

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/125276/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Morra, Irene 2020. Battering rams at the Bastille: Rewriting "the Drama of the New" in Gordon Bottomley's *Gruach*. *Modern Drama* 63 (1) 10.3138/md.1068r

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3138/md.1068r>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



## ABSTRACT

### Battering Rams at the Bastille: Rewriting “the Drama of the New” in Gordon Bottomley’s *Gruach*

When Gordon Bottomley’s verse play *Gruach* (1918) was first published and staged, it was met with unanimous critical praise. Like Bottomley’s earlier, equally praised *King Lear’s Wife* (1915), *Gruach* built upon its Shakespearean inspiration (*Macbeth*) to re-imagine its central female protagonist. In its dramatization of a forceful heroine confined by social and aesthetic conventions, in its emphasis on female sexuality, expression, and agency, the play in many respects aligned itself with some of the central themes of the New Drama. It also distanced itself aesthetically from neo-Elizabethan verse drama and Victorian and Edwardian commercial approaches to the staging of Shakespearean drama. In *Gruach*, Bottomley engages critically and aesthetically with some of the central, often complex tensions that characterized definitions of the modern drama at the time. He does so, however, by insisting on a contemporary imperative to defy social realism and argumentation, and to return “poetry” – through language, stage design, and narrative – to an audience starved of beauty and the representation of timeless, essential truths. In *Gruach*, the last of his dramas for what he would later term a “theatre outworn,” Bottomley engages with his Shakespearean inspiration in such a way as to both articulate a distinct dramatic aesthetic and to address prominent contemporary themes. In so doing, he also provides a significant, overlooked manifestation of an alternative vision for the modern stage.

## Battering Rams at the Bastille: Rewriting “the Drama of the New” in Gordon Bottomley’s *Gruach*

In January 1922, the *Saturday Review* proclaimed of Gordon Bottomley’s (1874-1948) one-act play, *Gruach* (1918; published 1921): “If *Macbeth* were to be erased from knowledge *Gruach* might continue in virtue of its own power of characterization, its supple and masculine poetry, its sense of the beating of dark wings” (“Review” 40). Together with *King Lear’s Wife*, *Gruach* had “so assuredly taught us that [Bottomley] is capable of the Elizabethan quality” that they hoped now for a longer play that would continue to give “something of the Elizabethan compass”: “Of whom else would it not be a folly and a heartbreaking to ask it?” (40). The following year, the play was awarded the Femina Vie-Heureuse prize, founded to “reward a strong and original piece of work, excellent in matter and in style, promising for the future, and calculated to reveal to French readers the true spirit and character of England” (“Opening” 6). In *The Bookman*, R.L. Mégroz looked wistfully to the London production under Basil Dean: “London will have the all too rare opportunity of seeing staged a play that is as dramatic as it is poetically beautiful” (177). In a letter to Bottomley, the artist Paul Nash (1889-1946) was even more effusive in his praise:

For so comes *Gruach*; a veritable staggere! ... I don’t think I can say how much this play moves me and I pant for the excitement of seeing it staged! the whole conception, the intense beauty of the whole—its language and action—I give you every praise. It is a great play. (Bottomley and Nash 131)

*Gruach*, a single-act verse drama that imagines the first meeting of Macbeth and Gruach, the future Lady Macbeth, was the second of Bottomley’s two Shakespearean prequels. In 1915,

*King Lear's Wife* had been given pride of place in the second volume of Edward Marsh's *Georgian Poetry* anthology and received almost unanimous critical acclaim; Marsh hailed the work in a letter to Rupert Brooke as the "only one really great literary event of the year" (Hassall 277). The play was similarly praised in performance, in both Birmingham and in a one-evening performance at Her Majesty's Theatre in London. The reputation of *King Lear's Wife* was further enhanced in 1922, when Nash's speculative designs and model for the play received international acclaim at two international exhibitions of theatre and design. As Clifford Bax reflected in 1951, the critical success of both plays had suggested to many the potential for Bottomley "to storm" London and the West End (44). Over thirty years later, Claude Collier Abbott reasserted their significance, as dramas in their own right and as seminal engagements with their Shakespearean inspiration: "If to write such a prelude to *Lear* was a bold stroke, to avoid being smothered by Shakespeare's mantle was a triumph. ... Even more daring and more successful is *Gruach* the prelude to *Macbeth*..." (16).

Notwithstanding such assessments, Bottomley's plays – not to mention his contemporaneous recognition as a modern dramatist – rarely achieve even a passing mention in contemporary explorations of twentieth-century drama. Furthermore, where Bottomley's plays are acknowledged in discussions of Shakespearean adaptation, they tend to be treated briefly and, more often than not, dismissively. In what remains one of the standard assessments of 'modern Shakespeare offshoots', Ruby Cohn sees in the "faded blank verse" of *Gruach* an unfortunate adherence to tired nineteenth-century traditions (64) and an indifference to the psychological motivations of Shakespeare's heroine, despite her having been rendered "as a Hedda Gabler" (104). The nineteenth and early twentieth century had seen popular romanticizations of Shakespearean characters in narrative and art and a particular fascination

with Shakespearean heroines as a means through which to present contemporary and generally moralized definitions of girlhood and womanhood.<sup>1</sup> It had also seen a proliferation of neo-Elizabethan verse plays and increasingly more spectacular, opulent productions of Shakespearean plays. As Sillars notes of Herbert Beerbohm Tree's 1900 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "the scenes are recalled as much for the rabbits and the grass as for the confusions of the lovers taking place before them suggests that this was in literal terms a stage too far" (66). Cohn implicitly aligns Bottomley with these traditions, assessing his play as a failure both as a 'modern' drama and as an effective engagement with its Shakespearean inspiration.

While some more generous appraisals have emerged in recent years, they have tended in the main to be rather cursory. In 2002, Richard Foulkes explored the collaborative correspondence between Nash and Bottomley in order to make a "case" for a future staging of *King Lear's Wife*. In 2014, William C. Carroll cited *Gruach* as "one of the earliest texts to offer a relatively sympathetic, even proto-feminist view of Lady Macbeth" before turning his focus on more recent (novelistic) texts. In her appraisal of *King Lear's Wife*, Lynne Bradley argued that the play "celebrates Shakespeare and reinforces the status quo": "later adaptors offer a more challenging relationship" (78). Most of these critical approaches generally assume that modern engagements with Shakespeare have followed a nebulously defined progressive (or "challenging") trajectory – and position Bottomley as a curious, gently independent, but generally forgettable remnant of nineteenth-century tendencies.

