

**The Language of Resistance and the Power of the Female Voice in Sue Glover's *Bondagers*  
(1991)**

Gioia Angeletti, University of Parma

***Introduction***

In a hundred years – more –  
We'll be ghosts in the fields,  
But we'll cry out in vain,  
For there'll be no one there.  
Fields without folk.  
Machines without horses.  
A whole week's harvest  
All done in one night,  
By the light of great lamps...  
Not the light of the moon,  
They won't wait for the moon ... no need for the moon... (Glover 2005: 72)

At the end of Sue Glover's play *Bondagers*, Sara, one of the protagonists, delivers this lyrical speech, whose message reveals the peculiar politics of language endorsed by the author in this *pièce*, as well as in her dramatic *opera omnia* – that is, her belief in theatre as a discursive space investigating societal transformations and their impact on individuals.

Sara is one of the 'bondagers', or 'women workers of the great Border farms in the last century' (Glover 2005: 2), whom ploughmen had to bring along with them to work as a condition for their own hiring in the farm. In the quoted speech, Sara, echoing her daughter Tottie's words in Scene Two – 'We [farm owners] don't need folk. We don't need horses./ Machines without horses' (Glover 2005: 45) – refers to the radical change that the agrarian system was undergoing in the 1860s under the impact of mechanisation, the consequent risk of unemployment and the gradual disappearing of all the customs practiced by the rural community formed by the bondagers. This sense of loss, perceived as a downside of modernity and progress, is conveyed by the antithesis between 'we' (the bondagers, the traditional rural world) and 'they' (the new generations and mechanised farming methods) – a gap between present and future that also implies profound changes in individual and national identities. In fact, most of Glover's plays, as Ksenija Horvat has observed, deal with 'the sense of community and the effects that economic and political relationships have on the minds of individuals and entire nations' (Horvat 2005a: 86).

*Bondagers* originally premièred at Glasgow's Tramway in 1991.<sup>1</sup> Sara's speech, recited at that time, after a decade in which Scottish theatre became increasingly permeable to European and international influences,<sup>2</sup> would seem to express an opposite nostalgic call to look inside Scotland's geo-cultural borders and rehabilitate the local or national values rooted in the old rural world. However, Glover's heterodox preference for non-urban settings and outdoor scenes instead of the closed spaces of kitchen-sink or workplace drama, – as in *The Seal Wife*, *An Island in Largo*, *The Straw Chair* and *Shetland Saga*, among others<sup>3</sup> – must be read as her own political statement about any society's duty to preserve ancestral roots that are part of a community's collective unconscious, in order for that community to confront and handle the inevitable generational changes resulting from economic and political developments.

Modernity is 'liquid', according to Zygmunt Bauman's famous concept, and, consequently, individual identity fluctuates to adapt itself to this unstable condition; without denying this truth, in *Bondagers*, as will be shown, Glover identifies solidarity and the sense of sharing among individuals as forms of resistance against the hazardous tendency to consider human values as always contingent and relative. In other words, if the structures of society are increasingly losing their solidity under the force of technological transformations, at their basis, Glover seems to suggest, some fundamental frameworks should persist that define one's sense of being human.

Glover achieves this purpose through the deployment of two main discursive strategies, which I will examine in the two main sections of the article. The first will show how the individual and choral voices of the characters are imbued with features deriving from Scottish folklore and the oral tradition: like other female playwrights, she makes use of a language that is 'an almost physical celebration of the sound of words' (McDonald 1997: 509). In Glover's case here, the language is marked by a storytelling cadence, as well as ballad rhythms and imagery, thus reviving a past oral culture – in particular that of the farm servants' songs and the bothy ballads – whose embedded values and mythical aura, in the context of disappearing roots and traditions, she still considers politically and morally vital in modern society. Hence her drawing from the Scottish supernatural tradition in a play that, on the whole, in its reconstruction of a specific social reality at a precise historical moment, is indebted to theatrical naturalism.

The second section aims at analysing the ways in which, in *Bondagers*, Glover succeeds in giving full power to the female voice by deliberately silencing that of the male characters, who 'act', as it were, *in absentia*, their influence being palpable only through what the bondagers say about them. Each of the six protagonists – Jenny, Liza, Sara, her daughter Tottie, the ex-bondager Ellen, now married to her former master, and the hind's wife Maggie (a 'hind' is a Scots word for a farm-servant or ploughman) – has a distinguishable voice, yet, at the same time, there are moments in

which their individuality merges into a choral identity that strengthens the overall socio-political thrust of the play.

