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**LIZ LOCHEAD AND THE FAIRIES:
CONTEXT AND INFLUENCE IN *GRIMM SISTERS*
AND *DREAMING FRANKENSTEIN***

William Donaldson

When Liz Lochhead burst upon the firmament of Scottish letters there was nothing like her in the tradition. Those brought up on Helen Cruickshank, Violet Jacob or Rachael Annand would have been utterly unprepared for what they found in the best work of Lochhead's early period, culminating in *Grimm Sisters* (1981) and *Dreaming Frankenstein and Collected Poems* (1984).¹ It prompts speculation about what influences may have been at work here. Lochhead's affection for American poetry is well documented; she has spoken enthusiastically of the influence of poets like William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley and Robert Lowell, but her style is not at all like theirs.²

There was an alternative tradition, however, with which Lochhead's work seems to form a more perfect arc: a long-overshadowed line of American feminist poets whose work had been gathering momentum since the 1920s and was documented, with revelatory power, in Florence Howe and Ellen Bass's epoch-making anthology *No More Masks!* (1973), one of the great events on the American cultural scene during the nineteen seventies, a source of pleasure and strength to literary women and to non-academic feminists alike.³ The book's impact, and the second-wave

¹ Liz Lochhead, *The Grimm Sisters* (London: Next Editions in association with Faber and Faber, 1981); *Dreaming Frankenstein & Collected Poems, 1967-1984* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1984; new ed. Edinburgh: Polygon, 2003). Unless otherwise indicated, all references below are to the 2003 collected volume (as *DFCP*). I wish to thank Professor Ruth Perry of MIT for much information about American feminist poetry in the 20th century. .

² Emily B. Todd, "Liz Lochhead Interviewed by Emily B. Todd," *Verse*, 8.3/9.1 (1992): 83-95.

³ Florence Howe and Ellen Bass, eds., *No More Masks! An Anthology of Poems by Women* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973); on the book's impact, see Adrian Oktenberg, "Smashing the Mold Straight Off: Feminist Poetry Now," *Kenyon Review*, 16.3 (Summer 1994): 162-7 (accessed via *Literature Online*, 23

feminist revival it voiced, was still at its height during Lochhead's long and fruitful trip to Canada and the United States in 1978, on a Scottish Arts Council Exchange Scholarship. Crucially, Lochhead's visit coincided with intensive work on her volume *Grimm Sisters*, the crowning achievement of her early period—and perhaps of her career.⁴

There is much in 20th century American feminist poetry that finds an answering echo in Lochhead's work, from minor verbal details to major thematic concerns, including the inventive re-use of myths and fairy-tales we see in *Grimm Sisters*, which she describes as “my business of putting new twists to old stories.”⁵ Refashioning classical stories was a recurring preoccupation of American women poets through much of the twentieth century, part of a sustained effort to recreate the inherited mythology and disrupt the way it had been deployed to support the patriarchal order.

A typical example is Edna St. Vincent Millay's “An Ancient Gesture,” written in 1949, which invokes Homeric times with acerbic irony to contrast the falsity of Odysseus's tears, assumed purely for rhetorical effect, with those, entirely genuine, of his long-forsaken wife:

I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:
 Penelope did this too.
 And more than once: you can't keep weaving all day
 And undoing it all through the night;
 Your arms get tired, and the back of your neck gets tight;
 And along towards morning, when you think it will never be light,
 And your husband has been gone, and you don't know where, for years,
 Suddenly you burst into tears;
 There is simply nothing else to do.

And I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron:

April 2022); and Emily Sernaker, “No More Masks: Celebrating a Landmark Anthology of Women's Poetry 45 Years Later,” *MS Magazine* (May 15, 2018): https://msmagazine.com/2018/05/15/_no-masks-celebrating-landmark-anthology-womens-poetry-45-years-later/. Lochhead's links with American feminist writers have received passing notice in Sara Soncini, “Liz Lochhead's Revisionist Mythmaking,” in Valentina Poggi and Margaret Rose, eds., *A Theatre that Matters: Twentieth-Century Scottish Drama and Theatre* (Milano: Edizioni Unicopli, 2000), 57-72; and Tudor Balinisteanu, “Tangled up in Blue: Liz Lochhead's Grimm Sisters Tales,” *Marvels & Tales: Journal of Fairy-Tale Studies*, 23.2 (2009): 325-52 (accessed 23 April 2022).

⁴ <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poet/liz-lochhead/> (accessed 23 April 2022). Lochhead seems to have made at least one previous visit to the United States, during the early 1970s: see, for example, the poem “Letter From New England from a small town, Massachusetts,” from her first book *Memo for Spring* (Edinburgh: Reprographia, 1972): in *DFCP*, 142-45.

⁵ “In The Cutting Room,” *DFCP*, 34-5.

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This is an ancient gesture, authentic, antique,
 In the very best tradition, classic, Greek;
 Ulysses did this too.
 But only as a gesture,—a gesture which implied
 To the assembled throng that he was much too moved to speak.
 He learned it from Penelope...
 Penelope, who really cried.⁶

Women's constancy and sincerity are strongly contrasted with the dissimulation and waywardness of men. At the same time there is powerful stress on mundane, everyday things undercutting the epic ethos: piercing through to the reality that—for women—lies behind the heroic facade. We note the ostentatious refusal of archaic or "elevated" language to deal with grand historic themes. The blurring of then and now, of the ancient and the completely contemporary, visible frequently in the American sources, is a distinctive feature also of Liz Lochhead's poetry.⁷

We find here, too, the early assertion of the hallmark statement that "the personal is political," a keynote of a good deal of feminist poetry which also seems to mark Liz Lochhead's—especially later—work. The poet Muriel Rukeyser writes:

What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?
 The world would split open.⁸

Or as Adrienne Rich put it:

Find yourself and you find the world.⁹

The main point of the move to re-interpret a previously settled past was to drive home the reality of long-overshadowed female need and female power. In Louise Bogan's "Medusa", for instance, written in 1923, the gaze of the Gorgon not only completely petrifies the male hero who has come to kill her, leaving him paralyzed and impotent, but deep-freezes most of the surrounding neighborhood as well:

When the bare eyes were before me
 And the hissing hair,
 Held up at a window, seen through a door.
 The stiff bald eyes, the serpents on the forehead
 Formed in the air.

This is a dead scene forever now.
 Nothing will ever stir.

⁶ *No More Masks!*, 68.

⁷ See, for example "The Ariadne Version," *DFCP*, 96-8.

⁸ *No More Masks!*, 103.

⁹ *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law Poems 1954-1962* (New York: Norton, 1967, first published 1956), 33.

The end will never brighten it more than this,
Nor the rain blur. [...]

