky, derived from 1950s popular culture and Americanisms (Craig 2002: 1-14). Here, the new imperial power and its influences in the slab boys' language might show a (perhaps illusionary) desire to escape from an older language or at least to reinvent it in a more modernised, media-influenced form. Such innovators in using demotic Scots were followed in the next decade by playwrights like Liz Lochhead in her version of *Tartuffe* (1985), Rona Munro in *Saturday at the Commodore* (1989) and Anne Marie di Mambro in *Tally's Blood* (1990), all writing later plays in demotic Scots.

The ideology of these generations was not of essentialist identity, but of Scotland as resistance to oppression, empire and class and gender stereotyping, a country aspiring to, if not always succeeding in achieving, socio-political change. The generational change in their playwriting, of course, finds parallels in other national contexts, not least in black American playwrights like Oyamo and August Wilson or English northern writers like Tony Harrison, Alan Plater, Alan Bleasdale, Bill Morrison and Willy Russell. For these Scottish generations, however, the change involved processes of struggling for an imagined broader, national collective identity characterised by (chronologically shifting) linguistic affiliations and (contested) cultural

values in their own uniquely inflected way. Theirs was to be a theatre and a country at ease with Scots as a language that could deal with any issue. The generational change may be seen – as the younger generation reimagined national community – as part of the hegemonic struggle through repositioning, challenge, appropriation, parody and ridicule.

If I can draw on my own experience as a minor member of that 1970s generation, I can say that I certainly found a key incentive to my writing in Scots was the desire to employ the language of my neighbourhood with its richness and capacity for profundity. For me this was not a retrospective exercise in nostalgia but one with serious forward-looking critical purpose, in conscious tribute to my neighbours' sense of community identity and capacity for rational and emotionally engaged discussion in lively Scots language. Again, perhaps ironically, I began by looking backward for material, writing a version of *Antigone* in Scots for Strathclyde Theatre Group in 1969 and working on postmodern deconstructive versions, or series of versions, of the lives of Andrew Carnegie, produced as *Carnegie* in 1973, and *Mary Stuart* for *Mary*, produced in 1977, both at Edinburgh's Royal Lyceum Theatre. *Mary* contains a scene which draws on McLellan in its deconstructing of the myths of 'Mary, Queen of Scots' when in Scene 23 it represents Mary's escape from Lochleven Castle as a Kailyard comedy, even Kailyard farce. It begins by plundering some lines from the opening of McLellan's *Toom Byres* (1936), his first full-length first-arc play:

LENNOX IS SITTING IN A CHAIR, DRESSED AS AN OLD WOMAN. HE IS KNITTING. KNOX ENTERS, DRESSED ALSO AS AN OLD WOMAN. LENNOX PUTS DOWN HIS KNITTING.

LENNOX        Oh dearie me, is it yersel, Jeannie Knox?

KNOX            Aye, it's me, Aggie Lennox.

LENNOX        Sic a ding ye gied ma pair pulsing hert. Hirpling in there the like o an oossie puddock.

KNOX            Aye, hinnie. It's a dour lift aboon us baith and a queer eldritch nicht the nicht. The birdies and the beasties, Aggie, the birdies and the beasties is ower awfy restless. The hens're ill tae lay and the kye's kicked ower the mune. The hoonds're howling, the hoolets hooting, and, hoots, it's gey eerie the nicht, a nicht for bogles and whigmaleeries. (n.p.)

Here the Scots borrows from McLellan's actual usage to make fun of it. It has the confidence to do so as it deconstructs not only a retrogressive use of the language, but yet another myth of 'Mary', something many of the play's scenes do by employing

theatrical pastiche to subversive purpose. Scots language becomes not only a vehicle for, but an object of, postmodern playfulness. An 'oossie puddock' is hardly a possibility, but such playing with the language to undermine common sense reflects the play's processes of playfully undermining established, and conflicting, versions of 'Mary, Queen of Scots'.

The point here is that the language was now not identifying a retrospective culture and embodying nostalgia, but interrogating, challenging, questioning and subverting received versions of Scottish history and historical mythology. Later, plays by Liz Lochhead, whether in her more theatricalised linguistic experiments like *Mary Queen of Scots got her head chopped off* (1987) or her more colloquial Glasgow contemporary comedies, and Sue Glover in work like *Bondagers* (1990), to name only two, develop such work, in their case from a feminist perspective. Subsequently, translator/playwrights like Edwin Morgan, with his extraordinary iconoclastic and vivid version of *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1992), and Bill Findlay and Martin Bowman, with their startlingly lively versions of Michel Tremblay's plays, which embody in their original Quebecois their own generational change and hegemonic challenge, were free to use Scots as a dynamic modern forward-looking language in radical drama. This use of Scots is one which writers like Mike Cullen in *The Cut* (1993) or Peter Arnott in his translation of Brecht, *Puntilla and his Man Matti* (1999) – again to name only two – could exploit in the 1990s. More recent examples, meanwhile, include work by Gregory Burke in *Black Watch* (2006) with its vibrant use of demotic Fife-dialect dialogue to challenge sanitised versions of Scottish militarism and Kieran Hurley in *Rantín* (2013) where he employs Scots and Gaelic alongside, mainly, Scottish English to explore radicalised perceptions of Scotland, challenging sentimental views of Scottish society, especially among expatriates. Perhaps it would be only just for those generations to reflect on the importance of the earlier generation of McLellan and his colleagues in the process of establishing the beginnings of a politico-cultural framework and a wide-ranging, inclusive community identity in which we could all feel confident Scots-language drama could deal with any topic under the sun in what had become newly revitalised, in Greimas's terms, as an ideological language.

It is debateable whether the work of recent playwrights could have the confidence in that language it does without Robert McLellan – not to mention Joe Corrie and Unity playwrights like Ena Lamont Stewart – having begun that process of revitalisation in their Scots-language dialogue. This article has argued that a significant shift in the theatrical use of Scots took place in the 1970s from, but on the basis of, the

work of 'pioneers' like McLellan and Reid, and, more generally, other members of the Scottish Literary Renaissance, so that, in dramatic texts, use of Scots and ideological implications about the communities depicted through that language changed profoundly. The freedom playwrights adopted validated for them the use of all varieties of Scots, including the 'unredeemed' demotic, and embodied an ideological adjustment with regard to what discourses the Scots language might inhabit dramatically. These challenged regressive perceptions of the nature of 'Scotland', and Scottish history and, so, what Scottish communities and their identity might be. Versions of ideological language moved away from embodying the retrospective and retrogressive in the way – perhaps unfairly – 1970s playwrights saw their predecessors like McLellan and Reid doing and towards embodying radical, including feminist and gay, perspectives. Thus, versions of community identity expressed on the Scottish stage proliferated and changed. In the end, though, the struggle for collective community identity builds on past imaginations even as it challenges and redefines them.

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Notes.

<sup>1</sup> Email, 14 August 2016. I am indebted to Professor Corbett for his constructive comments on this article in draft.

<sup>2</sup> I am also indebted to Dr John Kirk whose helpful comments have fruitfully contributed to the development of this article, particularly with regard to the content of this and other paragraphs. I am further grateful to Dr Trish Reid for her insightful feedback on an early draft of this article.