In fact, language and gender politics are inextricably interlaced in this play. Appropriating Patterson's distinction between 'reflectionist' and 'interventionist' theatrical strategies (Patterson 2003: 15), one can say that *Bondagers* exemplifies the former inasmuch as, thanks to its peculiar language and setting, it holds up the mirror to a perfectly recognisable historical reality, but the authorial choice of discarding male voices expresses the attempt to 'intervene' in the mimetic representation of that reality, in order to foreground the subaltern, silenced or marginalised in official historical records – *in primis*, the voice and role of female farm-workers united all together by their common plight. As has been noticed, like Rona Munro and Lara Jane Bunting, Glover gives 'outlet to the unheard voices, suppressed dreams and hidden communities of women' (Horvat and Bell 2000: 77).

In reconstructing the 1860s agrarian world from a female perspective, Glover shares the feminist rejection of the opposition between the domestic and the public spheres, whereby the former is cut off from political action and thus denied any social impact. In fact, the private milieu formed by the community of bondagers is a *locus* of thriving debates about the woman question, social inequalities and possible reactions to them. Like other contemporary Scottish women playwrights, Glover shows how, in McMillan's words,

feminist thinking is particularly relevant to drama because of its clear recognition that 'the personal is political': that the smallest of intimate or domestic actions carries with it a heavy freight of implications about the balance of power and responsibility in society as a whole (McMillan 1986: 71).

Not only does Glover foreground the political thrust embedded in the female private world of the bondagers, but she somehow enhances this thrust by deploying heteroglossia as a means of avoiding simplistic idealisations or conceptions of a female voice regardless of class and status differentiations. In this context, as it were, the idea of multiplicity in unity – or the heterogeneity of the women's rural community, even entailing internal conflicts – rather than that of a unified social and individual identity, rules.

### **1. *The subversive voice of tradition***

As has been mentioned, the play is set in a Scottish Borders farm in the Victorian period. The whole action revolves around the life of five women and a girl, from the February Hiring Fair to the end of

the agricultural year and the kirn, or harvest home (a festival celebrating the earth's fertility) in Act One and on in Act Two to the eve of the next year's Hiring Fair. In fact, at least until the tragic turning point at the end of Act One, when, during the kirn, Tottie is raped by Kello, and, everything, thereafter seems to be doomed to inexorable downfall, it is not so much the action as the dialogue among the protagonists that makes an impact on both reader and spectator.

The whole dramatic text sounds like a multi-vocal lyrical narrative about the bondagers' everyday toil, memories or tales of the past, and their complex relationships with one another, their master or other men. Their voices alternate, often interlace, to convey the image of a rural world in which the real and surreal, history and myth amalgamate as in a folktale or a ballad – a world with echoes of Allan Ramsay's Arcadian scenes, or of Lewis Grassie Gibbon's glimpses of a golden age before history. However, Glover projects in front of our eyes a darker, dystopian vision in order to warn us against what she has called 'our (sometimes criminal) carelessness' in preserving our roots and respecting, or protecting, our land (Glover 1995: 179).

Like the female slaves in Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter* (2007), Glover's female workers share a 'communal, ritualistic mood' (Horvat 2005a: 83) conveyed by choral speeches whose rhythmic language – in the performance, combined with the dance scenes – bestows a distinctive musical quality to the play. Significant examples occur at the incipit of each of the two Acts, both scenes being marked by a powerfully hypnotic aural and visual language:

**Voices** (*all the cast, cutting in on each other's phrases, some of the phrases can be repeated. Low whispers at first, growing louder*)

The Hiring, the Hiring, the Hiring...

The Hiring, the Hiring, the Hiring Fair...

What a folk/What a crowd/What a carts/What a people/What a noise!

Ye get a' the clash at the Hiring.

Ye get a' the fun at the Fair.

[...]

See the farmers bargain wi the hinds.

See the hinds bargain wi the bondagers (Glover 2005: 5).

Here we can hear and see the confusion of the Fair, and, similarly, in the final two lines, we can perceive the sense of expectation and anxiety felt by the bondagers waiting to be hired. Glover's ability to suggest the characters' emotional complexity through a particular visual imagery is also evident at the beginning of the second Act:

*It is dark, at first we barely see the characters on stage. The different sections of chorus here come fast on top of each other, sections actually overlapping – until Maggie and Sara speak individually, in character.*

[...]

**Voices** (in a spoken round)

When a' the hills are covered in snow

Then it is winter fairly...

[...]

**Voices** (*singly, in turn*)

Cold wind: snow wind

Small thaw: mair snow [...]

