



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 22 | Spring 2016

Title	Stealing Fire: Political Re-Appropriation of Verse Drama in Tony Harrison's <i>Prometheus</i> and Liz Lochhead's <i>Medea</i>
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Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	22
Issue Date	Spring 2016
Publication Date	30/05/2016
Editors	Emma Sullivan and Matthew Tibble

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Stealing Fire: Political Re-Appropriation of Verse Drama in Tony Harrison's *Prometheus* and Liz Lochhead's *Medea*

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*Critical opinion of verse drama has long considered it to be an outdated and classist form. Yet in the early 21st century, certain dramatists have provided examples of how the form may be subverted not only to expose its privileged history but to provide a context for new lines of ideological enquiry. This article examines how verse drama has been re-appropriated to serve as a vehicle for socialist and feminist concerns in Liz Lochhead's *Medea* and Tony Harrison's *Prometheus*.*

Prometheus, Titan, creator of mankind and scourge of Olympus, stole fire from the lap of the gods to ameliorate human life on earth. His utilitarian act of enlightenment led to surely the most gruesome of mythological punishments: chained to a rock in the Caucasus, where his liver formed the daily meal of an obliging eagle. Prometheus's immortality meant that his liver was regenerated on a nightly basis, providing the eagle with a truly sustainable food source. This ancient and oft-retold tale serves as a savage warning to those who would take the gifts of the gods and share them amongst the undeserving myriad who dwell on earth.

Verse drama, occupying an over-lapping space between poetry and drama, had come to be viewed as Olympian fire by the mid-twentieth century: preserved as the purview only of the privileged. Writing in 1960, critic John Wain commented:

Perhaps, after all, it is a social rather than an artistic matter; perhaps there are certain habits and preferences set up in bookish people by the kind of education they have and the kind of circle they live in, that demands verse as an extra trimming to play, lifting it automatically into a higher class (62).

Wain claims that verse drama is engrained in those who have been afforded access to a classical education or those who move in (one assumes) illustrious circles. Furthermore, he suggests that the very inclusion of verse enhances the worthiness of a play, "lifting it automatically into a higher class". This elitist approach to the form could explain in part the genre's decline, with Arnold Hinchcliffe calling "the value of verse in modern theatre certainly doubtful" and requesting a redefinition of its aims and parameters in 1977 (XI). Even before Wain's classist assertions, Yvor Winters had damned the genre in the *Hudson Review*, claiming that "the epic and verse drama have long been dead due to defects in the nature of the forms" (1956). Thus, whilst verse drama may have been considered an Olympian ideal in the 1960s, a higher form of dramatic art for "bookish people", this holy fire was in danger of being extinguished.

Despite this dimming of the genre, at the end of the twentieth century contemporary poets and dramatists began to subvert not only the elitism of poetic drama but also its supposed demise by creating assertive works imbued with obvious socio-political agendas. The trajectory of verse drama has

been extensive, projecting throughout the centuries, but, given its fall from grace, the use of this form in more recent years can be understood as an act of critical defiance – a deliberate aesthetic and hermeneutic approach. Through the verse drama form, these latter-day versions of Prometheus have reacted against the tired and classist associations of the form by forcing verse drama to serve as a space in which feminist, socialist and linguistic concerns may be addressed. The resulting conflict between tradition and innovation, form and content, serves to highlight the power and potential of literary re-appropriation. Liz Lochhead’s verse drama for the stage *Medea* (2000), and Tony Harrison’s screenplay in verse, *Prometheus* (1998), will be set against the standards previously established by cross-genre works within the canon.

Making the drama ‘more dramatic’: a brief critical history of verse drama

To see how this poetic form has been subverted, we must first define what is understood as verse drama. Contemporary criticism on verse drama is thin on the ground; generic definitions remain outdated and somewhat vague. Critics offering illumination include T.S. Eliot, who claimed that “the poetry of a great verse drama is not merely a decoration of a dialogue which could, as drama, be as well put in prose; it makes the drama itself different – and more dramatic” (15). Denis Donoghue states that verse drama is not based merely on “verbal construct” and that the poetry of the play must be found in all of the play’s components (7). He believes that the “organic unity” of content and form within verse drama ought to derive from Aristotle’s concept of *entelechy*, the conditions under which something potential becomes actualised (8).

