

THE SCOTS LANGUAGE IN DRAMA

by

David Purves

THE SCOTS LANGUAGE IN DRAMA

by David Purves

INTRODUCTION

The Scots language is a valuable, though neglected, dramatic resource which is an important part of the national heritage. In any country which aspires to nationhood, the function of the theatre is to extend awareness at a universal level in the context of the native cultural heritage. A view of human relations has to be presented from the country's own national perspective. In Scotland prior to the union of the Crowns in 1603, plays were certainly written with this end in view.

For a period of nearly 400 years, the Scots have not been sure whether to regard themselves as a nation or not, and a bizarre impression is now sometimes given of a greater Government commitment to the cultures of other countries, than to Scotland's indigenous culture. This attitude is reminiscent of the dismal cargo culture mentality now established in some remote islands in the Pacific, which is associated with the notion that anything deposited on the beach is good, as long as it comes from elsewhere. This paper is concerned with the use in drama of Scots as a language in its own right, as an internally consistent register distinct from English, in which traditional linguistic features have not been ignored by the playwright.

Whether the presence of a Scottish Parliament in the new millennium will rid us of this provincial mentality remains to be seen. However, it will restore to Scotland a national political voice, which will allow the problems discussed in this paper to be addressed.

DRAMA IN MIDDLE SCOTS

In the sixteenth century, Scotland was a kingdom with a long history of independent government. It had its own parliament and a monarchy with a line of succession which could be traced directly to the Celtic King Fergus of Dalriada in the fifth century AD. It had its own laws and national institutions, and two languages: Gaelic and Scots. Throughout the known world, Scotland was regarded as a country and a nation. At this time, nearly everybody in Scotland spoke either Scots or Gaelic.

Scots, which had earlier been known as *Inglis* because of its origins in the Northumbrian brand of Anglo-Saxon spoken in Lothian and the north of England, was now beginning to be identified as the State Language of Scotland. It was spoken by the Court and Parliament, throughout the Lowlands and by many Gaelic speakers near the Highland Line. It had a body of literature of European standing, represented by the works of Robert Henryson (1425-1506?), William Dunbar (1460-1520?) and Gavin Douglas (1475?-1522). Gavin Douglas¹ was one of the first writers to recognise the new national status of Scots. The following words appear in the Prologue to his translation of the Aeneid:

1

*And yit, forsuth, I set my besy pane,
As that I culd, to mak it braid & plane,
Kepand na suidroun bot our awin language,
And speikis as I lerit when I was page.*

At this time, Scots was generally seen as adequate for every purpose of life, and Gaelic, the ancient language of the Kingdom, was not held in high regard in the Lowlands, and had become known as ‘Erse’, the language of Ireland. The Scots language can perhaps be seen as having reached its zenith as a recognised national language about the time of the Reformation in 1560, and although not much is known about the theatre in Scotland at this time, public dramatic performances appear to have been popular throughout this century. The language of drama seems to have been almost exclusively Scots, but few plays written before 1603 have survived. The best-known of these is certainly Sir David Lyndsay’s morality play, *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*.²

Although not, perhaps, a poet in the first rank, Sir David Lyndsay (1486-1555) was regarded as a writer whose work appealed to every class of society. This play was first performed at Linlithgow Palace in 1540, before King James V and his Queen, Marie of Lorraine. One of the subsequent performances (1554) is reputed to have lasted something like nine hours. The play is essentially a piece of social commentary, in which serious popular discontent with malpractices within the Church was given public expression.

In a sense, the play is a plea for reform within the Catholic Church, rather than a call to repudiate the whole structure, lock, stock and barrel. There were two later performances in this century, at Cupar in 1552 and in Edinburgh two years later. The following comment by the Pauper in the play, exemplifies the language used and the grounds for some of the popular discontent which led to the cataclysmic events in the Reformation which was shortly to follow.