The snow wreaths

The feeding storm

The hungry flood

[...]

**Sara** The dread of winter. All summer long, the dread of it. Like a nail in the door that keeps catching your hand. Like a nip in the air in the midst of the harvest (Glover 2005: 42-43).

Not just the spectator but also the reader of this scene can see the misty landscape in which the women workers incessantly toil, standing out like figures in a Millet painting, and expressing a sense of community conveyed by the semiotics of their costumes:

In their large hats and headhankies tied over their chins, they are not individually recognisable. [...] The dialogue, when it comes, is fast, fragmented, overlapping. It comes in spurts, with pauses between. And they never stop working (Glover 2005: 11).

And while endlessly working in the fields, the women sing a shared repertoire of improvised and traditional songs, usually meant to celebrate old fertility rituals as well as to alleviate their fatigue. Sometimes, they pronounce speeches that sound like folk songs or tales, exemplifying what Walter J. Ong defined as 'primary orality' (Ong 1982), a culture, that is, untouched by literacy which, however, is at the root of all forms of verbalisation. Anticipating David Greig's revival of popular border ballads in *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* (2011), Glover retrieves the power and meanings of that purely oral tradition, showing how, despite its immateriality, some residues can and should be still preserved in our time – first of all, a sense of human community and collective experience that has been lost in technological societies which too often, instead, encourage forms

of self-sufficient individualism. Hence, in the bondagers' choral voice there is a call for resistance against socio-cultural changes endangering the vestigial roots of mankind.

Orality in *Bondagers* is expressed through the use of a lyricism which marks all the different genres and forms adopted by the author: both the scenes in verse and the prose dialogues – all characterised by a 'physical' language meant to reproduce the past rural world, the sound, movement and rhythm of the bondagers' work, as well as the atmosphere surrounding them. A significant example is the following onomatopoeic passage reproducing through sound the repetitiveness of their actions:

**Liza** (*or all, taking phrase by phrase, in turn. [...]*) Redd up the stables, much out the byre, plant the tatties, howk the tatties, clamp the tatties. Single the neeps, shaw the neeps, mangle the neeps, cart the neeps. Shear, stook, striddle, stack. Women's work.

**Ellen** Muck. A heap of it – higher than your head. Wider than a house. Every bit of it to be turned over. Aired. Rotted. Women's work.

**Liza** (*forking the dung*)

Shift the sharn, fulzie, muck

Sharn, sharn, fulzie muck

Shift the sharn, fulzie, muck ... etc. (Glover 2005: 29)

In order to convey a sense of shared cultural heritage, Glover also includes folk or literary songs – such as, for example, 'Woo'd and Married an a', 'O the Plooman's so Bonny', 'For the Sake o Somebody', and 'Up in the Mornin', the last two attributed to Burns – , which, in fact, not only '[reflect] characters' emotions' and 'help create mood and atmosphere' (Hodgart 2012: 41-42) but also evoke a past and a rural world whose traditions and values transcend the regional specificity of the play's setting. The situation described also recalls, for instance, the central themes of the northeast Bothy Ballad tradition,<sup>4</sup> or, for that matter, rural traditions or rituals referring to the collective unconscious and archetypes of a given community – in Freudian terms, the 'archaic remnants' of the pagan world, like those celebrated in such festivals as Halloween, the kirk and Hogmanay.

One character in particular is associated with this ancestral heritage and its uncanniness: the young girl Tottie, nicknamed 'Tottie the daftie' by those who do not understand her intimate connection with the land, the community myths and its spirit. Conceived in the corn rings, Tottie personifies the memory and safeguarding of cultural roots, imagination against imminent societal materialism, so that what she suffers – the violation of her innocence and her final ostracism from the community – is an image of the violence and abuse perpetrated against the land and nature,

then and now. Tottie seems to have a kind of 'second sight', since she can look into both the past and the bleak future and foresee the tragic disappearance of the rural community and its values – 'the lang syne rigs' and 'machines without horses' (Glover 2005: 45) – a loss that she projects onto the figure of a ghost she sees on the misty moors, the 'Lang syne ploughman' protagonist of the story she tells Maggie's baby:

**Tottie** [...] I'll tell you a story. I'll tell you about the ghostie. It's true. I was upon the moors [...] And the mist came doon – and roon – and doon. I was feared. [...] and then I heard, very close: 'Shoough...shooooough...shooooough...' – a plough shoughin through the ground, and whiles whanging a stane or twa. [...] After, Jock the herd said: [...] 'Naebody ploughs there, Tottie – the only rigs there are the lang syne rigs. [...] Hundreds of year old. But ye'll no see ony plooman, and ye'll no see ony plough.' Aye. But I heard him though ... (Glover 2005: 15).