And I shall stand here like a shadow
Under the great balanced day,
My eyes on the yellow dust, that was lifting in the wind,
And does not drift away.¹⁰

In another characteristic move, Mona Van Duyn invokes ancient pre-Classical sources in her “Leda Reconsidered” (1962) to present a very different version of the story. Like many other feminist writers, including, Liz Lochhead, Van Duyn draws her inspiration from Robert Graves’s books *The White Goddess* (1948) and *The Greek Myths* (1955). Graves was of seminal importance to second-wave feminist writers. His works contain a great deal of ancient folklore, centering on the Moon goddess and the matrilineal early societies in which she was worshipped, with the idea that power and property, status and identity formerly flowed through female lines of descent; the corollary was, of course, that women had gradually fallen from an overall position of power and authority to their present marginalized position. In Graves’s text, Leda is herself a shape-shifter, and the story of how she pursues and eventually destroys her violator forms the climax of an ancient seasonal fertility drama.¹¹ In Mona Van Duyn’s poem she reflects on her lover’s many changes and wonders how he will cope with hers:

And now, how much would she try
to see, to take,
of what was not hers, of what
was not going to be offered?
There was that old story
of matching him change for change,
pursuing, and at the solstice
devouring him.¹²

It seems a short step from “matching him change for change” to one of the most famous Lochhead poems, the memorable final lines of “Tam Lin’s Lady” (*DFCP*, 81-4), where the protagonist rescues her lover from fairyland by clinging to him through a series of hideous transformations, and the poet enquires:

tell me?
what about you?

¹⁰ *No More Masks!*, 69.

¹¹ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths The Complete and Definitive Edition* (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 2011), 126, 206-8.

¹² *No More Masks!*, 129-32.

How do you think Tam Lin will take
all the changes you go through?

Then there's the doyenne of American feminist poets, Adrienne Rich herself. In an interview in 1992, Liz Lochhead discussed encountering Rich's poetry after being urged to read her by Margaret Atwood, whom she met on her Canadian trip:

Once I read her I found what she had to say fantastically useful and true for being an accurate statement of many things that I had subconsciously been feeling and working on for quite a long time. I now like Adrienne Rich's poetry very much. I tend to prefer the poetry before she wrote the wonderful prose in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*. When I read that, I thought, 'Ah yes', but it was quite later on. When I was in Canada, I remember Margaret Atwood saying, 'You've never heard of Adrienne Rich?'; it was just in conversation, and she was amazed.

ET: When was this?

LL: Oh, it can't be so long ago. It was maybe about '78 or '79, so yes I did read her in the 1980's, but I prefer Rich's poetry when she was working through this stuff—you know things like 'Diving into the Wreck' which are just, you know, they are wonderful.¹³

There are obvious dissimilarities between Adrienne Rich and Liz Lochhead as poets, ranging from their very different treatment of politics to large disparities in tone. Yet it is striking to hear Rich declare, in yet another treatment of the theme of Leda and the swan, that

A thinking woman sleeps with monsters.¹⁴

This exactly encapsulates the central metaphor in one of Lochhead's best-known poems, the title piece of her landmark collection *Dreaming Frankenstein* (1984, *DSCP*, 11-12), based on a dream reported by Mary Shelley. The background is well known: in the summer of 1816, Byron and the Shelleys were staying together in a villa in Switzerland, and one evening Byron suggested as an amusement that each should retire to his room and write a ghost story; in the morning they would compare results and see whose was best. Shelley produced nothing; Byron, a fragmentary tale that his physician/companion John Polidori later worked up into *The Vampyre*—one of the earliest fully-developed vampire stories in English; while Mary Shelley in a "waking dream" had conceived her famous novel *Frankenstein*:

¹³ "Liz Lochhead Interviewed by Emily B. Todd", *Verse*, 1992, 83-95 (88).

¹⁴ *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, 22.

She said she
 woke up with him in
 her head, in her bed.
 Her mother-tongue clung to her mouth's roof
 in terror, dumbing her, and he came with a name
 that was none of her making (*DFCP*, 11).

There are further precedents for Liz Lochhead's *Grimm Sisters* collection in recent American tradition. A number of women poets used fairy tale material as part of the project to re-purpose the masculinist narrative. The anthology *No More Masks!* contains pieces like Denise Levertov's "An Embroidery," based on Snow White and Rose Red and a friendly bear who is really a prince in disguise; or Anne Halley's "A Pride of Ladies," which shows a bunch of fairy tale princesses waiting, perfect, beautiful, for their most imperfect princes to arrive; or Kathleen Spivak's "Mythmaking," on a world where one must grow up to realize that there are no happy endings, and that beauty is not its own reward.¹⁵

This trend reached its peak in Anne Sexton's *Transformations*, a sequence of fairy-tale parodies published in 1971.¹⁶ For many, especially younger readers, on both sides of the Atlantic, the spectacular Anne Sexton with her model-girl good looks, prize-winning books, sell-out public readings, and daring "confessional" style was very much the public face of Anglo-American poetry in the later Sixties and early Seventies. Sexton's seventeen fairy story versions were based on originals from the Brothers Grimm but were placed within a darkly allusive personal frame and spiced with references to contemporary popular culture.

At first sight, Sexton's versions offer numerous points of comparison with the poems of Liz Lochhead. Sexton wrote "I take the fairy tale and transform it into a poem of my own, following the story line, exceeding the story line and adding my own pizzazz. They are very wry and cruel and sadistic and funny."¹⁷ The Sexton versions all develop along similar basic lines: a personal "framing" section introduces the chosen tale which is then narrated in briskly conventional summary punctuated by hip asides. The tone is dark, with veiled references to incest and abuse and marked by brittle, often bitter humour. In a typical example, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs," we see Snow White hold court, having won the game and married the prince,

rolling her china-blue doll eyes open and shut

¹⁵ *No More Masks!*, 156-7, 181, 264-5.

¹⁶ Anne Sexton, *Transformations* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971; London: Oxford University Press, 1972).

¹⁷ Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Anne Sexton A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 336-7.

and sometimes referring to her mirror
as women do.¹⁸

This characteristic refusal of the conventional strategies of closure in the fairy tale is typical of the deconstructing methods of mainstream American feminist poetry. In Sexton's poem, however, instead of rising triumphantly over adversity, the protagonist is sucked back into the cycle. In the final, cruelest transformation of all, Snow White replaces the Wicked Queen, and the victim becomes persecutor in turn.

It seems clear, then, that Liz Lochhead has more affinity with the witty, sophisticated, college-educated American daughters of the Nineteenth Amendment than with the Violet Jacobs, Rachael Annands, or Helen Cruickshanks of Scottish tradition. Still, while these American poets may have contributed significantly to the cultural pool from which *Grimm Sisters* was drawn, we discover when we turn to that work itself that Liz Lochhead was diving into a rather different wreck.