Reflecting on verse drama’s history, Wain suggests that “keep[ing]...verse drama in being seems to be a deep instinct of the English-speaking races” and yet, the prominence of this kind of formal fusion has not been sustained (58). William McCollom has commented on the decline of the form in a similar vein (99). It may be assumed that ultimately, verse drama became a victim of its own success; Wain believes that all verse dramatists were seeking to echo the successes of Shakespeare, “employing a kind of thinned-out Elizabethan iambic...to suggest Shakespeare and thus charge the air with theatrical and literary incense” (59). Donoghue suggests that a separation, or re-separation, of genres began in the middle of the eighteenth century, with the rising influence of French domestic tragedies with a preference for naturalistic dialogue (3). Adopting prose as the verbal vehicle for realist drama meant that verse and drama began to occupy increasingly disparate spheres. Henrik Ibsen, who had initially been interested in verse drama and written plays in the form such as *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, later wrote that “verse has been most injurious to dramatic art” (365). McCollom notes that in 1980, of the sixty current theatrical productions in New York, only one was in verse – listed as W.B. Yeats’s *Cuchulain* (99). An amalgamation of Yeats’s *Cuchulain* cycle, the constituent plays of which were written in the early twentieth century, its singularity in the listings indicates that verse drama was not being regularly produced in the 1980s. Thus has verse drama become a contested site of exploration that is both recognised as containing an intrinsic dramatic authority, while also being rejected. I would argue that verse drama has, therefore, an unusual generic identity and one which embodies conflict: it at once suggests a significant literary heritage and bestows an acknowledged authority upon a dramatic work, while also being denigrated and ignored by critics and playwrights alike in recent years.

The strange space that verse drama occupied by the 1960s, simultaneously venerated yet broadly considered flawed and outdated, means that any engagement with the genre necessitates some manner of conflict with its established identity. Some contemporary playwrights resurrecting the form have found themselves battling both aspects of this generic identity: they are simultaneously subverting its classist history whilst repudiating its supposed cultural irrelevancy. Not only, therefore, is the very existence of these new dramas a defiance of established critical opinion, but the thematic concerns of the plays in question exist in direct conflict with the expectations of the form. Verse drama has thus become the ideal vehicle for interrogating the canon, questions of class and authority, and exploring symbolic language. Tony Harrison and Liz Lochhead's engagements with verse drama at once endorse the need for "organic unity" emphasised by Donoghue in 1959, but use that unity of form and content as a tool to dismantle classist preconceptions of how verse drama should function. Harrison and Lochhead's decision to utilise poetics within a drama becomes more interesting in view of this history – as a deliberate act of defiance and conflict rather than an alignment with an arbitrary tradition or an attempt to reanimate the spirit of the Bard.

“We women are too weak, they say, for war”: Lochhead's feminist rewriting of *Medea*

Medea is a reworking of the ancient Greek tragedy first written by Euripides in 431 BC. It is the bloody tale of the eponymous Medea, former wife of Jason who enacts revenge upon her ex-spouse by brutally murdering both his new wife and her own children. Its content is still shocking today, but Lochhead handles the source myth in a dynamic way that allows it to operate within a feminist tradition of rewriting. Myth has long been understood as an intrinsic part of patriarchal discourse; Mary Daly has even defined the patriarchy as a mythological paradigm (1974:90), while Vanda Zajko has emphasised the crucial role that mythology played in creating asymmetrical understandings of gender, to the detriment of women (396). With rewriting broadly acknowledged as a means of interrogating such asymmetries¹, Lochhead's engagement with feminist concerns within her version of *Medea* is supported by her use of the verse drama form, allowing the conflict between mythology and patriarchal concepts of femininity to be highlighted.² In engaging with the feminist tradition of rewriting, Lochhead's particular interrogation of this myth forces it to serve as a space for analysing the sexual politics of tragedy. She achieves this through her innovative verse, the diction of the dialogue, and the foregrounding of feminist concerns.