In this desolate picture, Tottie even sees herself turned into a ghost. Indeed, at the end of the play, after being unjustly accused of the murder of Kello, she is taken to an asylum. She disappears from the scene like the healing magic roots that her mother mentions when Ellen tells her that she cannot have children and therefore hopes that these plants can also cure her infertility: 'Nobody thought to save any of the roots. Nobody gave it any thought.' (Glover 2005: 58). With Tottie, the poetry of the earth seems to disappear, too, because she had the gift of receiving and interpreting its mysteries through her singing, dancing, and those supernatural stories that her mother recalls at the end of the play, almost in an attempt to keep them alive – 'She would tell me stories', she says to Liza, 'she said they were true. She "saw" them, she said, on the moor, in the mist' (Glover 2005: 72). At the moment in which everything seems lost for her and her fellow bondagers – Tottie, their jobs, the magic roots – by evoking her daughter's words about the consequences of cutting the umbilical cord with the land, the rural community and its traditions – 'We'll be ghosts in the fields [...] Fields without folk' (Glover 2005: 72) – Sara, 'an Earth Mother at one with the land' (Horvat and Bell 2000: 72), reaffirms that bond.

However, the absence of a positive denouement may be interpreted as Glover's own disenchantment with the possibility of preserving and handing down Scotland's oral traditions rooted in the old agricultural world. At the same time, though, as Horvat has pointed out, by deploying Scottish folklore and myths, here and generally in her dramatic works, Glover 'raises her female protagonists to a mythological level where their personal identities become a strong metaphor for national identity' (Horvat 2005b: 147).

The bondagers' peculiar Scots, amalgamating elements of different Scots dialects, English and even Gaelic, plays an important part in transmitting the idea of a national identity which is anchored in a native cultural heritage yet has also been permeable to influences coming from the outside, thus challenging unhealthy protectionist or isolationist attitudes. So, on the one hand, Glover seems to share the playwright Alexander Reid's opinion that a return to Scots in theatre 'is a return to meaning and sincerity', since Scottish people 'can only grow from [their] own roots and [their] roots are not English' (cf. Brown 2013: 154), but, on the other hand, she explicitly admitted that she did not write *Bondagers* in 'authentic' or broad Scots because she intended to address a large audience:

The dialogue here is not authentic 1860-speak. How could it be? No reliable record of the speech of the fields (or the streets, or even of the drawing-rooms) survives. (Letters and diaries can only give clues; people do not talk as they write). The function of the language in *Bondagers* is dramatic: to help the audience believe in the time, the place, and above all, the characters. It is honest: I do not use any Scots that the bondagers might not have used. It is not very broad Scots because I am not writing solely for a Scottish (far less a Border) audience. (Glover 1995: 160).

Glover's linguistic choices achieve a double purpose, which, in fact, goes beyond her desire to reach an international audience. Transcending the regional specificity of the bondagers' world, and deciding against the use of a specific Scottish dialect, she manages both to represent Scotland's multifarious identities and to turn the local reality of the rural Borders in the 1860s into a transcultural allegory of the changes affecting human society as well as of the persistence of injustice and violence within it. In this context, Tottie's central role is confirmed by the fact that she is the character using the most archaic – as well as poetic<sup>5</sup> – Scots; her being violently taken away at the end of the play signifies another kind of violence: that perpetrated against natural and cultural 'roots', either abusing the earth or disrespecting the memory of past ancestors – those ghosts that Tottie sees in the fields.

## **2. Gender matters**

The polysemy of the word 'roots', used in *Bondagers* to refer to the past, national identity, the land's as well as woman's fertility, is also relevant to the other central discursive strategy adopted by Glover in the play: the choice to present the 'herstory'<sup>6</sup> of female bondagers exclusively from their own point of view, retrieving their voices from the documentary sources she consulted and silencing those of both male farm-workers and masters.

However, as mentioned earlier, if men's voices cannot be actually heard and male characters are removed from the stage, their authoritarian presence in the female workers' life and the

constraints of a male-dominated society become audible in the bondagers' speeches and conversations.<sup>7</sup> Except for Liza's brother and Sara's partner who moved to Canada, when men are mentioned in the play, they are generally associated with some form of violence: in particular, the farmhand Kello, who rapes Tottie, and Maister Elliott – Ellen's husband – who is in charge of the 'Inquiry' about Kello's accidental death, caused by his falling from a ladder in the barn, at the moment when Tottie discovers him with another woman. Clearly, the young girl had no intention to hurt him, but she is instead accused of murder. While interrogating Maggie, Maister Elliott forcefully cuts her short to prevent her from telling the truth,<sup>8</sup> so his unuttered questions can be deduced from the woman's interrupted replies – 'Tottie wasn't – Tottie wouldn't – / *Listens to the maister's questions.* / [...] Yes, sir. It was dusk. [...] But they were all down at the inn, the men, so why would Kello –? / *Listens to the maister's questions*' (Glover 2005: 67).