Pauper

*Gude man, will ye gif me your Charitie
And I sall declair yow the blak veritie.
My father was ane auld man ane hoir,*
And was of age fourscoir of yeirs and moir;
And Mald, my mother, was fourscoir and fyfteine;
And with my labour I did thame susteine.
Wee had ane Meir, that caryit salt an coill;
And everie ilk yeir scho brocht us hame ane foill.
We had thrie ky, that was baith fat and fair –
Nane tydier into the toun of Air.
My fader was sa waik of blude and bane,
That he deit, within ane day or two;
And thair began my povertie and wo.
Our gude gray Meir was bairtand on the field;
And our Lands laird tuik hir for his hyreild.**

*The Vickar tuik the best Cow be the heid,
Incontinent, when my father was deid;
And whan the Vickar hard tel how that my mother
Was deid, fra hand he tuke ti him ane uther.
Than Meg, my wyfe, did murne, both evin & morrow,
Til at the last, scho deit for verie sorrow.
And whan the Vickar hard tel my wyfe was deid,
The thrid cow he cleikit be the heid.
Thair umest clayis, that was of raploch gray,
The Vickar gart his Clark, bear them away.
Whan all was gaine, I nicht mak na debeat,
Bot, with my bairns, past for till beg my meat.
Now have I tauld you the blak veritie,
How I am brocht into this miserie.*

**hoir, white-headed; bairns, grazing; hyreild, due; umaist, outer;
raploch, coarse wool*

There are already signs of anglicisation of Scots in this text and about this time, the process of evolution of Scots into a language distinct from English was arrested by the introduction of an English translation of the bible by the reformers from Geneva. The written form of the Scots language was sufficiently close to Elizabethan English for this translation to be understood in Lowland Scotland, and it became universally used. No satisfactory published version of the bible directly into Scots was available at this time. Thus, at a time when Scotland was still politically independent of England, the Scottish people, acquired the impression that since the word of God was in English, God must be some kind of Englishman – a dangerous misconception. There are certainly very few examples in Scottish writing where God is represented as a Scot. One is found in the joke where the sufferers in the torment of Hell hold up their hands and plead: “But Lord, wou didna ken, wou didna ken!” only to receive the response from God, in his Infinite Mercy: “Weill, ye ken nou!”

The existence of *Philotus*, Scotland’s only extant Scots language Renaissance drama, is evidence of the survival of a Scottish dramatic tradition in the second half of the 16th century. This play was written by an unknown author between the 1560s and 1600 and it has been suggested that Alexander Montgomery might have been the author. The play was published in Edinburgh in 1603. It contains elements of high farce and morality plays, and has antecedents in Italian Renaissance comedy, particularly that of *Gl’ Ingannati*.

The plot is largely concerned with the folly of a wealthy octogenarian (Philotus), who lusts after a 14-year old girl, and this provides an amusing spectacle in itself. The language is essentially the same as that of the Court poets writing during the reign of James VI: Alexander Scott (1525-84), Alexander Montgomerie (1545-1611) and Mark Alexander Boyd (1563-1601).

Immediately before the end of the play, when Philotus takes stock of his *undeceptioun*, we are given a rendering of the *Sang of the Fower Lufearis*. The last stanza is as follows:

*Let us thairfor, sen evin as we wald wisse,
Reciprocklie, with leill and mutual lufe,
As fleitand in the fludes of joy and bliss
With solace sing and sorrowes all remufe:
Let us the fructes of present plesour prufe,
In recompence of all; our former pane
And miserie, quhairin we did remane!*

Although little is known about the theatre in Scotland at this time, dramatic performances appear to have been popular until the end of the century.

The reign of Jame VI of Scotland prior to his accession to the English throne in 1603, is dramatised in parody in Robert McLellan's play, *Jamie the Saxt*³, written in 1937. James had a difficult time as King of Scots. He was very much at the mercy of lawless warring factions and his Royal authority was always fragile. It is known that he looked forward to ascending the English throne on the death of Elizabeth Tudor, and his eager anticipation is reflected in the following passage at the end of this play.