The habit of re-using fairy tale material, often for comic or satiric purposes, is almost as old as the genre itself, and that genre is an old one. Beginning as an oral form, the fairy tale, or "wonder tale," stretches deep into the past, and written versions have existed at least since the time of Boccaccio and the early Italian Renaissance.¹⁹ There followed a notable period of composition and collection in France during the later seventeenth century with Charles Perrault, Marie-Jeanne l'Héritier de Villandon, and the Baroness d'Aulnoy (whose generic title for these tales, *contes de fées*, is the one by which they are generally known today), bringing us early published versions of Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty, Blue Beard and Tom Thumb. But the main impetus behind the modern fairy tale springs from the Brothers Grimm whose *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* was published in seven editions between 1812-1857. The Grimms initially intended their work as a serious contribution to German high culture, but a popular abridged edition in English by Edgar Taylor in 1823, which jettisoned the scholarly apparatus and focused simply on the stories, established a pattern for the future, and by the end of the nineteenth century the Grimms' tales were enjoying enormous global sales.²⁰

¹⁸ *Transformations*, 9.

¹⁹ The literature on the fairy-tale tradition is extensive; for a convenient online overview of its evolution as a literary form and some of the major cultural implications, see William Donaldson, *Popular Culture and Narrative: Use and Abuse of the Fairy Tale* (MIT OpenCourseWare; Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2015): <https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/literature/211-430-popular-culture-and-narrative-use-and-abuse-of-the-fairy-tale-fall-2015>.

²⁰ Jack Zipes, ed., *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* (New York: Bantam, 1992), xxviii-xxix.

The renewed prominence that the literary fairy tale thus gained as a form was reflected in Hans Christian Andersen's stories, which brought classics like "The Ugly Duckling," "Thumbelina," "The Little Mermaid," "The Red Shoes," "The Princess and the Pea," and "The Emperor's New Clothes." Andersen wrote nearly two hundred fairy stories in all, the final collection being published in 1872. A remarkable number of later writers were also attracted to the genre, including Charles Dickens, George MacDonald, R. L. Stevenson, Kenneth Grahame, Oscar Wilde, L. Frank Baum, Philip K. Dick, E. Nesbit, Naomi Mitchison, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood and Ursula K. Le Guin.²¹ These exhibit a considerable variety of styles, but there was a recurring thread of comedy, a result, perhaps, of secularism and modernity taking their toll on the credulous realm of faerie.

Women poets and novelists made a particularly strong contribution, often using fairy tales to subvert the gender stereotyping typical of the lines of narrative descending from the Brothers Grimm with their characteristic contrast of active male with passive female roles. Indeed, feminist literary scholars like Marina Warner, Elizabeth Wanning Harries, and Maria Tatar make a convincing case that the fairy tale tradition was originally a women's one, and continued essentially to be so.²²

Scottish sources also fed richly into Liz Lochhead's work. She drew in part on a historic strain of diablerie in the literature of Lowland Scotland, extending back through Barrie and Bridie, Stevenson, Hogg, Scott and Burns, at least as far as Dunbar. The ballads, too, were an important source, with pieces like "Thomas the Rhymer," "Tam Lin," and "The Elfin Knight" lending richness and complexity to number of Lochhead's poems, including the "Legendary" sequence (*DFCP*, 61-5), and the superb "Tam Lin's Lady" (*DFCP*, 81-4).²³

Scottish scholars had long been prominent in the study of fairy lore. The Rev. Robert Kirk's *Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns and Fairies*, written in the closing decades of the seventeenth century, was a

²¹ For a representative selection, see Alison Lurie, ed., *The Oxford Book of Modern Fairy Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

²² Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde—on Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994); see also Warner's *Once Upon a Time—A Short History of Fairy Tale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Elizabeth Wanning Harries, *Twice Upon a Time—Women Writers and the History of the Fairy Tale* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Maria Tatar, ed., *The Classic Fairy Tales* (New York: Norton, 1999).

²³ It has been suggested that the use of ballad sources may be a way of invoking a further strand of tradition strongly associated with women; see, for example, Catherine Kerrigan, ed., *An Anthology of Scottish Women Poets* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 8-9.

foundational early text.²⁴ Kirk offered a systematic account of the world of faerie as part of an ambitious project with Robert Boyle and other members of the Royal Society. This was intended to defend religion against the encroachment of scepticism by demonstrating the reality of the supernatural, as well as defining more precisely the outer boundaries of the Order of Nature as the arena in which the new science might operate.²⁵ The work of Andrew Lang was also highly significant. Lang was an important Victorian anthropologist as well as a prolific poet, essayist, novelist and general man of letters. His twelve “coloured” fairy books brought together tales from all over the world and helped define the topography of fairyland for generations of subsequent readers.²⁶ David MacRitchie, in his book *The Testimony of Tradition* (1890), surveyed the various theories that the fairies represented a folk memory of an original dwarfish, neolithic race driven to the margins of cultivation by later waves of invasion into Britain and reflected the typical nineteenth-century urge to subsume the fairies as part of the natural order. The great wealth of Highland fairy tradition was meantime revealed by writers like J. F. Campbell of Islay in his *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* (1860-62), and by folklorist-exciseman Alexander Carmichael, whose *Carmina Gadelica* (2 vols., 1900, eventually extending to six volumes) contained numerous charms and invocations to protect against fairy assault.²⁷

Scottish women scholars also made notable contributions to the study of fairy and supernatural lore, including Frances Tolmie (1840-1926), whose “Songs of Occupation from the Western Isles of Scotland” recorded

²⁴ *Secret Commonwealth; or, a treatise displaying the chiefe Curiosities as they are in use among diverse of the People of Scotland to this day, etc. 1691* (Edinburgh: reprinted by James Ballantyne & Co., for Longman, Reese, Orme, & Brown, London, 1815. There is a recent modern edition with an introduction by Marina Warner, (New York: New York Review Books, 2007).

²⁵ Michael Hunter, *The Occult Laboratory: Magic, Science and Second Sight in Late Seventeenth-Century Scotland* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2001) 1-31; Lizanne Henderson and Edward J. Cowan, *Scottish Fairy Belief: A History* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2001) also contains numerous references to Kirk and his work.

²⁶ There were at least a dozen of these “coloured” fairy books, ranging from Blue through to Lilac (London: Longmans, 1889-1910), containing folktales from a wide variety of geographic locations. For a more general view of Lang and his work, see William Donaldson, “Andrew Lang: A World we have Lost,” *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 43.1 (2017): 155-65: <http://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol43/iss1/14>.