Women rather than men are associated with the land and its 'roots' – albeit in ambivalent ways. As has been noted, the play is 'a vibrant domestic drama of women subject to economic "bondage" but also revelling in female "bonding", the women finding strength and communion even within a context of subjugation' (Scullion 2000: 103). 'Tottie stands for the land', Glover wrote (Glover 2005: 3), like her mother Sara, who would have never left the land to go to Canada with Patie, her partner – 'He wanted – something, adventure, Canada. It was me said no, I wouldn't go. This parish was my calf-ground [...]; the fields, the river, the moor up yonder with the lang syne rigs' (Glover 2005: 22), and again, at the very end of the play, Sara will repeat 'These fields are my calf-ground' (Glover 2005: 72). Moreover, the woman seems to be the wise bearer of the earth's innermost secrets, like the healing herbs whose roots, unfortunately, have not been saved.

However, for the other female workers, 'bondage' to the land mostly means submission to the patriarchal system, exploitation, and gender discrimination in terms of wages and social position. Ironically, it is Ellen, the only woman who managed to escape these injustices by marrying the 'maister', who provides us with an explanation of the system of bondage. Here Ellen clearly distances herself from her husband while sympathising with her former co-workers:

**Ellen** 'Don't be ridiculous, Ellen', says the maister. 'We can't do away with the bondage. I can't employ a man who hasn't a woman to work with him. One pair of horse to every fifty acre, one hind for every pair of horse, one bondager for every hind. That's the way it's done', he says. 'I'm all for progress', he says, but I won't do away with the bondage', he says. 'We need the women. Who else would do the work? ... Women's work, for women's pay (Glover 2005: 28-29).

With the same subtle irony, Glover uses Ellen's infertility and her painful struggle to heal it as an image of the ambivalent link between women and the land, both exploited and abused for material needs. Ellen's sense of her own uselessness due to her lack of 'productivity' is an allusion to the bondagers' enslaving dependence on their work in the fields, which only secures them a role and status in society. In the following dialogue, Ellen shares her frustration with Sara – the healer, the Earth mother – in the hope that she can help her to find the cure for her 'barrenness':

**Ellen** [...] I'm useless in that great house! Dressing up; pouring tea. [...] I'd shift the sharn if it'd help; mangle the neeps, feed the beasts. I watch him at his desk, writing, counting. He doesn't even know I've come into the room. He breaks my heart. I only want it for him. I'm plump, I'm greedy, I'm healthy! Damn it, why can't I swell? [...] There's a herb. It cures a'thing, my mother used to say. [...]

**Sara** *shakes her head very slightly, as she continues knitting or whatever.*

**Ellen** You know about it, don't you? You know where it grows?

**Sara** It cured cuts and wounds. [...]

**Ellen** Barrenness?

**Sara** (*gently*) Nell –

[...]

I'm not sure it would have cured barrenness, Nell – (Glover 2005: 56-57)

Sadly, Ellen's yearning for a child does not derive from a deep desire of motherhood but from a need to be acknowledged as having a creative role in her entrapping household, as if providing him with progeny were the only reason why Mr Elliott married her. Sara will then explain that nobody thought of preserving the roots of those herbs, so, in this sense, the earth is also 'barren' like Ellen's womb – symbolically, an emptiness that may point to the void caused by the gradual disappearance of agrarian society and its traditions under the impact of mechanisation, to those 'Fields without folk./ Machines without horses' that Sara mentions at the end of the play (Glover 2005: 72).

There is, therefore, an intimate connection between the land and all the female protagonists: all are somehow victims of man yet also depend on him in order to be procreative. Moreover, the land is where all the women find a choral identity and a community voice to speak their minds. Ellen herself nostalgically recalls her days as field worker as marked by a special sense of joy and pleasure "I felt like yon Amazon in the Bible. No one could stop me [...] I gloried in the shearing, I'll miss the hairst" (Glover 2005: 30). Conversely, in her 'Big Hoose', despite her improved social status, Ellen feels like a prisoner, as symbolised by her tight dresses – 'It's the stays. Can't bend foward. Can't bend back. I'm tied up every morning – let loose at bedtime' (Glover 2005: 18).