¹ See, for example, Adrienne Rich's "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision". *College English*. (1972). Susan Sellers has commented: "Feminist rewriting can thus be thought of in two categories: as an act of demolition, exposing and detonating the stories that have hampered women, and as a task of construction – bringing into being enabling alternatives" (30). *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction*. London: Palgrave, 2001. Dianne Purkiss has also engaged with the ramifications of rewriting as a methodology for feminism in "Women's Rewriting of Myth". *The Woman's Companion to Mythology*. Ed. Carolynne Larrington. London: Pandora, 1992.

² Indeed, the gender conflict inherent in the source myth was previously explored by Tony Harrison in his unproduced libretto *Medea: A Sex War Opera* (1985). Harrison's *Medea* was commissioned by the New York Metropolitan Opera but the score was never completed. Van Zyl Smith, "Greek Drama in England from the 17th-21st Century". *A Handbook to the Reception of Greek Drama*. Ed. Betine Van Zyl Smit. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2016. (312)

One of the key benefits of using poetry in contemporary drama is that it necessarily enforces distance between an audience, who are typically accustomed to realist prose, and the characters, who present their dialogue in verse form. Wanda Rulewicz has detailed how in a verse drama, the stage may serve as a space for the presentation of abstract ideas, as opposed to the seemingly concrete realities of naturalistic drama (169). This deviation from the conventional norm of prose drama defamiliarises the play. Donoghue believes that this is problematic for contemporary audiences, but I argue that it forces the audience to adopt a more analytical stance, engaging with a form of dialogue that is different in terms of structure and metaphoric yield (14). This defiance of expectation allows the audience to become aware of different narrative processes and foregrounds abstract concepts. Contemporary drama in verse accordingly thrusts the play's actions and characters into the symbolic realm and thus becomes ideally suited to allegory.

As an example of the allegoric potential within verse drama, Lochhead makes use of the traditional role of the Chorus to create a society within the play that comments upon the behaviour of the characters, particularly Medea. Lochhead uses the Chorus, ubiquitous in ancient verse drama, as a vehicle for feminist discourse:

CHORUS

That cry

We have heard it

From our sisters mothers from ourselves

That cry

We did not know how to cry out. (9)

In Lochhead's choral society, the female voices claim community with one another in making reference to their history of silence. This speech can be read as a reflection upon Euripides's original – the women in his play were unaware of their own power of expression, but now, within a contemporary framework, they become conscious of their previous ignorance. Now written as women by a woman, they can claim a community with each other. Through this group communication, they are able to find the language necessary to "cry out". The choice to compose this group dialogue in verse is particularly effective – the women are speaking in unity with each other. The message of the chorus is thus united in form, content and delivery. However, the verse creates a distance between them and the audience, thus demonstrating concretely the women's oppression by language.

Throughout the play, Lochhead's verse achieves "organic unity"; her verse and the action work in harmony to create *entelechia*, expanding her efforts to use the form to interrogate its own assumptions.

KREON

Frankly I'm feart of you why no?

Feart you hurt my daughter why no?

You're a clever quine and cunning

Malice is your middle name (11)

The hard, consonant heavy pattern of the alliterative, staccato verse emphasises Kreon's role as Medea's antagonist and oppressor: his language strikes out as cutting and brusque in retaliation to Medea's softer articulation. The verse becomes part and parcel of the perfect unity of form and content. Kreon's

speech indicates how verse itself can be oppressive, but when contrasted against the speech of Medea and the Chorus, the subversive potential nascent within the form is illuminated.