²⁷ Alexander Carmichael, et. al, eds, *Carmina Gadelica*, 6 vols (vols 1-2, (Edinburgh: printed for the Author, 1900; revd., 1928; vols 3-6, 1940--1971; 6 vols, repr. Edinburgh: Floris Press, 2006): vols 1-3 available online. See also the Carmichael Watson Project (Centre for Research Collections, University of Edinburgh), at: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/library-museum-gallery/crc/research-resources/gaelic/carmichael-watson>.

tales of fairy encounters with the famous MacCrimmon pipers in the enchanted Cave of Gold.²⁸ F. Marian McNeill (1885-1973) was another highly significant figure. Her pioneering study of Scottish folklore and practice, *The Silver Bough*, published in four volumes between 1957-1968, was a gateway text for many readers in the years that followed. Looking slightly further afield, Emily Gerard of Airdrie (1849-1905), novelist and travel writer, was the author of *The Land beyond the Forest: Facts, Figures, and Fancies from Transylvania* (1888), whose vivid accounts of the folk customs of the Carpathians introduced the word “*nosferatu*” into English usage and provided a principal source for Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*.

These, then, are some of the writers who helped to foster the long-standing Scottish interest in folklore and the supernatural which underlies so much of Liz Lochhead’s work. The magical, the supernatural, weird ballad, and fairy lore all figure prominently in her poetry, revealing a knowledge of many things not in the standard syllabus. In her poem “The Legend of the Sword & the Stone”, for example (*DFCP*, 53-4), she remarks “I know what witches know,” and she goes on to demonstrate a command of folklore that seems both detailed and extensive. It must be stressed, especially for readers outside Scotland, that this is not common knowledge or part of a general inheritance that might be casually picked up in childhood. Rather few people stopped at random in the street could identify offhand what a “Fetch” or “Doppelgänger” even was, still less what its significance might be.²⁹ But Liz Lochhead knows exactly what it means to encounter one. In “Fetch on the First of January” (*DFCP*, 66-7) she throws open the door at Hogmanay and finds the First-Foot from Hell standing in the lobby:

Nae time eftir the Bells, and the
New Year new in...
when the door went.
 Well, well,
who’d’ve thought Ah’d be staunin’ there
tae first foot masel’?

This is no ordinary “first foot”—a tradition that the first person to cross the threshold on Ne’er’s Day should be a tall dark man with a bottle of whisky

²⁸ Tolmie’s essay was published as *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, no.16 (London, 1911).

²⁹ Scott gives one of the earliest references in a Scottish source to this idea; see his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft addressed to J. G. Lockhart, Esq.* (London: John Murray, 1830), VI: 178: “A common instance is that of a person haunted with a resemblance whose face he cannot see. If he turn his cloak or plaid, he will obtain the full sight which he desires, and may probably find it to be his own fetch, or wraith, or double-ganger.”

and a lump of coal, to bring luck in the New Year, a widely-diffused, still-current seasonal practice in Scotland. Seeing one's spectral double, or "fetch," on the other hand, is a sign not of luck but of impending death for the beholder. However, this particular fetch is clearly going to have his work cut out with the poet, who receives him with a torrent of invective and abuse, before finally, grudgingly, letting him in. Lochhead's visitor, although based upon traditional ideas, is an interestingly complex construction. There are hints of a once-human ex-lover, with a flashback to seemingly shared experience:

... Ah should hunt ye, by Christ,
 the way you chased that big black tyke
 that dogged ye wance, mind?—
 A' the wey fae Hope street hame.

There are several features suggesting a ballad-style revenant:

sae chitterin' ill-clad for the caul'
 sae drawn an' pale...
 Ice roon yir mooth when ye Kiss me,
 the cauld plumes o' yir breath

This is an echo, perhaps, of "The Wife of Usher's Well," where the dead are summoned back to their graves by the coming dawn: "The day doth daw, the cock doth crow, / The channerin' worm doth chide." Parts of the visitor are plainly demonic: "wi' the black bun burnin' a hole / in yir poackit an' the coal / a Live Coal." Although he wears Liz Lochhead's own face, the visitor is obviously on some level a Jungian animus, which one is theoretically supposed to embrace—and she does—even though the embrace of this Archetype on the doorstep will clearly not be salutary. The image receives an even greater charge when fused with a contrasting seasonal motif, the traditional April-Fool ritual called "Hunt the Gowk" (Seek the Fool). This involves sending a simple-minded person from joker to joker on a series of futile errands: "Dinna lauch, dinna smile, / Hunt the gowk anither mile," runs the old rhyme. There is no doubt here about who is the Gowk. Despite knowing what he is and what he means, the speaker still invites him in, the final line ruefully acknowledging a typical act of emotional self-harm: "Come away in, stranger, Happy New Year." Layer upon layer of compressed meaning and a skillfully-contained psychological violence mark this as a remarkable poem.

In "Dreaming Frankenstein" (*DFCP*, 11-12), we see esoteric folk motifs powerfully deployed to depict the youthful Mary Shelley in the searing moment of conceiving *Frankenstein*:

No maidservant ever
 in her narrow attic, combing
 out her hair in the midnight mirror

on Hallowe'en (having eaten
 that egg with its yolk hollowed out
 then filled with salt)
 —oh never one had such success as this
 she had not courted...
 This was the penetration
 of seven swallowed apple pips.
 Or else he'd slipped like a silver dagger
 between her ribs...
 and getting him out again
 would be agony fit to quarter her ...

This cluster of folk motifs: the mirror used for divination (which has its own fairy tale associations), the apple pips, and the hollowed out salt-filled egg, blend the quest for love with the reality of visionary experience. The original intention of these charms was to uncover the identity of one's own true love; but the actual result is a monstrous visitation, emblematic of the fate that may have awaited many a girl in grim reality; and there is an additional clever twist. For the artist-dreamer, the experience does not end when the vision ceases; an even more alarming stage follows in which supernaturally-heightened experience must be transmuted into art, sitting "in the reasonable sun of the morning" with "quill and ink and icy paper." At the crowning moment, we have an outstanding example of Liz Lochhead's ability to endow a simple, everyday object (here a button) with uncanny presence and meaning, conferring dreadful reality on what could have been dismissed as a purely subjective experience:

Later, stark staring awake to everything
 (the room, the dark parquet, the white high Alps beyond)
 all normal in the moonlight
 and him gone, save a ton-weight sensation,
 the marks fading visibly where
 his buttons had bit into her and
 the rough serge of his suiting had chafed her sex,
 she knew—oh that was not how—
 but he'd entered her utterly.