THE KING: To think hou the twa puir countries hae focht an struggled. To think o the bluid they hae shed atween them, the touns they hae blackent wi fire, the bonnie green howes they hae laid waste. And then tae think, as ae day it sall come to pass, that I, Jamie Stewart, will ride to London, and the twa countries sall become ane.

MAITLAND: (*Coming out of his trance and reaching for the bottle*)
Ay, yer Grace, it's a solemn thocht! But the auld bitch isna deid yet!

He places the bottle before the KING. The KING fills his glass.

THE KING: (*Raising his glass high*) Jock, here's to the day.
May the mowdies* sune tickle her taes!

MISTRESS EDWARD appears at the door of the dining room.

MRS E: (*With a deep curtsey*) Yer Grace, the supper's ready.

The KING and MAITLAND eye each other and drink the toast.

**mowdies*, moles

CURTAIN

DEGRADATION OF SCOTS AFTER THE UNION OF THE CROWNS

When James VI blithely took his Court with him to London, the market for Courtly poets writing in Scots disappeared. The period when Scots was internationally seen as the language of an independent kingdom came to an abrupt end. Within Scotland, the language continued to be used in public life and in the Scots Parliament, the Law Courts and in local Councils. However, Scots lost both the prestige of being associated with the Court and its principal national focus. A tendency developed among those seeking preferment at Court, to regard Scots as an inferior or corrupt form of English. This caused a serious problem of identity for the people of Scotland, who were suddenly deracinated by this political development. Most of them had never heard English people speak, yet this was the model they were supposed to emulate. Scots, however, survived within the oral ballad tradition and continued to evolve in its spoken dialect form, particularly in rural areas, although its further development as a literary language, or as a medium of communication for 'serious' purposes, was impaired.

During the seventeenth century, English became established as the language of Kirk and State, and Scots became more associated with barn and byre, and flesh and feeling. In education, Scots came to be regarded as a rustic dialect of English, or a corrupt version of it requiring correction. Following the Treaty of Union in 1707, in which Scotland lost her own Parliament, the feeling of alienation and loss of identity which had followed the Union of the Crowns was greatly exacerbated. This event was very unpopular with the people⁴ and was greeted in the streets of the Scottish burghs with serious rioting. Many people shared the view, later expressed by Robert Burns, that they had been bought and sold for English gold and betrayed by a parcel of rogues. When the Scotch MPs took their seats in the House of Commons, they were derisively laughed at for what was seen as their absurd speech.

The Scottish provincial cringe was born. In general, the people still saw themselves as Scots, but they now found that they were expected to see themselves as Britons, a word associated with re-Roman Cymric Celts. South of the Border, this problem did not arise. The English rightly saw that there was no significant difference between a British and an English identity.

In the political climate in Edinburgh in the years after 1707, Allan Ramsay (1684-1758) initiated a literary revival which had important long-term consequences. He helped to found a group called the Easy Club, which provided an easy atmosphere in which young men with nationalist sympathies might compose and criticise poetry written in Scots. In his day, Ramsay was an important figure. He gave encouragement to the arts of poetry, drama, painting and song. In 1725, his pastoral play in Scots, the *Gentle Shepherd*, appeared. The opening lines of his play provide an example of the thin *shilpit* kind of Scots verse which was being written at this time.