By thus damning with relatively faint praise or minor attention, these appraisals risk overlooking the uniqueness of Bottomley's critical engagement with his Shakespearean

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Anna Jameson's influential *Characteristics of Women: Moral, Political, and Historical* (1832; later retitled *Shakespeare's Heroines*), Mary Cowden Clarke's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines* (1850), and Helen Faucit's *On Some of Shakespeare's Female Characters* (1885).

inspirations. In the assessments of Cohn and Bradley, Bottomley's Shakespearean plays manifest the last gasp of an outdated Victorian bardolatry. For Cohn, they are also stylistically in thrall to the "undramatic verbiage" of "nineteenth-century romanticism" (252, 64), implicitly resistant to the ambiguously defined values of a more modern twentieth-century drama. As we shall see, however, such readings give astonishingly short shrift to what is in fact a strikingly distinct engagement with Shakespearean character and theme.

Rather than wallowing in nostalgia or regressive poetic romanticism, rather than aspiring to Shakespearean adaptation or homage, Bottomley's plays enter consistently – in theme, subject, and aesthetic – into contemporaneous, evolving debates about modern drama, dramatic tradition, and the relationship between the arts. They do so, moreover, in relation to a larger, loosely coherent artistic movement that attempted to position "poetic drama" at the centre of dramatic reform. Historically, this movement has been dismissed, if not ignored entirely, by a critical narrative centred almost exclusively around the reforming energies of the 'New Drama', the drama of social realism and argumentation advocated by George Bernard Shaw and William Archer.<sup>2</sup> In associating Bottomley's plays with the much-maligned drama of the nineteenth century, that narrative continues to overlook some of the complex tensions that characterized many early twentieth-century formulations of a modern drama. *Gruach* is the last play that Bottomley composed for what he would later dismiss as the "theatre outworn" (*Stage 3*) – the mainstream commercial theatre and the proscenium stage. It is also a relatively rare example of an early twentieth-century verse play that was successful both on that mainstream stage and with a critical readership. As this essay will argue, it consequently provides an intriguing case study through which to examine some of those earlier tensions and reconsider what continues to be a limited historiographical narrative.

---

<sup>2</sup> For an exception to this trend, see Morra.

## The Drama of the New

By the turn of the century, the influential writings of Shaw and Archer had gone a considerable way to entrench critical expectations of modern dramatic writing in England. In their broad definition, the forces of dramatic reform would have to sweep away the tired nineteenth-century conventions of easy melodrama, empty spectacle, and formulaic well-made plots to ensure the centrality of social argumentation, generally through contemporary setting and dialogue. They would thus establish the centrality of drama itself as a means of engaging with – and ideally transforming – society. The New Drama had no time for historical dramas, Shakespearean prequels, or dramatic verse. It also had very little time for Shakespeare himself, particularly as manifest in the acting and staging traditions with which he continued to be interpreted on the commercial stage. In 1897, a letter from Shaw to the actress Ellen Terry was unambiguous in this regard:

The theatre is my battering ram as much as the platform or the press: that is why I want to drag it to the front. My capers are part of a bigger design than you think: Shakespear, for instance, is to me one of the towers of the Bastille, and down he must come. (Christopher 110).

Both *King Lear's Wife* and *Gruach* seem deliberately to challenge such definitions of dramatic reform: they take inspiration from Shakespeare and eschew contemporary situation and dialogue. They are also, perhaps most worryingly, written in blank verse. Then as now, the most prominent, vocal advocates of dramatic reform regarded drama in verse with scornful

amusement at best. This default response was in part informed by lingering memories of the nineteenth century, which had seen poets either composing closet dramas in scornful suspicion of the stage or penning pseudo- Shakespearean historical dramas demanding spectacle and histrionic performance. The consequent assumption was that drama in verse was both irrelevant and indifferent to the contemporary social moment and the contemporary stage. In 1932, the critic Desmond MacCarthy provided an indicative summation of these assumptions. When a verse drama is actually brought to the stage, he argued, its creators immediately decry the very qualities of that stage, and “it is universally declared that no living actor or actress can speak verse.” The audience-member attends, “nodding a brightly wan assent to praise and blame, and receiving with docility the injunction that he must not judge the play from the production, but *read* it.” When the “very stupid” press reacts negatively, the poet-dramatist decides to persevere with the form nonetheless, always invoking Shakespeare as proof of the worth of the enterprise. Ultimately, MacCarthy concludes: “Shakespeare? Yes, I have heard of Shakespeare; but in his day verse-drama was a living form. If he were reborn to-day, are you sure he would use it?” (102).

The energy of such responses was informed by more than the occasional attempt by a poet at bardolatrous imitation. As I have argued in more detail elsewhere, MacCarthy is responding to what had emerged as another, if more disparate movement equally bent upon the reform of dramatic writing. From the end of the nineteenth century, a disparate group of poets had been attempting, often in co-operation with directors and designers, to position modern drama in verse as a more legitimate means to reform contemporary drama. This movement frequently identified a fundamental sympathy between verse drama and more experimental, non-realist (and thus ‘poetic’) approaches to dramatic staging and writing on the Continent. Where



the New Drama acclaimed (an inaccurate reading of) a socially argumentative, realist Ibsen as its model, verse dramatists more often invoked Maeterlinck and Edward Gordon Craig as contemporary models – and Greek, medieval, and Japanese No drama as informing creative examples. In 1940, Bottomley recalled that the first translations of the early Maeterlinck plays and the “revolutionary first productions of Gordon Craig” had brought him to the seminal understanding “that poetry might live in the theatre, in a way that it had never done, by a synthesis of arts” (*Stage 2*). In the context of a New Drama that enshrined the social discussion play as a marker of dramatic modernity, these convictions were much more experimental than generally acknowledged. Instigated initially by W.B. Yeats in London and Dublin, this movement was represented most recognizably (in published plays, staged productions, and much literary editorializing) by John Drinkwater, Arthur Symons, Laurence Binyon, Lascelles Abercrombie, John Masefield, and Bottomley. It also found prominent support from influential theatre-managers and directors, including Annie Horniman, Barry Jackson, Ashley Dukes, and Terence Grey.