The visit of the Muse has often been depicted as a disturbing experience, but seldom as intensely as here, leaving a sense of selfhood violated and horror clinging like ectoplasm to the returning surfaces of everyday reality. A poem based on such lurid elements might have struggled to avoid mere sensationalism, but this is deftly avoided. Everything is held in check, balanced, proportionate and with an assured command of pace and tone that should alert the critic to the presence of a remarkable talent.

Like "The Golden Key" at the beginning of Sexton's *Transformations*, Lochhead's *Grimm Sisters* opens with an introductory "frame," in this instance a sequence of three linked pieces with the title "The Storyteller

Poems" (*DFCP*, 70-2). The first of these depicts a woman storyteller and her role at the heart of village society. At first, this might seem a fairly unremarkable picture, until we reflect that in 1978 the view it presents of the fairy tale as essentially a women's tradition was still a radical one, and decades ahead of the scholarly works which would eventually give substance to the theory:

she sat down
 at the scoured table
 in the swept kitchen
 beside the dresser with its cracked delft.
 And every last crumb of daylight was salted away.

No one could say the stories were useless
 for as the tongue clacked
 five or forty fingers stitched
 corn was grated from the husk
 patchwork was pieced
 or the darning done...
 To tell the stories was her work.
 It was like spinning;
 gathering thin air to the singlest strongest
 thread. Night in
 she'd have us waiting held
 breath, for the ending we knew by heart.

We are struck by the powerful claim being made for the necessity of art to the business of life and the view of the common people and gifted individuals amongst them as its ultimate custodians. Once again we find Lochhead's poetry reflecting a wider world than appears on the surface, and drawing upon a skein of sophisticated ideas suggesting extensive reading.

As formalist theories gained ground in the academy during the twentieth century, the ethos of traditional storytelling attracted increasing interest as a living example of tradition and the individual talent. Vladimir Propp's studies in Russian traditional stories, published as *Morphology of the Folktale* made a great impact in the West following their translation in the later fifties.³⁰ These described how storytellers were socially valued and how they actually set about their work, constructing their narratives from a palette of pre-existing narrative units in the very act of performance. Propp's work formed part of a wider enquiry into creativity and oral

³⁰ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1958; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968); see also Sibelan Forrester, ed. and transl., *The Russian Folktale by Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012).

tradition which included Milman Parry and Albert Lord's seminal study of Yugoslavian epic, *The Singer of Tales*, and the great Aarne-Thompson motif index, *Types of the Folktale*.³¹ Traditional storytelling allowed the narrator/performer a large degree of aesthetic control, along with the expectation that he or she would vary language, detail, mood, and length to suit the occasion, and do so with arresting skill, so that each telling was in a sense a new tale and it need never be done the same way twice. Although they already know the story and how it will end, Lochhead's peasant audience is still held spellbound by the artistry of the teller:

And at first light
 as the women stirred themselves to build the fire
 as the peasant's feet felt for clogs
 as thin grey washed over flat fields
 the stories dissolved in the whorl of the ear
 but they
 hung themselves upside down
 in the sleeping heads of the children
 till they flew again
 in the storytellers night.

Of course this creative bending, shaping, making and remaking of stories is reflected in Liz Lochhead's own work as a poet and dramatist; she clearly regards herself as standing in direct succession to this long-dead teller of tales, although working now in a predominantly literate setting.

Fairy tales contain many old and dark things, although often expurgated nowadays and banished to the nursery. Both Freud and Jung believed that they granted access to deep levels of the psyche and to every manner of instinctive and irrational urge; and fairy tales became a favoured interpretative tool in psychoanalysis.³² However, there are problems with this approach of which psychoanalytic critics do not always seem to have been aware. Because folk tales are subject to oral transmission, and distributed globally, they occur in multiple variants sometimes differing quite markedly in content. A standard modern collection, Maria Tatar's *The Classic Fairy Tales*, takes seven different versions to represent "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Beauty and the Beast," and notes that hundreds of

³¹ Albert Bates Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960); Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *Types of the Folktale* (Helsinki: Academia scientiarum Fennica, 1961), enlarged and re-edited by Hans-Jörg Uther (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 2004).

³² See, for example, Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); and Marie-Louise von Franz, *Introduction to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1970).

variants for “Snow White” have been collected worldwide.³³ Which of these should be the “master” version for the purposes of analysis?

Within the written tradition, too, there are frequent complications. We now know that the Brothers Grimm bowdlerised their texts, softening key aspects of intra-familial strife, creating the figure of the Wicked Stepmother, and substituting her whenever they encountered birth-mothers planning the destruction of their offspring (which seemed to happen surprisingly often). The Grimms also silently removed references to incest which did not square with contemporary notions of morality. In all seven of the published editions between 1812 and 1857 over which they exerted direct personal control, the Grimms silently re-wrote their material. The full extent of their creative intervention was not widely appreciated until John M. Ellis drew the evidence together in 1983 in *One Fairy Story too Many: The Brothers Grimm and Their Tales*.³⁴ Ellis presented a damning case against the Brothers who had hitherto been frequently if incautiously hailed as the founding fathers of modern “scientific” fieldwork research. Most of the published versions of “Snow White” concentrate on the murderous jealousy of a step-mother eclipsed by the beauty of a step-daughter and how with the assistance of various external agents the daughter frustrates the mother’s designs. Yet in the earliest collected version of the tale, contained in the Grimm’s original manuscript of 1810, it is Snow White’s father who rescues her, not Prince Charming, a safer figure who the Brothers silently substituted in the published version of 1812.³⁵

There are elements here of a more disturbing picture, and these were thrown into vivid—even lurid—relief for readers of Liz Lochhead’s generation by child-psychologist Bruno Bettelheim’s award-winning study of the therapeutic value of fairytales, *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, published in 1976. Bettelheim’s book caused a considerable stir and found many readers on both sides of the Atlantic. Bettelheim claimed deep symbolic meaning in the fairy tale corpus, viewing it as an essential aid for children to help process the contents of their unconscious. He located “Snow White” within an explicitly Oedipal framework, presenting the story as a primal incest scene, although there was little direct textual evidence in the Grimms’ published version that he used as his source.³⁶ The deadly rivalry between the queen

³³ Maria Tatar, *The Classic Fairy Tales* (New York: Norton, 1999).

³⁴ John M. Ellis, *One Fairy Story too Many: The Brothers Grimm and Their Tales* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983).

³⁵ Ellis, 75-6.