Hence, through the staging of a local woman question in Victorian Scotland, Glover can also confront timeless transnational gender issues and the female subaltern's attempt to oppose societal disparities by means of forms of congregation and collective passive resistance. In Peter Zenziger's words, *Bondagers* stages 'a protest against the exploitation of the female labour force in the mid-nineteenth century agricultural system in the Lowlands, but in this context it also stresses the importance of women of analysing their situation and recognising the power' (Zenzinger 1996: 130).

The female community in *Bondagers* shows how the 'personal' can be 'political'. Taken as a group, it raises a powerful choral voice both in the open fields and within the domestic walls, its members being defiant and united despite the differences among them: 'Us! The lassies!', cries Liza, 'There's as many of us as them! More lassies than men, come harvest!' (Glover 2005: 28.). Now and then, this congregational spirit alternates with the strong individual voices of the bondagers, each standing out with her own idiolect, as well as her own ideas of femininity, gender and sexuality.

Sara and Tottie are similarly associated with folklore, the earth and the past rural world, with a wisdom that seems to be disappearing. In a sense, both embody 'auld lang syne', and a genuine attachment to Scotland's ancestral traditions. They are profoundly fond of each other, not just because they are mother and daughter but also because they are complementary figures: Sara's rationality balances Tottie's emotional side and uncanny behaviour; Sara knows that, in their world, it is necessary to keep one's feet on the ground, while her daughter always appears '*wrapped in her own world*' (Glover 2005: 70) of ghosts, visions and prophetic thoughts.

Another complementary couple is that formed by Liza and Maggie, although, in this case, their clashing voices more often suggest conflict than unity of opposites. Adrienne Scullion regards Liza as the "play's narrator" (Scullion 2000: 103), since her individual voice is the first and the last one to speak in the play, and, moreover, she personifies a spirit of independence that all bondagers, in different ways, reveal. Indeed, Liza is the feminist of the community, expressly protesting against wage disparity between the sexes – 'We don't get much!' (Glover 2005: 28) – and unwilling to comply with patriarchal domestic duties – 'I don't want to spin' (Glover 2005: 28). In addition to this radical spirit, Liza shows a romantic side, which emerges when she sings the traditional song 'Woo'd and married and a' together with her crony Jenny.

Maggie, on the other hand, is *par excellence* the domestic woman, the fertile matriarch sacrificing her life to the family. Indeed, she always appears on stage doing the chores, pragmatic and peremptory in playing the faithful hind's wife and the mother devoted to her offspring, and seemingly unaffected by the lack of romance or fantasy in her rather repetitive life. In fact, however hardened by experience and clearly victimised by a chauvinist husband, she does not hesitate to show her

womanly pride and female solidarity when required, for example in defence of Tottie, when the girl is unjustly accused of having murdered Kello.

Thus, despite the preponderance of the communal voice, the play is marked by heteroglossia, whereby Glover empowers each of her protagonists with a voice of her own and a personal point of view. By recognising the diversity of women's voices and positions, Glover achieves two important aims. On the one hand, she foregrounds the socio-cultural and linguistic diversity of Scotland, thus taking issue with ideologies that regard the nation as a necessarily united and cohesive entity, starting from its language. As Ian Brown argues,

While Scottish culture was attempting to promote the sense of its own autonomous power, Glover's work, with skilful understatement and remarkable directness, sought to represent the ways in which differences within Scottish identity have been constructed and the ways in which they still shape the modern Scottish politico-cultural *communitas* (Brown 2013: 200).

On the other hand, she dissociates herself from simplistic ideas of female/ feminist communities and essentialist gender divisions, while showing the central role played by class as a factor in determining a woman's position in society. Significantly enough, one of the stage directions describes Ellen (the former bondager now married to the master), Maggie (a farm-servant's wife) and the bondager Sara 'not "together", but in their separate areas' (Glover 2005: 20) – in other words, Glover does not seem too keen on mythologising sisterhood as an absolute idea that sees all women, of whatever class or race, united against societal discriminatory behaviours.

Owing to her social climbing, Ellen is perfectly aware of her apartness from the other female characters, so much so that her attitude, and even her language, changes according to whether she mixes with the bondagers or acts out her role as 'maister's' wife. In other words, her past and present selves cannot be integrated, as evinced by the following two speeches:

**Ellen** I love the speed of it all, the fury. Faster, faster, keep up with the bandster; faster, faster, and better your neighbour. I felt like yon Amazon in the Bible. No one could stop me, if Mabon himself had stood before me, I'd have cut him in two with a swipe o my sickle. I gloried in the shearing. I'll miss the hairst. (Glover 2005: 30).