THE GENTLE SHEPHERD

Patie The Gentle Shepherd in love with Peggy

Roger A rich young shepherd in love with Jenny

PATIE: *This sunny morning, Roger, cheers my blood,
And puts all nature in a jovial mood.
How heartsome 'tis to see the rising plants?
To hear the birds chirm o'er their pleasing rants?
How halesome 'tis to snuff the cauler air,
And all the sweets it bears when void of care?
What ails thee, Roger, then? What gars thee grane?
Tell me the cause of thy ill-seasoned pain.*

ROGER: *I'm born, O Patie! To a thrawart fate;
I'm born to strive with hardships sad and great.
etc. etc.*

Little had been written in Scots for over a hundred years, and there is an enormous difference between this language and the Middle Scots of the medieval Makkar. This is no longer a language in its own right, suitable for every purpose of life, but a kind of Scotticised English, shackled by a format of rhyming couplets and iambic pentameters. Real shepherds in Scotland had a hard life in Ramsay's day and lovesick romantic shepherds were probably thin on the ground. However, a romantic image of pastoral life was fashionable in western Europe at this time.

Ramsay went on to open a theatre in Carrubbers Close in 1736. This was a courageous move, but his theatre had a short life. One of the consequences of the Act of Union was the application of the Licensing Act of 1737 to Scotland. This forbade the performance of plays for financial gain outside London! At this time, the Kirk still retained its traditional disapproval of such frivolities as public performances of plays. There was a possibility that such performances might have an undesirable influence on public opinion. According to Donald Campbell⁵, the fact that the script of the Gentle Shepherd was in a kind of Scots, was an important factor leading to the closure of the theatre. Ramsay's aim to found a theatre in which 'native virtues join the arts to please' did not fit in with the views of the Edinburgh establishment. The Edinburgh Presbytery therefore made use of the Licensing Act to close Ramsay's theatre.

Allan Ramsay has to be given credit for demonstrating that at a time when the Scots Language had been politically discredited, it could still be effectively used as a medium of artistic expression. Unfortunately, the Scots he employed had a parochial, rather than a national image. In Ramsay's time, Scots was beginning to be regarded

in influential quarters as a rustic dialect of English, rather than a national form of speech, which had been derived from a remote common ancestor, so Ramsay employed a system of spelling Scots which reflected this deferential attitude of mind. In some respects, the rather loose system of spelling used by the Makkars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was superior phonetically to the practices of later writers in Scots, who had come to terms with a situation where Scots had been socially downgraded for political and economic reasons.

But instead of basing his spellings on the native, out-of-date practices of the Makkars, Ramsay turned to English and embarked on large-scale anglicisation of Scots spellings⁶. He was responsible for introducing apostrophes into Scots words with English cognates (for example, *he'rt*, for *hert*, *o'er* for *ower*, *wi'* for *wi*, giving the impression that these words were careless versions of their English counterparts. It has taken 200 years for writers of Scots to agree to get rid of Ramsay's unnecessary apostrophes. He also caused confusion by spelling a number of Scots words as if they were actually English words. For example, *breist* is spelt *breast* and *heid* is spelled *head*, and these words are represented as rhyming with *beast* and *deed*, respectively. Ramsay did serious long-term damage to Scots orthography.

THE AGE OF ELEGANCE AND GENTILITY

About two hundred years later, in his play, *The Flouers o Edinburgh*, (staged in 1948), Robert McLellan highlights some of the difficulties Scots encountered in the 18th century in trying to come to terms with a situation in which their natural speech was no longer regarded as polite or acceptable in influential circles. In Act I, Charles Gilchrist, the newly anglicised son of Lord Stanebyres, informs the Reverend Dr Dowie, the author of an extended poem, 'The Tomb', that his rhymes are faulty:

Charles: (Reading from The Tomb) Here we are, I think, Yes. You are sitting among the skulls, Doctor, addressing Death. You say:
Thy boney hand lies chill upon my breast.
Now add my carcass to thy loathsome feast.

Dowie: Breist, no breast.

Charles: I know it has to read breast before it rhymes, but an Englishman says breast.

Dowie: B-r-e-a-s-t?

Charles: Yes, Doctor, have you ever been to England?

Dowie: Na.

Charles: I thought so. English as a spoken language is quite foreign to you.

Dowie: But I read naething else.