³⁶ “The Jealous Queen in ‘Snow White’ and the Myth of Oedipus,” *Uses of Enchantment*, 194-215.

and her daughter was sexual in nature, said Bettelheim, and focused not on Prince Charming, but on Snow White's father, the king, for whom the prince was simply an avatar.³⁷

Liz Lochhead's treatment of the "Snow White" story in "The Father", the second poem in the "Storyteller" group, exploits this possibility to striking effect. The poem begins with teasing indirection and ends in disturbing ambiguity. In a mood of brittle, superficial gaiety, we are transported to Snow White's wedding:

loving and bungling,
 offending the evil fairy by forgetting
 her invitation to the Christening,
 or being tricked into bartering his beloved daughter
 in exchange for the rose he only
 took to please her...
 But when she comes,
 The beautiful daughter,
 leading her lover by the sleeve, laughing--
 'Come and meet my daddy, the King,
 he's absolutely a hundred years behind the times
 but such a dear.'³⁸

But just as we prepare for the happy ending, the focus suddenly returns to the father in a series of oddly ambiguous and unsettling lines. Here is the conclusion of the poem as it originally stood in *Grimm Sisters*:

and she's (note Redeeming Kiss)
 wide-eyed and aware,
 stirring, forgiven, full of love and terror,
 her father hears her footstep on the stair.³⁹

What is happening here? For whom, and from whom is the "redeeming kiss"? Exactly who is "wide-eyed and aware"? And what are they aware of? Is it Snow White or her father who is "stirring, forgiven, full of love and terror"?

At this point we need to consider the text more closely. Liz Lochhead was not often given to changes of mind once a piece was published. Poem after poem was reproduced in subsequent collected editions exactly as they appeared on first publication. But in this piece there was a subtle, and

³⁷ In their classic study *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar also air this possibility (36-42). Ruth Perry drew attention in conversation to the irony of Bettelheim busily putting back into the tales the creepy content that the Grimms so carefully took out.

³⁸ *DFCP*, 71.

³⁹ *GS*, 12.

perhaps significant, change. In *Dreaming Frankenstein and Collected Poems* the comma at the end of the third last line above is replaced by a full stop and the beginning of the next line capitalized:

and she's (note Redeeming Kiss)
wide-eyed and aware.
Stirring, forgiven, full of love and terror,
her father hears her footstep on the stair (*DFCP*, 71).

The flow is interrupted at a key moment, altering the emphasis, and increasing our sudden sense that there may be something very bad about to happen here. We get an additional fraction of a second to reflect: as the king lies with palpitating heart, whose chamber is Snow White approaching? In the end the action is simply suspended. The deliberate lack of resolution artfully undercuts the expectations created by the atmosphere of frivolity that had seemed to precede it.⁴⁰

There was one further significant editorial change between *Grimm Sisters* and *Dreaming Frankenstein*: namely, the epigraph which had prefixed the former text was silently dropped. It took the form of a lengthy quotation from Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths* (1955), and it had a considerable bearing on the poems that followed it. In search of the primal roots of metaphor in the West, Graves had delved into the pre-classical, pre-Hellenic lore of ancient Greece, claiming to have uncovered an early matrilineal society in which the moon goddess had held chief place in the pantheon before her later displacement by the sky gods of a new male-dominated social order. This was a theory he had first raised in his book *The White Goddess* (1948), which, as we have seen, would exert a powerful influence on second-wave feminist writers during the nineteen seventies.

The epigraph that Lochhead later discarded ran as follows:

The moon's three phases of new, full and old recalled the matriarch's three phases of maiden, nymph (or nubile woman) and crone. Then, since the sun's annual course similarly recalled the rise and decline of her physical powers—Spring a maiden, Summer a nymph, Winter a crone—the goddess became identified with seasonal changes in animal and plant life... She could later be conceived as yet another triad: the maiden of the upper air, the nymph of the earth or sea, the crone of the underworld ... Selene, Aphrodite, Hecate.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Liz Lochhead returned to the theme of father-daughter incest a few years later in "The Sins of the Fathers," *True Confessions and New Cliches* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1985; repr., 2003), 100-101.

⁴¹ *Grimm Sisters*, epigraph; see Robert Graves, "Introduction," in *The Greek Myths, Complete and Definitive Edition* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 14.

Graves seems to have exerted a powerful influence on the themes and organization of the collection itself: for example, a striking number of the poems are arranged in groups of three: “The Storyteller Poems” (“I: Storyteller; II: The Father; III The Mother”, *DFCP*, 70-72); “The Furies” (“I: Harridan; II: Spinster; III Bawd”, *DFCP*, 74-6); “Three Twists” (“I: Rapunzstiltskin; II: Beauty & The; III After Leaving The Castle”, *DFCP*, 78-81). There are “Six Disenchantments” (*DFCP*, 84-5). In addition there are a number of poems which reflect various aspects of the Goddess identified by Graves, such as “Hags And Maidens” (*DFCP*, 94-8), and “The Cailleach” (*DFCP*, 101), the latter a version of the crone or winter goddess; and also “The Last Hag” (*DFCP*, 103-04).

The powerful poem, “Last Supper” (*DFCP*, pp.93-4) in which the persona entertains her female friends to dinner to mark the end of an abortive romance and attack the character of her former lover has a number of sources, and a wealth of double meaning and cultural punning. It falls into two sections, the first showing preparations for the formal meal that will end the relationship. The second, anticipating a girls-only gathering which will make a hash of the leftovers spiced with what remains of the unlamented ex-’s reputation:

She is getting good and ready to renounce
his sweet flesh.
Not just for lent. (For
Ever)
But meanwhile she is assembling the ingredients
for their last treat, the proper
feast ...
So here she is tearing foliage, scrambling
the salad, may be lighting candles even ...
the nicely al-
dente vegetables, the cooked goose.
He could be depended on to bring the bottle
plus betrayal with a kiss.

The idea of the sacrificial male at the heart of the poem seems clearly to have its source in the primitive pre-Hellenic Hercules identified by Graves in *The White Goddess* (125-6)—a book we know Liz Lochhead read and was strongly influenced by. There, his role was similar to the guardian of the sacred grove in J. G. Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, namely to be slain annually in the ancient seasonal fertility dramas. Graves elaborated the idea in *The Greek Myths*. In a passage immediately following that quoted as an epigraph to *Grimm Sisters*, he added:

The tribal Nymph...chose an annual lover from her entourage of young men, a king to be sacrificed when the year ended...His sprinkled blood served to fructify trees, crops, and flocks, and his

flesh was torn and eaten raw by the Queen's fellow-nymphs—
priestesses wearing the masks of bitches, mares, or sows.⁴²

The playfully atavistic mood of “Last Supper” appears to have its direct source here, as the persona assumes the role of Queen of the Woods, and feasts with her merry-maid companions:

Already she was imagining it done with, this feast, and
exactly
what kind of leftover hash she'd make of it
among friends, when it was just
The Girls, when those three met again.
What very good soup
she could render from the bones ...
Yes, there they'd be, cackling around the cauldron,
spitting out the gristlier bits
of his giblets;
gnawing on the knucklebone of some
intricate irony...
'That's rich!' they'd splutter,
munching the lies, fat and sizzling as sausages ...
sleek on it all, preening
like corbies, their bright eyes blinking
satisfied
till somebody would get hungry
and go hunting again.