The verse of Lochhead's play becomes its own agent for the creation of sensations of expectation and horror. Priscilla Thouless writes that in Elizabethan plays, the "marked spectacular element" of the tragedies was "excited by...flamboyant verse" (1), and this sense of the holistic quality of verse drama – the verse at one with the content and action of the play – is at work in Lochhead's play. The elements of horror in the play are excited by "flamboyant verse", Medea's brutal actions matched by her figurative language. Medea tells herself that she "ring[s her] heart in steel" (43) and tells Jason, upon revealing the fate of their children: "I have torn out your heart out and devoured it" (45). The comparative qualities of their hearts - impervious steel and edible flesh - serves to further illustrate the violence of Medea's behaviour and its impact upon those around her. Her declarations to Jason are peppered with rhythmic punctuations: "tigress? fury? harpy? witch?" at once invoking and inhabiting archetypes of female violence. The verbal rhythm of the piece thus helps to support the violence of the language. However, even as Medea's brutality is exposed through language, there is a repeated insistence on her humanity. Lochhead deviates from traditional standards by insisting that hers is an entirely human play. In the foreword to the play, she writes, "My Medea is not supernatural, not an immortal, but is all too human" (n.pag). In this, Lochhead is both utilising and subverting the expectations of the verse drama form - she is using verse to exacerbate the tragedy, but her poetic dialogue simultaneously emphasises Medea's humanity, even in the wake of her infanticide.

Lochhead also makes use of the traditional facets of verse drama as a means of exploring the power dynamics of language. The chorus and the rest of the characters speak in Scots whilst, in order to show her alienation from society, Medea's verse is in Standard English. In this way, Lochhead draws attention to the power of Scots as a mode of poetic expression and questions Standard English as the only method of poetic expression; surely a surprise to Wain's "bookish people". Moreover, Medea, described in the stage directions as "somehow exotic"; renders exotic and 'other' the usually dominant Standard English (9).

In every particular, therefore, Lochhead is engaging with verse drama's traditions, yet, with a marked "organic unity", has rewritten Medea for the feminist age. The form and content function in perfect sympathy, but in conflict with critical and cultural expectations. In Medea's address to the chorus, she comments

We women are too weak they say for war
wrong us[...] though [...]
we'll have your guts for garters. (10)

Lochhead is here acknowledging the patriarchal preconception of feminine weakness. Medea contradicts this in her acts of violence and in her declaration of war. Lochhead's *Medea* refashions the guts of verse drama to wear for her garters – not merely as decoration but as a political statement.

“Toward mere life, toward non-art”: A working class *Prometheus*

In 1964, E. Bentley berated the "lower middle class mentality" of naturalist drama, suggesting that it was a "move toward mere life, toward non-art" (84). The classism inherent in much dramatic

criticism is again manifested in Bentley's assumption that dramatic taste is intrinsically shaped by a person's class. Yet in the screenplay for his acclaimed 1998 film *Prometheus*, Tony Harrison attacks both Bentley and Wain's classist assumptions regarding verse drama, by re-appropriating the form to serve as a vehicle for exploring both socio-political class and linguistic concerns. His *Prometheus* has been described by Edith Hall as the most significant cultural response to the decline of Britain's industry and the destruction of its working classes (2002).

Like Lochhead, Harrison appropriates Greco-Roman mythology for his interrogations and does so while also constructing the majority of his dialogue in regional dialect - in this case, adopting a northern English vernacular. The film is a fusion of high and low culture - it is a verse drama but not written for the stage, intended instead for the more accessible medium of both film and television. Additionally, the verse uses "low" vernacular diction, once again defying Wain's emphasis that verse is used to raise drama to a "higher" class. In *Prometheus*, as in *Medea*, we see how the expectations of the verse drama form can be radically subverted to speak to a wide range of social issues.

Harrison's combination of poetry and cinematic drama provides a context in which to locate discussions regarding class and culture in the post-industrial context of the late twentieth century. In the couplet "I hide the fact, by talking broad/ That I'm a posh Olympian lord", Hermes draws attention to the fact that poetry has always been seen as the domain of the educated and wealthy, "the posh" (*Prometheus*: 18). He bemoans the fact he is "not spouting proper poetry", because he is required to keep up his everyman façade. Such lines of verse written in a screenplay designed for a wide audience indicates a deliberate re-appropriation of what has traditionally been seen as high culture and the conscious creation of a space for working-class language and concerns.