Notwithstanding this environment of encouragement and collaboration, notwithstanding the critical acclaim that greeted Bottomley’s dramas alone, the concerted attempts of these poet-reformers to establish a contemporary place for verse drama tended to fall on deaf ears. Verse drama continued to be read by many (then and now) as elitist, old-fashioned, blithely impervious to the realities of theatre and audience, and smugly reliant upon the success of past models in bygone ages. A brief glance at the published verse plays of Robert Bridges, Abercrombie, and Binyon suggests that these appraisals were not wholly inaccurate. They are much too general, however, and rarely consider the very self-consciousness with which a poet-dramatist such as Yeats, Masefield, or Bottomley was actively engaged with the very concerns that preoccupied

the acknowledged forces of artistic and dramatic reform. Central to those concerns were the relationship of drama to the contemporary moment, the reform of the stage-space, and the very significance of drama itself as modern expression. Like Shaw and Archer, these poet-reformers were appalled that drama had become reduced to the position of 'theatre' in the nineteenth century, a merely formulaic entertainment that traduced its true potential and power to affect. They too were convinced that modern dramatic writing could and should exert a significant and profoundly altering effect on the audience. They were adamant, however, that any true dramatic reform was equally compromised by the prevailing Ibsenite insistence on social realism and argumentation.

From the perspective of the verse dramatists, the ideals of Ibsenism countered the very significance of drama as *art*. In their conception, drama is at its most powerful when it exists as suggestive expression; it must appeal not to reason or the quotidian, but to an essential, implicitly spiritual understanding of shared human experience and emotion. Only verse, with its innate resistance to the surface realism of contemporary dialogue, could effect that experience: as Bottomley would assert, "there is a heightening power in [verse]" (*Stage* 18). Equally central, for many, was the potential for folklore, myth, historical setting, and the conventions of earlier dramatic traditions to strengthen that poetic suggestiveness. Some found inspiration in the verse patterns of medieval drama and the ritualistic aesthetic of Greek drama. At a time when British Ibsenism insisted upon contemporary social settings and realist dialogue, Yeats, Drinkwater, and Bottomley wrote verse plays set in ancient Iceland, England, Ireland, and Scotland. Many of these dramas built upon folk legend; all centred around characters in situations or moments far removed from contemporary, quotidian experience.

In the first half of the century, the typical critical response to poetic drama was to associate its advocates with a deliberate resistance to the concerns of the contemporary moment and a consequently blinkered, unworldly enthusiasm for romanticisms past. In this critical climate, a resistance to social realism, a persistence with verse, and what Archer termed a “critical overvaluation of ancient, and undervaluation of modern, drama” (385) was seen as stubbornly anti-modern – in both a social and aesthetic sense. Harley Granville Barker claimed that in “[revolting] from the commonly accepted ‘realism’ of the modern play,” poet-dramatists had “revolted in effect ... from freedom to fetters” (24-5). Archer associated them with a reactionary “orthodoxy” that denied the “stark essentials of mimetic art,” the “drama of the new” (385). Equally regressive (and thus inauthentic) was any attempt to marry mimetic representation with a more suggestive, symbolic aesthetic. In his earliest approaches to verse drama, Bottomley had taken inspiration from the Jacobean: their use of “patterned, unrealistic speech” could serve a “realistic plot” while at the same time ensuring that it spoke beyond an immediate social context (*Stage 2-3*). In *The Old Drama and the New* (1923), however, Archer reinforced a presiding assumption:

The two elements of the old drama, imitation and lyrical passion, have at last consummated their divorce. For lyrical passion we go to opera and music drama, for interpretation through imitation we go to the modern realistic play. And surely we ought to recognise that this divorce, so obviously inevitable, is a good and not a bad thing. (387)

Anyone whose aesthetic continued to ignore this modern “divorce” between imitation and lyrical passion was promoting a drama that went against “the spirit of the modern man” (387) and that embraced “illogical impurities” (385).

In a 1927 letter to Nash, Bottomley objected haplessly to the implications of these readings: “[I was] sincerely puzzled by the crude misfit of the classification which the New Vision had made of me, and could only protest feebly like an old-fashioned Radical being driven off to vote in a Conservative carriage-and-pair by a deaf coachman” (Bottomley and Nash 194). Bottomley’s plays can hardly be held up as overlooked manifestations of old-fashioned Radical politics in either a social or aesthetic sense. They do, however, frequently engage with themes of social inequity, the confinements of marriage, and female sexuality and free will from what would have otherwise been recognized as a socially progressive perspective. Rather than addressing these themes through discussion or argumentation, Bottomley presents them in narratives far removed from contemporary situation, and in an unrhymed blank verse punctuated with moments of expressive passion and metaphor. In so doing, he posits an alternative aesthetic through which to present some of the themes so frequently associated with the “drama of the new.”

Notwithstanding these thematic sympathies, Bottomley, like many of his fellow verse dramatists, positioned this aesthetic much more self-consciously against the New Drama than against the preceding stage traditions that both movements were contesting. This instinct in itself points to one of the defining characteristics of much of that verse drama movement. Shaw and Archer focussed their energies on clearing the contemporary stage of previous practices in order to assert its modern argumentative relevance. Bottomley and his peers, however, did not just reject that emphasis on argument and social realism: they refused to embrace a definition of modern art bent upon the rejection of earlier traditions. Throughout his career, Bottomley challenged any assumption that self-conscious innovation or challenge was a marker of contemporary authenticity. In 1927, he rebuked Nash: “you seem to believe that progress in art is

possible, just as progress in Science is possible, whereas I believe that art has always been complete since it first began to be expressive and that local variations of method ... never change or vary the things an artist can say” (Bottomley and Nash 192). For Bottomley, the most vital modern art is that which recognizes and transmutes the truth inherent in previous expressions.