Bobbing about in the resulting rich stew of cultural references we also note the play *Macbeth*, the ballad of “The Twa Corbies”, and Jesus and his disciples at the Feast of the Passover (Mark 14:12-26) with its linked motifs of nutrition and betrayal, and echo of the paschal lamb as the sacrificial victim symbolically consumed.

The re-shaping of the Last Supper into a rollicking witches' sabbath, is typical of the spirit of witty transformation that runs through the whole of Liz Lochhead's *Grimm Sisters*. In the Fairy Tale world, after all, few things are what they seem at first, and many creatures have a form very different from what they will later assume. The idea of transformation is not only deeply embedded in the theoretical literature, but also, as we have seen, at the heart of the long feminist drive to re-forge the dominant narratives.

In *Grimm Sisters* not only the stories are transformed, but the poetic persona also undergoes ceaseless mutation, here “a Virago, / at her wit's end, running past Hell's Mouth, all reason gone (“Harridan” *DFCP*, 74), now a prim singleton intoning the mantras of Sunday-supplement well-being:

⁴² Graves, “Introduction, 14.

Go vegetarian. Accept.
 Support good causes.
 Be frugal, circumspect.
 Keep cats. Take tidy fits.
 Go to evening classes (“Spinster”, *DFCP*, 75).

then a brazen *femme fatale*:

I’ll get all dolled up in my gladrags, stay
 up till all hours, oh
 up to no good...
 I’ll let my hair down,
 go blonde, be a bombshell, be on the make...
 I’ll paint my face up, paint the town,
 have carmine nails...
 I’ll look daggers, kill.
 My lipstick colour’s Merry Hell (“Bawd”, *DFCP*, 76).

We see this feature particularly strongly in the collection’s title-poem, “Grim Sisters” (*DFCP*, 72-4), which shows a seemingly classic fairy-tale transformation scene, but approached from a highly unusual angle. Beauty is mandatory for the fairy-tale heroine, and here we see the protagonist being operated on by a team of flinty-eyed Ugly Sisters (note the single “m” in the poem’s title) who subject her to the demeaning rituals of physical perfection Nineteen-Fifties style. But reality cannot so easily be wished away:

Luxembourg announced Amami night.
 I sat at peace passing bobbipins
 from a marshmallow pink cosmetic purse
 embossed with jazzmen,
 girls with pony tails and a November
 topaz lucky birthstone.
 They doused my cow’s-lick, rolled
 and skewered tightly.
 I expected that to be lovely
 would be worth the hurt. (*DFCP*, 72-3)

The scene-setting is wonderfully precise and suggestive, but it is more than mere description (however vivid) or period flavour (however telling). The action is suddenly frozen—on the stroke of midnight as it were—stranding the characters with their pinched-in waists and bouffant hairdos like mannequins in an abandoned store front. As we are finally returned to the present, we see the full reach of the central metaphor, and realise that the poem is actually a powerful reflection on the theme of *ubi sunt*? After all, what could be more poignantly passé than last year’s fashions?

In those big black mantrap handbags
 they snapped shut at any hint of *that*

were hedgehog hairbrushes,
cottonwool mice and barbed combs to tease.
Their heels spiked bubblegum, dead leaves.

Wasp waist and cone breast, I see them yet.
I hope, I hope
there's been a change of more than silhouette. (*DFCP*, 74)

The poem ends with a wish (as a good fairy tale should) but poses at the same time a kind of rhetorical question, and the implied answer is not a comforting one.

It is generally agreed that the ability to confer upon the everyday a new and powerful resonance is one of the outstanding features of Liz Lochhead's poetry. This is particularly apparent at the climax of another of her Fairy Tale versions, "Blueshirt" (*DFCP*, 90-91), a reworking of the Bluebeard story. It takes us on a journey, proceeding by subtle stages from the absolutely mundane to an extraordinary climax:

Well break-
fasted I move
alone and trusted
among your books and jazz
your photographs (horn-
players friends and trees)

A note of unease begins to enter as the writer considers her boyfriend's former (and maybe not so former) lovers:

... caught
in the cold cold stare of the tiger cat
I know was named by the lady
you say left long ago.

The sudden stab of disturbing presence introduced by the "tiger cat", comes along with suggestions of hidden evil and witches' familiars.⁴³ At any rate, in the everyday opening section, before the poem suddenly takes a more alarming turn, the persona's boyfriend slips into his blue business shirt, passes her a key and goes off to work whistling. She considers the key gloomily: just what secrets might it unlock?

I stare at this key printed on my palm
its intricate notchings
then (absolutely clean
of charms or chicken bones) I

⁴³ The tiger cat may be an echo of Elinor Wylie's, "The Puritan's Ballad," in *No More Masks!*, 47-9, which refers to a "tiger cat" when recalling an irresistible, but fatally false, lover: "Will he never come back from Barnegat / With thunder in his eyes, / Treading as soft as a tiger cat, / To tell me terrible lies?"

pocket it.
 In your innocent ticking fridge
 I might find the forbidden egg
 crowned with blood.

A number of highly characteristic features are visible here: a sense of incipient horror stirring uneasily below the deceptive surface of “normality”; an easy familiarity with folk magic--particularly powers of divination--suggesting the presence of some dark but as yet undisclosed menace; a web of motifs skillfully combining into a cumulative sense of danger all the greater because implied rather than directly stated; a use of “found” material displaying great resourcefulness.

For example, the egg crowned with blood does not appear at all in the source we might have expected her to use, namely the Grimm’s version of “Bluebeard” where the fatal object turns out to be a little golden key (which survives as a ghostly echo in the persona’s hand). The tell-tale bloodstained egg actually occurs in a variant tale which the Grimms published with the title, “Fitcher’s Bird”, a story of abduction and murder in which a sorcerer carries off the daughters of a poor widow and it is an egg rather than a key which is dropped in the bloody chamber.

Neither of the Grimm versions features a cat. But there is a cat in the Scots Gaelic variants of the story collected by J. F. Campbell of Islay and his team and published in their classic *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* in 1862. In the Scottish version, the protagonist, a widow’s daughter is wooed by an ogre who, like Bluebeard, possesses a bloody chamber stacked with the remains of his former lovers. Native ingenuity defeats the villain in “Fitcher’s Bird”, but in the Gaelic versions, a talking cat comes to the protagonist’s aid, a classic “animal donor” (actually a captive enchanted queen) who is able to lick the tell-tale blood from the incriminating egg. The brilliant image which climaxes Liz Lochhead’s poem not only finds an ingenious modern counterpart for the original chamber of horrors, but contributes its own particular menace: “innocent ticking fridge” managing somehow to suggest reassurance and danger at the same time. A routine domestic object is suddenly invested with sinister presence, and we accept at once that it could conceal a ruinous discovery.