Indeed, the subversive potential of poetry is patently highlighted by Hermes, who queries "How can Olympus stay intact/ if poetry comes to Pontefract?" (5). The notion that poetry arriving in the Yorkshire town could dismantle the might of Olympus, foregrounds the power of the poetic as a tool of rebellion within the film. In addition to Harrison's emphasis upon poetry as a stolen gift which enables revolution, it also acts as an irresistible force for communication and equality in the film.

Miner 1

Have you noticed summat?

Miner 2

What?

Miner 1

Every time

We make a sentence it ends up wi' a rhyme

Miner 3

I'm not joining in, I'm not old son

Miner 5

Except someone'll complete what you've begun. (36)

Much as Miner 3 may try to resist, he cannot help but become part of a body of rhyming miners, communicating with each other using the means traditionally only afforded to those on stage or in classrooms. Miner 4 even remarks on the bizarre situation: "Making poetry out of stuff like this/ Tha's t'bloody Shakespeare of puke and piss" (38). Shakespeare, master of verse drama, is here being invoked,

no longer as a holy standard in whose image verse dramatists attempt to create, but instead as a figure of authority being undermined through the re-appropriation of his recognised verse form for the depiction of working class concerns.

The aesthetics afforded by film as a medium also serve Harrison's political goals. He states in the foreword to the screenplay of *Prometheus* that "the size of the cinema screen can give heroic stature to the most humble of faces, and this became an essential requirement in a film where the most unlikely, wheezing ex-miner is slowly made to represent Prometheus himself. Men projected onto large screens could become Titans or Gods" (Foreword to *Prometheus*: XXII).

Edith Hall has commented on the similarities between *Prometheus* and *Billy Elliot*, released two years later. She cites its similar subject-matter – the collapse of British industry, particularly that of coal mining – but comments that whilst *Billy Elliot*'s message is "ultimately about the individual's need and ability to transcend his class origins...*Prometheus*, on the other hand, which shares a similar focus on a young miner's son, is all about humanity's collective need and desire to transcend its own tragic history" (2002:134). Verse plays an intrinsic part in shaping that message. Putting verse into the mouths of sooty miners contravenes expectations and highlights the distance between the subjects (the miners) and their discourse (poetry). This in turn simultaneously exposes the class divide in poetics and serves as an attempt to subvert that divide. Harrison's rhyming miners serve an allegorical function similar to Lochhead's chorus and act as a way of questioning not only their own social history, but also the literary history of their silence. Harrison's exposition of the class system at the end of the twentieth century is perfectly served not only by his poetic verse but by the cinematic production of that verse for a wide audience. His egalitarian verse and the accessibility of its production are thus working in "organic unity".

The Olympian fire of verse drama, considered in the sixties to be in danger of going out, or serving only to warm the hearts of Wain's "bookish" people, has thus been re-appropriated to great effect in more recent years. The historical expectations of the verse drama form serve to further the political message of both Lochhead and Harrison respectively – *Medea* and *Prometheus* simply could not function with the same symbolic and linguistic outcomes had they been composed in prose. The conflict between the verse form and Lochhead and Harrison's thematics is, indeed, necessary in order for the works to have their full, powerful effect. Verse is not, for either writer, the mere "decoration of dialogue" that Eliot warned against.

Wain's insistence that verse drama is an impulse for English-speaking dramatists suggests that its regeneration is as inevitable as that of Prometheus's liver. Yet it can no longer be theorised as a static genre, given the encounters detailed above. Thus the contemporary, fire-stealing verse-dramatists have not only managed to prevent the form from becoming little more than ash upon the history of the stage, but have also shared the purloined flames with mankind as they light up present-day political discourses.

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