Rather than embracing nineteenth-century stage traditions or attempting to imitate Shakespearean drama, however, Bottomley identified most prominently with what he saw as formative traditions in nineteenth-century poetry and visual art. These traditions, he maintained – never mimetic, never argumentative – provided the necessary example and inspiration for any formulation of a contemporary poetic art. Bottomley explicitly rejected what he identified as “the present prevalent insistence that the business of the arts is to treat of life in the world of to-day” (qtd. in Abbott 12). True “art is a distillation of life and nature – not a recording or a commenting”: it is concerned with representing “the essentials of life, the part that does not change” (qtd. in Abbott 12). In 1893, he had been searching for illustrations of dramatic performances in *The Pall Mall Budget* when he experienced a Damascene moment: “I came to a reproduction of [Dante Gabriel] Rossetti’s small ‘Blessed Damozel’, the head only, with a plain gold background”: the effect was to “[destroy] most of the previous significances of life, and [create] a complete new range of values” (qtd. in Abbott 11). In 1940, he reflected, “I venerate him still” (qtd. in Abbott 12). For Bottomley, the work of Rossetti provided a profound example (in both poetry and painting) of a symbolist, suggestive art that could recognize and reawaken – but never imitate – essential, implicitly spiritual truths: “the past/Must be resumed in each of us, to each/Deliver its attainment and its hope” (“To C.H.S.” 3). Rossetti had revived and renewed, “by moody English ways,” the art of a bygone age: “The lost Italian vision, the passionate/Vitality of art more rich than life,/More real than the day’s reality” (“To C.H.S.” 2).

In the dedication to *Gruach*, Bottomley celebrates Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts for having in turn “continued and renewed” the “mysterious beauty” of Rossetti’s art (“To C.H.S.” 3). He also expands upon the values that inform his aesthetic convictions:

I have understood that I desire from art  
 And from creation not repeated things  
 Of every day, not the mean content  
 Or discontent of average helpless souls,  
 [...]
   
 But unmatched moments and exceptional deeds  
 And all that cannot happen every day  
 And rare experience of earth’s chosen men  
 In which I cannot ...  
 ...  
 Share unless they are held  
 Sublimated and embodied in beauty. (“To C.H.S.” 4)

In this rejection of social realism and topical setting, emphasis on beauty, and focus on the “rare experience of chosen men,” Bottomley positions himself overtly against the prevailing expectations of the New Drama and engages implicitly with their emphasis on social reform in very different terms. For Bottomley, it is in the symbolist work of the self-defined apostles of Rossetti that a “new life” can be most effectively imagined: “Out of the England that is here and now--/A region better than dreams, a dawn-lit state” (“To C.H.S.” 3).

Such visions of a “dawn-lit state”, dependent upon the perpetuation of artistic beauty as spiritual truth in the contemporary world, were clearly at odds with the more socially

argumentative advocates of modern dramatic writing. Indeed, in his letters, prefaces, and poetic dedications to his works, Bottomley frequently assumed that his contemporaries would see him as old-fashioned in his sustained conviction that “romance is wisdom and truth” (“To C.H.S.”<sup>4</sup>). Many of these statements are disingenuous, however; in the very act of these poetic dedications, Bottomley was aligning himself both with what he saw as a visionary past and with what he knew to be a community of similar, like-minded artists in the present. As Causey notes, Bottomley came of artistic age in the 1890s, “when the collaboration of poet and illustrator was a central form of artistic expression” (xiv). Much of Bottomley’s correspondence reveals an active development of this tendency, where poets, painters, designers, and dramatists recognized an essential sympathy of aesthetic intent. The work of Shannon and Ricketts – as artists, typographers, writers, and founders of the aestheticist magazine *The Dial* and the Vale Press – espoused a collaborative and often synthetic ideal of artistic expression.<sup>3</sup> *King Lear’s Wife* is dedicated to the poet, engraver, and writer Thomas Sturge Moore: working in both “speaking form and plastic speech,” he proved himself “by more than rime/A prince of poets in our time” (“To T. Sturge Moore” 131). In 1922, Nash, whose association with surrealism and modernism would position him as a major figure in the development of twentieth-century art, wrote to Bottomley, “We belong to a secret freemasonry of some world we both have secret knowledge of and are for ever trying to describe in different ways” (Bottomley and Nash).

Towards the end of his career, Bottomley would assert, “the arts are the language of [an] immortal state: they may be collectively called poetry” (qtd. in Abbott 12). For Bottomley and his correspondents, theatre, with its simultaneous celebration of the visual and aural, was the ideal space through which to manifest this collective – and increasingly synthetic – vision of

---

<sup>3</sup> Ricketts also illustrated the plays of Oscar Wilde and became a much-recognized theatre and costume designer for plays by Shaw, Maeterlinck, Masefield, and Yeats.

artistic expression. Indeed, for Nash, Bottomley's plays are "the sort of plays I should like to write if I was a dramatist and they make the pictures I enjoy to see in my mind" (Bottomley and Nash). In 1948, Bottomley recounted his eventual conviction "that poetry might live in the theatre, in a way that it had never done, by a synthesis of arts" (*Purposes 2*). Rather than manifesting the last gasps of a nineteenth-century melodramatic tradition, these ideals resonate with the aesthetic theories of Walter Pater, with the energies of the symbolist poets, and with the aesthetic explorations of such representatives of high modernism as Joyce and Eliot.

*Gruach* represents a relatively early manifestation of Bottomley's aesthetic explorations. Following its production, Bottomley turned to write exclusively for what he identified as a more ambitious culture of amateur theatre, untrammelled either by entrenched traditions or a blinkered insistence on social realism. In those subsequent years, he would develop ever-more experimental ambitions for what he ruefully termed the "theatre unborn" (*Stage 3*). As the final play written before that self-conscious retreat, *Gruach* constitutes a significant, overlooked example of attempts to counteract the prevailing strength of the New Drama with an alternative, "poetic" ideal of modern drama on the mainstream stage itself.