**Ellen** (*polite teatime voice [...] she's talking to the foreigners visiting the show farm of Blackshiels*) Progress? Progress! The key to progress is rotation: Maister Elliott's six-course rotation. Famed throughout the land; throughout Europe. [...] Sixty tons of

farm manure. Twelve hundredweight of artificials. [...] Rotation! Rotation of course applies also to the workforce. On farms of this size we have to be exact. Twenty men and eight women in winter, eighteen extra women and boys in summer. (Glove 2005: 46).

The musical Scots-English of the first passage – characterising in general Ellen’s speeches addressed to her former work associates – is in striking contrast to the formal Standard English of the second one. Ellen embodies liminality between past and present, the ancestral and the modern. Being incapable of harmonising the two sides of her personality, however, and feeling, until the very end, useless and inadequate because of her inability to procreate, she becomes the focus of the author’s scepticism about human progress and perfectibility solely based on material interests. Nevertheless, the fact that, because of her class superiority, Ellen cannot be fully integrated into the women’s group does not mean there is no common ground of values shared among all of them.

In fact, one of the central messages in *Bondagers* is that, despite the hardships involved and the community’s internal conflicts, the strong link between the land and the female workers underlines their shared stoic attempt to stay together until the final debacle, which foreshadows the decline of a whole society and its value system. ‘However women were exploited’, Ian Brown convincingly insists, ‘they had the capacity to cope, to set out to control, to find community’ (Brown 2013: 201). It is this sense of female solidarity that the play eventually endorses and ritualises.

As has been noted, at the end, Sara recalls her daughter’s words about the transformation that agricultural machinery would produce on the rural community and its traditions. Liza’s response to her warning is interestingly, perhaps deliberately, ambiguous. Throughout the play, she stands out as the subversive bondager, reluctant to fulfil typical feminine tasks – ‘Can’t spin. I don’t want to spin’, she firmly asserts earlier on (Glover 2005: 51) – yet, eventually, she asks Sara ‘will you teach me to spin?’ (Glover 2005: 72). It is with this open question that the play ends. Whether Liza’s request suggests, as Jan Macdonald has observed, ‘a capitulation to traditional “female values”’ (MacDonald 1997: 500) or a strengthening of a sense of womanhood and women’s relationships, metonymically represented by a traditional and mythical feminine activity, remains an unresolved question. Owing to the text’s final lack of closure and the uncertainty concerning the bondagers’ situation after leaving the farm, the reader and spectator are held in suspension between nostalgically looking at a past that is gradually fading and cautiously envisioning a future that cannot be known.

## **Conclusion**

Presumably it is not by accident that the play ends with a question mark. Following the cycle of the year, the story almost ends where it started, thus conveying a sense of circularity which contrasts with the elusive meaning of Liza's final words and the general uncertainty concerning the farm-workers' life and lives. Glover expects her audience to confront the issues raised in *Bondagers* but leaves it up to them to draw conclusions.

Her revisiting of a *tranche de vie* of women workers in nineteenth-century Scotland does not simply aim at celebrating the values of that past moment *per se*, nor does she idealise that past as a way of critiquing the present world – within and without Scotland. On the contrary, as this article has attempted to show, the world that *Bondagers* evoke is not a utopia to which one should wish to return, as proved by the love-hate relationship that the protagonists have with the land, and also by the tension they suffer between the desire to preserve their roots and a yearning for new routes, for another life in another place (Canada, where some of their men moved, symbolises this 'elsewhere').

Thus, the historical setting of *Bondagers* acquires a transhistorical meaning by triggering in its audience reflections on timeless themes, such as cultural origins, the relationship between individuals and nature, gender discrimination and the safeguarding of regional or national traditions against the homogenising tendencies of globalisation. Certainly, Glover looks to history for inspiration but *Bondagers* provides us with much more than a historical document. The contemporaneity of this lyrical play is proved by the fact that it continues to resonate with audiences nowadays.