Charles: I said as a spoken language. You cannot possibly know how English words should sound. You have no right to write English poetry.

Dowie: Nae richt! Dae they say that in London?

Charles: A considerable number.

Dowie: Dear me.

Stanebyres: Leave the man alane, Chairlie. I wadna lat him fash me, Doctor, what daes it maitter what a when Englishmen say about yer wark, whan it's weill thocht o here?

In 1752, a group of prominent Edinburgh Whigs under the leadership of Lord Elibank invited John Lee of Drury Lane in London to come to Edinburgh and establish a company in the Canongate Theatre, which had been built in 1746⁷. The object of this exercise was to assist Scottish Society to become 'British' by adjusting its speech and manners to that of the capital of Great Britain. The presence of a company of London actors in Edinburgh would enable the Edinburgh gentry to imitate their refined speech and provide a model for the highest English standard.

In a sense, this venture was successful from the standpoint of the Elibank Group. In 1756, the first performance of John Home's *Douglas* was given in the Canongate Theatre. This play was in a stilted English thought to conform to the required English standard.

The following passage gives an impression of the character of the play:

Norval: (The Hero)

*Returning home in triumph, I disdained
The shepherd's slothful life and having heard
That our good king had summoned his bold peers
To lead our warriors on the Carron side,
I left my father's house, and took with me
A chosen servant to conduct my steps: --
Yon trembling coward that forsook his master.
Journeying with this intent, I passed these towers,
And heaven-directed, came this day to do
The happy deed that gilds my humble name.*

At the end of this declamation, an exhilarated voice rang out from the audience and exclaimed: "Whaur's yeir Wullie Shakespeare nou?" This was, of course, the age of the powdered wig and pretentious gentility. In such a climate of opinion, there was hardly a place for serious plays in Scots. Home's *Douglas* was acclaimed, and it provided a model for some playwrights in Scotland for the rest of the century.

Nevertheless, there is some evidence of a public demand for plays in Scots, a patriotic backlash, as it were. When the Canongate was leased from the management for a production of *The Gentle Shepherd* in 1766, the performances were an outstanding success⁷.

The first half of the nineteenth century saw the establishment of a theatre dedicated to a distinctively Scottish audience⁸. A building for the Theatre Royal had been included in the plan for Edinburgh's New Town at the end of the previous century, and in 1815, William Murray, an actor with the Theatre, was appointed manager. Murray had a long and successful career at the Theatre Royal in Edinburgh, both as a manager and playwright⁷. (Campbell 1992).

Sir Walter Scott was a sponsor of the Theatre Royal and an important aspect of Murray's achievement was the production of what became known as the Waverley dramas: adaptations for the stage of Scott's Waverley novels. *Guy Mannering*, adapted by Daniel Terry, was produced in 1816, and this was followed by *Rob Roy* in 1819. The public flocked to see *Rob Roy*. It was a sensational dramatic success and of course, an economic success. Murray went on to produce twenty other adaptations of Waverley Novels, including *The Heart of Midlothian*, which was almost as popular as *Rob Roy*.

The Waverley dramas were, of course, complemented by the success of the Waverley novels. The action was often set in Scotland, and the plots provided romantic links with Scotland's history which were congenial to natives of the country, which was now supposed to have been renamed 'North Britain.' The characterisation was ready-made in the novels and the storylines were leavened by superb dialogue in an attenuated Scots, familiar to Scottish actors. Scott, although himself to some extent deracinated, was fascinated by the Scots language. He lived and moved among natural speakers and he went to great pains to ensure that the language employed by his characters was authentic.

Murray was also a playwright writing in Scots in his own right, and was the author of a number of productions at the Theatre Royal. His most successful play, *Mary Stuart*, was first performed in 1825 and revived by many companies throughout the century. Murray retired in 1851, after having created what was, in a sense, Scotland's first National Theatre.