### ***Gruach***

In *Gruach*, Bottomley negotiates simultaneously with nineteenth-century traditions, with Ibsenite themes about the sexual and social subjugation of women, and with the legacy of *Macbeth* itself. Many of these negotiations are implicit, contained within a drama of character, poetry, and passion that, as suggested by reviews at the time, seemed both to promise a vital future for poetic drama and "something of the Elizabethan compass" for a contemporary moment



and stage. Throughout the play, Bottomley in fact problematizes any reading of *Gruach* as an explanatory prequel to the future actions of Shakespeare's heroine. Instead, he implicitly critiques both the thematic and narrative focus of Shakespeare's play and subsequent, romanticized aestheticizations of Lady Macbeth on stage and in art. In dramatizing an inevitable – and implicitly problematic – relationship between these traditions, he also suggests that the artistic “revival and renewal” essential to vital contemporary art demands a *critical* engagement with expressions from both the recent and more established past.

In subject and theme, both *King Lear's Wife* and *Gruach* construct a decidedly ambivalent relationship with their Shakespearean inspiration. *King Lear's Wife* focuses on the situation and character of the young, unmarried Goneril and two other prominent female characters, King Lear's invalid wife and his mistress. All are confined and contained by the tyranny of Lear. Structurally, however, Bottomley implicitly liberates them from the tyranny of the earlier play itself: Lear, a selfish bully, becomes merely peripheral to the central drama and focus of the play. For Bradley, the play's consequently “domesticated focus” suggests that it is “trying to discover what about [Lear's] personal history . . . makes him act the way that he does” (77). Cohn similarly assumes that the play exists as an inept prequel to explain Lear's later actions, objecting that that “psychological rationale” fails by rendering Lear “a philandering weakling” (251). Both readings insist on evaluating the work in relation to the central character of Shakespeare's play. In so doing, however, they overlook the extent to which *King Lear's Wife* defies such constructions of lineage to formally and thematically foreground its female protagonist's heroic defiance of a pervasive, patriarchal authority. It does so, moreover, by

dramatizing the unnatural confinement of women to a “domesticated” social structure dominated by “philandering weaklings.”<sup>4</sup>

This emphasis on the containment of women within oppressive social and artistic structures similarly defines the aesthetic and narrative focus of *Gruach*. The play makes no direct reference either to *Macbeth*, Macbeth, or Shakespeare, and many of its central conflicts (found in neither Holinshed nor Shakespeare) defy any attempt to read it as a straightforward prequel or origin story. It also, however, takes as its dramatic focus one of Shakespeare’s most notorious characters and retains some of her most superficially recognizable characteristics: like Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth, Gruach sleepwalks, defies conventional gender roles, and forcefully articulates her will and ambition. As perhaps most famously manifest in the personal reflections of Sarah Siddons (“Remarks on the Character of Lady Macbeth,” published 1834) and the performances of Ellen Terry and Susan Bernhardt, the nineteenth century had seen various attempts to ‘understand’ as much as interpret the character and actions of Lady Macbeth. By invoking some of her most well-known characteristics, Bottomley suggests a similar commitment to these questions. At the same time, however, he re-defines that character within a very different environment. The effect is to suggest an implicit critique both of the original play and of subsequent receptions that continue to confine any ‘understanding’ of his protagonist in relation to her role as “Lady Macbeth.”

The plot of *Gruach* is simple: it opens on the unhappy eve of Gruach’s wedding to Conan, Thane of Fortingall, a match forced upon her and her betrothed by the dynastic concerns of her imminent mother-in-law, Morag, Lady of Fortingall. Macbeth, an envoy from the King arrives, seeking directions. Gruach and Macbeth are immediately attracted to each other; Macbeth stays the night; Gruach sleep-walks into Macbeth’s chamber and the two reveal a

---

<sup>4</sup> See Morra 76-88.

relatively mutual desire. The play ends with Gruach and Macbeth escaping together, into the night – but not before Gruach pens three farewell letters – to Morag, to Conan, and to her cousin Fern – that exult in her imminent liberation and reinforce her independent will. Just before they depart, Macbeth asks Gruach to tell him her name. She refuses; to do so would be to acknowledge an identity in “this iron-coloured prison”:

Within the dark immuring womb a blind  
 And unseen child is nameless, and I too,  
 Unliving and immured, will have no name  
 In my subjection ... (57)

Instead of focussing on her passion for Macbeth, Gruach dwells on her prison; she demands that Macbeth vow to “return and tumble down these walls” (57). Macbeth objects; it is a “holy house” and a “shrine” for him now: “We cannot burn the past; it would stand yet/In you, in me. Then let it stand for me” (57). Gruach insists, however, disregarding Macbeth’s invocation of a new, shared identity forged in romantic passion. At the end of the play, Macbeth is silent: the stage directions specify that Gruach walks to the threshold, “turns to the Envoy,” and says, “Come, Macbeth.” She goes out, and “the Envoy follows her” (58).

Throughout the play, Bottomley contests conventional idealizations of romantic union, particularly as a means of liberation or self-realization for entrapped women. As in *Macbeth*, the imagery and poetry of *Gruach* – primal, active and direct with relatively few set-pieces – evoke an environment dominated by natural and elemental forces. Gruach enters with “a great tangle of Spring wild flowers” (12); she is a “bride in the bud” yet to be ‘plucked’, berated by Morag for walking barefoot outside before her wedding day (12). Macbeth is a “handsome hawk-faced young man” (17): he reads “the mounting snow-packs [that] clot in the steely sky” to know that

he must ask for accommodation (18). He insists on taking his own horse at the end of the play: “He saved me in a clenched, stark river-fight”; “He saved me from a murderer in the night”; “He will speak to me before I am in his sight,/He will stamp until I speak to him, and touch” (52). This closeness to nature is also mirrored in Macbeth’s immediate, elemental response to Gruach. He likens her situation in “this tower of darkness” to that of a mother bee, “straitened in a blind and deepy cell” (35).

In *Macbeth*, the relationship between natural and social order is uncontested until it is disrupted by murderous action. On the night that Duncan is killed, Lady Macbeth dwells upon the shriek of the owl as that of a fatal bellman; the earth “was feverous and did shake” (2.3.55), a falcon is killed by a mousing owl, and Duncan’s horses eat each other, having “turned wild in nature” “as they would/Make war with mankind” (2.4.16-18). *Gruach* clearly alludes to the earlier play; Gruach’s final exit, for example, is marked by an owl who “cries twice with a long retreating sound, as if disturbed and flying away” (58). In Bottomley’s drama, however, nature does not consistently reflect the state of social order, nor is the ‘naturalness’ of that social order necessarily accepted by the play itself. Instead, nature is depicted as subject to the interpretations placed upon it – and as nourishing the complex instincts of a heroine against a social structure built on fixed, gendered assumptions about ambition, authority, and desire.