In a review of the 2014 performance at the Royal Lyceum, in Edinburgh, just over a month after the Scottish Independence Referendum, Michael Coveney reminds us that *Bondagers* is 'widely held to be one of the best modern Scottish dramas', and then he poses an apt question: 'How will this non-sentimental nationalist trip down memory lane play in the post-referendum capital city?' (Coveney 2014: 8). In fact, Glover's play was produced eight years before the creation of the devolved Scottish Parliament in 1999, but it is and will remain 'one of Scottish theatre's most popular pieces' (Scullion 2000: 103) because it draws attention to issues of individual and national identity that continue to be centre stage in political and cultural debates about Scotland's role within the UK and its relation to the world. Glover, in other words, adopts a dramaturgy that, on the one hand, focuses on national history and folklore, and, on the other, highlights the transhistorical and transcultural significance of remembering and understanding the past – what is to be preserved but also what should be changed – for the whole of mankind. Indeed, as has been observed, she is one of those playwrights who can tell stories that 'are *both* international and outward-looking *and* essentially and immediately committed to work within and about Scottish society' (Scullion 2001: 388).

With its stylistic panoply, *Bondagers* offers us an example of total theatre that continues to engage our minds and hearts even after reading or listening to its last speech. It teaches us that 'we need to be attuned to our own past and to the natural world' (Hodgart 2012: 50), despite the inexorability of societal changes, and of transformations affecting individual as well as national identities. Through effective discursive strategies – hypnotic rhythms, a storytelling style and the choral female voice – Glover makes us engage with a world whose tensions between bondage and freedom, permanence and change, attachment to roots and yearning for new life directions still resonate within our lives today.

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Notes.

<sup>1</sup> In 1991 *Bondagers* was produced at The Tramway in Glasgow and then at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. Two years later it was performed at the new Traverse Theatre and various places in Canada. In 1995 it was staged in Edinburgh, London, Budapest and again Canada. Since then it been revived on a number of occasions.

<sup>2</sup> Interestingly enough, it was at the Tramway that Peter Brook had his *Mahabharata* (1985) staged in 1988. 1983 saw the foundation of Communicado, one of the Scottish companies with a recognised international outlook, and generally 'a number of Scottish playwrights who had come to prominence in the 1980s – including Liz Lochhead, Iain Heggie and Chris Hannan', as has been noted, '– were important in establishing the foundations on which writers in the 1990s could build with relative freedom and with internationalist and European focus' (Reid 2013: 50-51).

<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, after *Bondagers*, rural settings started to be given more space on stage than before. As Neil Cooper writes, 'Glover's play seemed to open the door on other works that moved beyond the inner-city', such as Alastair Cording's stage adaptation of Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song*, performed in the same year as *Bondagers*, and David Harrower's *Knives in Hens* (1995). See <http://coffeetablenotes.blogspot.it/2014/10/sue-glover-bondagers.html>.

<sup>4</sup> The 'bothy' was the outhouse in which the living-in farm servants slept and cooked. In northeast Scotland many ballads were created by or for farm servants' in the nineteenth century, when pre-capitalist and capitalist farming systems co-existed. The most recurring themes of the songs were, *inter alia*: the relationships between servants and masters; the changes of the socio-economic structure of post-1800 agricultural society; the farm servants' hardships in facing these changes and their consequences; class issues, for instance concerning the illegitimate relationships between a farm servant and the farmer's daughter. Although the northeastern 'bothy' communities were predominantly masculine, as in the Borders, there were also women who worked in the fields by hired labour, although they became rather rare at the end of the nineteenth century. See Munro 1977.

<sup>5</sup> See Lenz 2000.

<sup>6</sup> However unattractive, this term is useful inasmuch as it has the double meaning of 'history of women' and 'stories of women', thus referring to the feminist ideas that, as subalterns, women have often been excluded from official historical records, and that, because of this exclusion, one needs to take into account individual stories (different versions and points of view) of and about women rather than looking for a linear objective narrative of their roles and position in history. For a discussion of these issues, see the pioneering book by Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History. 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (1975).

<sup>7</sup> Also in *The Straw Chair* (1980) Glover represents a community of women who find a dimension of their own during a week-long withdrawal to Boreray, where they spend their time dancing, singing and creating ballads. Yet, when they return home, their men immediately reassert their power and authority, almost suggesting that only through escape from

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reality can women achieve a sense of identity independently from their domestic duties. For a study on female communities see Auerbach 1979, and, specifically on the representation of female communities in Scottish theatre Scullion 1995.

<sup>8</sup> When Liza refuses to accompany Kello to the village feast, Tottie goes instead and the farmhand rapes her. In her innocence, the girl believes that, as established by an old tradition, he simply wants to see if she could conceive before marriage. In fact, she gets a crush on Kello, and, when she sees he is with another woman in the barn, accidentally she causes his death. Maggie tries to explain what happened to Maister Elliott, but she is not allowed to, and, thus, eventually, Tottie is taken away. At the end, the master's lease is not renewed and all the women must look for another farm.