Liz Lochhead has astonishing recall, and she was amongst the earliest Scottish writers to view the nineteen fifties as the site of a particular kind of magic, seeing, as Alan Bennett memorably remarked, that “there is no period so remote as the recent past.”⁴⁴ Lochhead’s landmark autobiographical essay, “A Protestant Girlhood,” with its vividly detailed memories of growing up in Motherwell in the post-war years under the

⁴⁴ Alan Bennett, *The History Boys* (London: Faber, 2014; play first performed 2004), 74.

shadow of the Bomb, was received by the more youthful portion of literary Scotland with the force of shock when it was published in the seventies.⁴⁵ To apply that kind of “pastness” to the recently-departed, and generally unlamented, late fifties and early sixties was to precipitate her peers abruptly into middle age, a condition that not all of them were ready to embrace. And to bring such a period back, alive and wriggling, when none or few in Scotland had ventured there, was an act of rare imaginative force and daring. But nearly everything Liz Lochhead touched in those early years proved to be remarkable, one way or another.

The handful of poems considered here can only hint at Liz Lochhead’s long and productive career. The focus here has been on context and influence, but there are several other aspects which could as easily have claimed attention, including the remarkable vitality and emotional range of her poetry, for example, which have not always received due recognition. Then, there is her aesthetic sophistication, evident throughout. If it could be encapsulated in a single moment, we might consider a later piece when the writer, taking a tidy fit, discovers a mouse in her wok.⁴⁶ For a leading Scottish poet to encounter a mouse presents certain irresistible attractions; but the mouse—a female mouse of course—says, in effect: “I’m not a mouse; I am an invention” (all literary animals in Scotland can talk). And clearly well-versed in history, she proceeds to reflect on the yawning gap between appearance and reality in the career of Robert Burns:

Ploughman? That twill be right! *Heaven-taught?*
 He drank deep o The Bard, and Gray, and Pope—the lot.
 I, faur frae the spontaneous outburst you thought,
 Am an *artifact*.
 For Man’s Dominion he was truly sorry? Not!
 ’Twas all an act.

We frequently discover complexity behind a screen of apparently simple reportage in Liz Lochhead’s poetry, occasional hints that—just like the mouse—the “I” of many apparently personal poems may be a constructed one, and not perhaps the direct and uncomplicated transcript from life it is sometimes assumed to be. Indeed, much of the success of Liz Lochhead’s complex, sophisticated and polished enterprise lies in the fact that it can so easily persuade us that it is natural, spontaneous, and direct.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Liz Lochhead, “A Protestant Girlhood,” in Trevor Royle, ed., *Jock Tamson’s Bairns: essays on a Scots childhood* (London: Hamilton, 1977), 112-125.

⁴⁶ “From a Mouse,” in *Fugitive Colours* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2016), 91-93.

⁴⁷ The poet is reported as saying “I’m not nearly as autobiographical as people think. It’s a lot of fiction, personae, personifying.” Quoted in Alison Smith, “Liz Lochhead: Speaking in her Own Voice,” in Robert Crawford and Anne Varty, eds, *Liz Lochhead’s Voices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 1.

Lochhead's ability to transform everyday objects in her poetry leads on to considering, at least briefly, her links with the larger world of fine art. The use of found objects, which abound in her poems, has obvious parallels with their use in modern painting from Picasso onwards. Her riffing through the oddment bag of quotidian life probably proceeds with similar intention to Robert Rauschenberg's appropriation of everyday objects for incorporation into his artworks. The sister arts feed upon one another in Lochhead's writing, and she has skills in both, a thing not always remembered. She studied at Glasgow School of art and is herself a painter. We see in her vivid and well-attended readings, and in her theatre work, an urge to make poetry as public an aesthetic gesture as painting—to produce it audibly, to make it occupy acoustic space the way a painting or sculpture might occupy a visual one, all part of the application to literature of essentially painterly techniques.

It is obvious, too, that Liz Lochhead possesses a formidable comedic gift, visible at many points, but particularly, perhaps, in the helter-skelter comic invention of "Rapunztiltskin" (*DFCP*, 78-9) her gleeful exposure of the clichés of courtship and the depressing frequency with which enticing physical exteriors conceal personalities of the utmost blandness and conventionality. Critics frequently point to music hall and popular entertainment as sources for her imagination, and her satirical theatre pieces collected in *True Confessions and New Clichés* (1985) and elsewhere make it clear that she stands in a rich and long-established Scottish comedic tradition. This has enjoyed a large, and relatively unexamined, role in the formation of national stereotypes over a period of many years. Great names like Will Fyffe, Harry Gordon, Jimmy Logan, Stanley Baxter, and Billy Connolly, have played an unusually large role in the shaping of national life and character. These were all men of course. There were not so many women counterparts. Until now—a further reminder how pioneering Liz Lochhead's work actually was when she and Marcella Evaristi unveiled the first of their satirical shows, *Sugar and Spite*, in 1978.⁴⁸

Liz Lochhead's poetry has enjoyed a high public profile, and a good measure of critical acclaim.⁴⁹ But not all the commentaries have been positive or recognized her literary and intellectual affiliations. Like many women poets, she has sometimes been dismissed as superficial or merely resting on performance effect like the Liverpool Beats of the 1960s:

⁴⁸ *True Confessions*, 1-2.

⁴⁹ See e.g. Crawford and Varty, above; and Anne Varty, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to Liz Lochhead* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

lightweight and unaccomplished.⁵⁰ No considered reading of her work could support that view. Lohead was no ingenue. The poems she included in *Dreaming Frankenstein and Collected Poems* deserve much close and respectful critical attention. The connections traced here to American second-wave feminist poetry and her creative reworking of both fairy tale and classical myth refute such patronizing dismissal, and deepen our understanding and appreciation of the sparkling literary intelligence and wide cultural horizons underpinning her remarkable body of work.

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⁵⁰ Cf. the responses summarized in one standard reference work: “For some critics, her apparent lack of interest in aesthetic complexity or poetic craft makes her poetry trivial and forgettable.... Some see her as a colourful, dynamic popular poet like Roger McGough or Adrian Henri. Others see her as another Pam Ayres or Wendi Cope, lightweight and unaccomplished”: Adam Frost, “Lohead, Liz, 1947-,” in *ProQuest Biographies* (Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2001) (accessed through ProQuest LION, December 12, 2022):.