Unlike the mother bee, therefore, Gruach defies her confinement and refuses to accept a similar naturalness to her imprisonment. Instead, she expresses a unique, authoring response to her environment in language that resists convention and poetic cliché. In verse that underlines Bottomley’s closer affiliation with symbolist poetry than with the “undramatic verbiage” of “nineteenth-century romanticism,” Gruach responds in sexually charged metaphor. When she spills spring flowers onto her wedding gown, Fern describes the premature “stain”: “the tissue was

pure” (13). Gruach, however, sees no difference between the stain and Fern’s embroidery; both signify a submission against which she revolts:

I hate all yellow things,  
 And most the yellowness of Springtime life—  
 Yellow and yellow, cowslip, crocus and primrose (13)

In this context, the “yellowness of Springtime life” suggests a natural fecundity akin to that of the virginal bride. Gruach does not just reject this construction, but defines herself in relation to a different flower, the purple hellebore that she has “fostered ... year after year”:

I love to feel it would kill me if it could,  
 And that I need not let it unless I wish. (14)

When Macbeth first enters, he is wearing this purple flower in his cap. After he unknowingly drops it, Gruach fastens the hellebore in her bodice and addresses it as it “[moves] with [her] life-breath”:

The spirit of thy softness enters me  
 When surfaces of lips and fingers meet  
 Thy filmy stillnesses; ...  
 [...]  
 ... ah, look up  
 And breathe again to me his earlier warmth,  
 As if the vital tremor of his person  
 Mixed with my heat that veins thy texture now. (27)

Gruach’s speech both invokes and contradicts the earlier, passive image of “stained” tissue and springtime flowers to dramatize a more primal, intuitive – and potentially violent – sexuality. It

also aligns that sexuality with an unconventional dominance, where Gruach alone both defines the pleasure of the flower and knows that it is in her power to allow it to “kill” her should she “wish.”

Gruach’s unique, poetic, and sexualized response to external and internal ‘nature’ reinforces the strength and distinctiveness of her character. It also encourages a decidedly ambivalent reading of her marriage to Macbeth as a definitive resolution to her attempts at self-liberation. The play constantly qualifies that relationship; it is not insignificant that the stage directions tend to refer to Macbeth merely as “the Envoy.” At the end of the first scene, Macbeth vows to return to the castle some day “as a ghost walks who has left a thing undone” (34). Gruach is set to be married the next day; this invocation of an uncertain Hamlet (or his dead father) only reinforces the empty uselessness of his assertion. Rather than acting to determine fate, Macbeth is passive: he hopes to dream of Gruach, but “She never comes as I could come to her” (37). Instead, Gruach comes sleepwalking to his bed, speaking of her desire and thus breaching – naturally and instinctively – what Macbeth describes as “our earth-taught reticence” (41), what “timid men teach women to wait to hear” (44) and what he has not dared to speak. She also determines the future course of action: it is Gruach who decides that they must elope. Gruach herself is the unavoidable ‘fate’ of Macbeth; like the poisonous purple flower that she “[fosters] year after year” against the yellowness of spring (14), she instinctively subverts “earth-taught” associations to enact a powerfully natural sexuality and authority.

Bottomley suggests that such associations are not just inherent to the society of the play; they are also innate to any art that refuses to engage with a contemporary truth. Like its heroine, the play challenges conventions of poetic expression and their formulation of romance and desire. Although Macbeth is ecstatic at Gruach’s revelation of her desire, his subsequent, familiar

language of impassioned possession renders him problematic as her lover: “I possess:/I am here to take my own” (39); “You shall devote/Fire of your brain, fire of your heart, to me” (39).

Gruach never responds to such exhortations. Instead, she orders Macbeth to take a different horse, decides upon their escape plans, pins her hair up with his “little dagger” (51), and when Macbeth fears for his life at the thought of breaking the King’s seal, reminds him: “Your life is not your own: it is now mine” (53). This performance of dominance, possession, and practical planning anticipates the later actions of Lady Macbeth. Bottomley recontextualizes that dominance, however, to emphasize his protagonist’s instinctive, heroic resistance to an unnatural confinement in which both Macbeth and the language of romantic convention remain complicit.

This emphasis is further ensured by the play’s clear engagement with the signifying potential of theatrical aesthetic. Bottomley’s play does not depict an all-consuming romance, but rather dramatizes the primarily self-willed escape of its heroine from an oppressive environment. It does so, moreover, within a theatrical aesthetic whose social and psychological realism contrasts emphatically with the characteristic opulence and romanticism of Victorian Shakespeare and the commercial productions of the actor managers. William Poel’s turn-of-the-century productions of Shakespeare had established a strong precedent for staging reforms, and had a particularly strong influence on Granville Barker’s influential Savoy productions, which famously substituted symbolist staging for realist spectacle. It is perhaps not coincidental that these productions were staged in the very years (1912-14) in which Bottomley was composing his Shakespearean plays. *Gruach* similarly refuses to illustrate through elaborate set, costume, or stage machinery: Bottomley hoped that its staging could be “[trusted] to the element of greater taste and imagination which came from Gordon Craig’s stylistic interpretation of realistic factors” (*Stage 3*). This emphasis on stylistic interpretation is invited by the play’s comparatively

small cast of eleven and its minimalist mise-en-scène: it is set in a single room, “the hall of a small black stone castle in the North of Scotland” in which a log fire burns to the side (7). It is marked by crude, simple furniture: “a heavy table,” a “stone fireplace,” “two lighted torches ... set in rings,” while in the back of the set, a staircase “curves upward out of sight” (7). This set, with its simplistic suggestion of a harsh, realist atmosphere, acts as a visual means to foreground the fundamental conflict between environment and repressed passion that becomes of the focus of the play.