However, after this time, the construction of the railway network had the effect of preventing the development of a distinctively Scottish Theatre. Successful actors found it easy to travel south, and London-based actor managers found they were able to move their companies to every part of the British Isles. Productions in Scotland became seen as taking place in the 'provinces', conceived as a number of peripheral regions where London plays might be usefully tested.

7

8

7

The process of downgrading the Scots Language continued throughout the nineteenth century, and Scots became identified by writers in Scotland as a parochial form of speech, at one and the same time, associated with the parish pump (*pant-wal*) and the deepest feelings of those who had been exposed to it in childhood. Novelists, such as John Galt and Sir Walter Scott had set the fashion for writing narrative in English and lacing the story with slightly anglicised dialogue in Scots. This fashion was continued by writers at the end of the century, such as Robert Louis Stevenson and John Buchan.

The expressive potential of dialogue in Scots was also successfully exploited by the Kailyaird novelists, whose writing now tends to be seen as the Victorian equivalent of contemporary *schmaltz*. These writers set their scenes with a 'heartfelt prayer' in the shadow of the Kirk (and *Kirkyaird*) in Victorian Scotland. The novel, *Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush* ran to eight editions, and about 50,000 copies were sold.

The important distinction between sentiment and sentimentality had become blurred or lost in much writing in Scots. In general, in the nineteenth century, the Scots language was described as having failed to sustain itself as a medium for reflecting on social change⁹ (Daiches. 1980). This is hardly surprising, in view of the fact that nobody had been taught to write in Scots and it had been represented in Scottish education for many generations, as a corrupt, or incorrect, kind of English.

Towards the end of the century, penny gaffs (shows where the admission charge was one penny) became a popular form of entertainment among the poorer degrees of society both in Edinburgh and Glasgow. These shows usually involved Victorian melodrama in colloquial Scots, ready-made monologue, sing-songs and often some disorder. This kind of entertainment eventually developed commercially into variety theatre in which no plays were performed. The popularity of this kind of program mitigated against the writing and production of serious plays in Scots and many theatres disbanded their companies, to act as receiving houses for shows imported from London⁸ (Campbell, 1992).

This period also saw the development of the typical Scottish pantomime at the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh. Pantomime generally involved reworking of European fairy tales, but also included some productions which drew on Scottish literature and legend¹⁰ (Bell, 1998).

This theatre is still with us. Scottish pantomimes in both Edinburgh and Glasgow subsequently became world-famous for their humor and the splendor of the productions. In a sense, the pantomimes accurately reflected the public consciousness, in that Scots was selectively used in the speech of ridiculous stock characters in absurd costumes, such as Buttons and the Ugly Sisters in Cinderella. The serious characters, presented to be admired, such as Cinderella herself, Dandini and the Prince, usually spoke with highly affected stage English accents. Nobody asked where this setting was supposed to be located, and why it was that Cinderella spoke a different tongue from her sisters. Such questions might have undermined the necessary suspension of disbelief.

9

10

Pantomime represented a significant symbolic landscape in the Scottish psyche. It demonstrated the survival of colloquial Scots well into the 20th century, as a significant feature of the national life. This is evident in the following scene.

At the pantomime. A husband, wife and little boy are seated in the front stalls. The stage is suddenly dramatically illuminated with red light. A figure in a white tutu prances on to the stage and brandishes a wand..

MOTHER: Oh juist look at aw the rid lichts cummin on! Thare the coamic! Whit a funny face the coamic haes!

FATHER: *(in deep voice)* That's no the coamic! That's the Guid Fairie!

BOY: Ah dinnae see nae ferlie, Maw! Ah dinnae see naething.. Ah dinnae see nae ferlie! It's that wyfe's big hat in front.

The capacity of Scottish audiences to laugh without reflection at the kind of parody of their own lives represented to them in traditional pantomime, is a psychologically interesting manifestation of the Scottish cringe. It is, of course, always better to laugh that we might not cry.