Bottomley’s presentation of this environment is self-consciously anti-romantic. Conor whets a hunting-spear with a small stone; his mother warms her hands by the fire; Fern, her daughter, sits nearby on a small stool. This picture of crude simplicity is counteracted only by the “heavy white robe covered with a meandering, close pattern in gold” that Fern is stitching for Gruach’s wedding; it is so “long and ample” as to spread over an empty stool (8). The opening tableau thus establishes a visual contrast between the environment of life in the castle and the wedding robe whose very lavishness – with its attendant, conventional associations with blushing brides, romantic union, and communal celebration – is made to seem so very out of place. Gruach enters, wet from the spring meadows: she spills flowers onto the gown, speaks bitterly of her impending marriage, and resignedly “[stuffs] the golden gown into a tight bundle under her arm” (15). She rejects the costume and ‘theatre’ of marriage for which the gown is being prepared. This rejection is reinforced by the visual aesthetic of the play itself, whose realism foregrounds the gown as anachronistic, if not unnatural in that setting. As staged to an audience culturally accustomed to the visual beauty of entombed Juliets, entowered Sylvias, and beflowered Ophelias in painting, illustration, and theatre, this presentation also acts as a potential



comment against the traditional aestheticization – and aesthetic containment – of Shakespearean heroines.

It also points, yet again, to Bottomley's conviction of the importance of artistic renewal as continuation. Notwithstanding his enthusiasm for Rossetti and the pre-Raphaelites, Bottomley implicitly challenges the romanticized neo-medievalism that had defined many of their representations. In the opening exchanges of the play, Bottomley establishes an immediate distance between the harsh, natural reality of his medieval setting and the more romanticized re-imaginings of the Middle Ages that had so dominated the late-Victorian and Edwardian imagination. Throughout the play, this reality is defined both by man's elemental relationship with nature and by hierarchical social structures that effectively contradict the utopian neo-medievalism famously espoused by William Morris, Edward Burne-Jones, and, to a lesser extent, Rossetti. The play begins with Domhnal, a steward, informing Morag that arrangements are underway for the next day's feast. Rather than evoking celebratory preparation, Domhnal's lines emphasize a primal, brutal relationship between man and nature. This focus is mirrored in the abruptness and broken rhythm of the play's opening lines:

The meat is killed: the veal is blooded: the trout are caught.

Lambs are too young to kill, so four were needed. (8)

Bottomley reinforces the naturalism of this tone and setting in Morag's reply: to Domhnal's information that "the women make ready to bake all night," she focuses on the hard reality of their situation, telling him to "stop such waste of fire" (8). To Domhnal's information that they will work with torches through the night to garnish the stables, she similarly replies, "Waste, waste, and never any forethought is here" (8). To Domhnal's query as to how many guest-chambers should be prepared, she asserts that the guests must ride home. As suggested in both

the content and the short, direct structure of these lines, the high-born characters in the play exist in a state of rugged hardship in relation both to nature and to their fellow man.

The play also calls subtle attention to the extent to which this environment – and the narrative/dramatic tradition through which it is disseminated – prioritizes the interior dramas of high-born characters, to the exclusion of a larger social reality. In its focus on *Gruach*, the play is of course complicit in this structure. Nonetheless, the opening of *Gruach* does not begin by introducing the protagonist or her situation: instead, it foregrounds social inequality in a manner that would not have been out of place in the contemporary discussion play. When Morag objects to the “waste” of torches and fire at the start of the play, she orders Domhnal to “tell the bonders’ wives that every house/Must send a basketful of loaves at dawn/For their lord’s wedding-feast” (8). Rather than many men working with torches, one must “sit up till midnight” until the moon “[joins] him and [works] with him” (8). The conversation moves thereafter to a discussion of *Gruach*’s unhappiness at the impending marriage. That the play should begin by emphasizing social hierarchy and control is significant: it implicitly aligns the drama’s central focus on *Gruach*’s concerns with freedom, free will, and community with a larger social reality where “the bonders’ wives” continue to be subject to the same powers against which *Gruach* ultimately rebels. It also hints that that larger reality will remain essentially untouched and unchanged by that one, individual rebellion.

Bottomley reinforces this reading in the conclusion of the play. Instead of concluding the action with his protagonists, Bottomley – as he had with *King Lear’s Wife* – ends with two extended conversations between servants, before having Conor deliver a final, anti-climatic monologue. The two exchanges discuss the actions and main characters of the play. In the first exchange, “the girl” is attempting to flee from service, so terrified is she by a nightly vision of

Gruach. In the second, the two serving-men are discussing their mutual state of drunkenness, and only muse in passing as to whether or not Gruach will “forsake her bed” in the morn (65). In both of these conversations, however, the actions of Gruach are peripheral to the personal dramas with which these characters identify. They invoke the oft-debated dramatic role of the night porter in *Macbeth*, with his black, ignorant humour and his injunction, “I pray you, remember the porter” (2.3.17). When combined with the play’s opening focus on the violence of social hierarchy, the effect, structurally, is to dramatize a fundamental tension between the play’s primary focus on “earth’s chosen men” and the lived realities of those who must serve them.

It is also to reinforce the play’s constant tempering of Gruach’s elopement as unambiguously decisive and triumphant action. Gruach’s first, instinctive attempts at escape manifest themselves not in imaginings of romance or of solitary flight, but in poignant appeals to other women. Her first sleep-walking visit is to Fern, to whom she appeals: “Where is the door? There must be a way out:/Will you not shew it to me?” (10). She does not seek a husband, but fellowship:

I cannot stand alone

Even the trees and mountains in this wildness

Huddle together against the blasts of time

And planetary tempests: what should I do? (45)

On the eve of her wedding night, Gruach also appeals to Fern in sexually suggestive language that seeks a stronger, sustaining union: “Your love brings strength, and it will be your love/That presses and nestles about me when I wear [my wedding gown]” (15). Fern, however, is herself so in thrall to received conventions that she can dwell only on her desire to be wooed into marriage herself. She might, as Morag notes, be similarly “afraid of marriage,” “too much fixed/On the

occurrences of a single day” (11), but she sees in the institution of marriage itself a delivery from loneliness and solitude that the play consistently refuses to endorse. In dramatizing the limitations of Gruach’s final escape with Macbeth, her “latest hope,” Bottomley contests romanticized constructions of chivalric rescue. In dramatizing her initial attempts to appeal to the women characters, he also underlines the insidious pervasiveness of those conventions.

In the character of Fern, Bottomley emphasizes the extent to which the patriarchal constructions of women challenged in the play – that of the submissive bride, helpless victim, political pawn – have become internalized by women themselves to ensure that his heroine essentially “stand[s] alone.” In the character of Morag, he presents a character who has extricated herself from those constructions only by imposing them violently upon others. Morag attempts to ensure the patriarchal lineage of her son by forcing him marriage; she explains to Conan, “[Gruach’s] mother’s lands/March with your father’s: they must be joined again” (11). Conan reflects ruefully on the “inconvenient,” “unavoidable” “wisdom of his mother” that “land is land”; he would rather wed the blacksmith’s daughter whose “lips bring thoughts of dew on rosy plums” (66). When she escapes, Gruach leaves a taunting message for Morag:

I am not of your blood to obey you; I will not mother your blood. I would live,  
so I leave you. ... I have given away my lands; keep your hands and feet from  
them. (55)

Morag has defined the “mothering” of “blood” as the assertion and expansion of political power, irrespective of emotional costs. Gruach refuses to participate and perpetuate this structure, and ‘gives away’ the lands of her own mother in an implicit attempt to break free and thus “live”.

In Morag, Bottomley dramatizes the violent unnaturalness of ruthless political ambition. He also, however, constructs an ironic resonance with Shakespeare’s *Lady Macbeth* that further

problematizes Gruach's final actions. Morag takes an almost sadistic interest in Gruach's imminent submission to social and sexual structures: "It is over: she is spent: she will submit"; "no one will come here who would listen to her" (16). This anticipation of Gruach's submission extends beyond Morag's political authority; it suggests an 'unnatural' sexual energy not unlike Lady Macbeth's entreaty that the spirits "unsex me here" (1.5.39). The allusion is reinforced in Morag's language of disgust at her son, which resonates with Lady Macbeth's famous rejection of maternal love as she exhorts Macbeth to be "so much more the man" (1.7.51). In lines reminiscent of Lady Macbeth's attacks on Macbeth's manhood, Morag rails against the "half man" that she has "borne and suckled" who allows his bride to "go out alone" (9). In Shakespeare's play, the name and fate of Lady Macbeth are tied to her husband, and her ambitions focus exclusively on the ruthless realization of his political power. In this context, it is significant that Gruach's letter is written in prose: in taunting Morag in her own terms, unaware of her own impending re-enactment of Morag's ruthless political ambitions, Gruach implicitly diminishes her own liberated, expressive potential as an "exceptional" heroine.

Ultimately, when read alongside *Macbeth*, the fate of Gruach becomes tragic; she will come to embrace and represent the very structures that she has fled. Notwithstanding the triumphant tone of Gruach's final lines, the structure of the play hints at her perpetual imprisonment within the narrative and themes of the earlier drama. At the end of *Gruach*, Bottomley again reinforces this suggestion in the conversations between the servants. The exchanges are anti-climactic in more senses than one; they seem to digress into their allusions to the later fate of Gruach, invoking images and ideas that have not been the focus of Bottomley's drama. The serving-girl reveals she has second sight, and envisions Gruach in a "a golden crown as if she is a queen," bearing a "red dagger" (62). Her vision is countered by the other women:

“Queens carry sceptres, they are not seen with daggers” and, “how can Gruach ever become a queen?” (62). In a play in which the heroine demonstrates no interest in murdering kings or becoming Queen, these allusions to events in Shakespeare’s play seem to ‘return’ Gruach unnaturally to the familiar Shakespearean narrative. As such, they invoke – implicitly to complicate – questions of artistic lineage, influence, and adaptation.

Throughout the play, and particularly in his staging and language, Bottomley extends those questions to engage with the larger tradition through which Shakespeare had become represented on stage and in art. In these final exchanges, he implicitly reinforces that preoccupation. At the time of *Gruach*’s composition, one of the most famous (and famously extravagant) productions of *Macbeth* remained that of Henry Irving, from 1888. The production’s influential afterlife had also been extended significantly by the well-known portrait of Ellen Terry in the role by John Singer Sargent (1889): both the portrait and the extravagant dress worn by Terry would become, for some, a prominent representation of the visual opulence of the Victorian stage. As an avid collector of Victorian art, Bottomley would have been familiar with the portrait, in which Terry stands not unlike the Gruach of the servant-girl’s vision, holding a crown above her head, with a fixedly imperious expression that mirrors the girl’s vision of a “pitiless face” (62). In the portrait, Terry wears a green-and-blue dress, her red hair braided like that of Gruach in the play; it too “falls at each side of her face and is bunched at intervals with knots of green ribbon” (12). The servant notes that the gown “is covered with green, bright eyes” (62), reminiscent of the Japanese beetle wings that famously decorated Terry’s gown in both the portrait and on stage. Bottomley does not develop this potential allusion any further, but implicitly invites a final recognition of the various means through which suggestive “art” – poetry, painting, drama fixed in portraiture – can perpetually acquire complex, contradictory

meanings around a shared, ever-evolving ambition to “sublimate and embody in beauty” the “rare experience of chosen men.”

At the same time, in containing that final suggestive imagery within the accounts of serving-people, Bottomley invokes and problematizes assumptions about authorship and the heroic subject. He also constructs a subtle challenge to traditional, potentially complacent expectations of form and genre. When Nash reported the displeasure of Edward Marsh with that ending – “he thinks it is too long a ‘cooling off’ after the thrill of Macbeths scene” (Bottomley and Nash 131) – Bottomley acknowledged that he was attempting deliberately to challenge conventional expectations:

... in England people have been swamped by the French bien faite play of the 19<sup>th</sup>. century, and will only let plays be ended one way. They always speak as if a play must be one specific thing: but that idea must be destroyed ... the truth is that a play can be anything. (Bottomley and Nash 133)

As Bottomley notes, when he wrote a similarly unconventional ending for *King Lear's Wife*, the lead actress (Viola Tree) had demanded that it be cut: “when I wouldn’t she cut out half of it all by herself” (Bottomley and Nash 133). In these final exchanges, *Gruach* supports Bottomley’s assertion “that a play can be anything” by simultaneously invoking and confounding contemporaneous expectations of dramatic unity and thematic focus. As such, it again asserts a distinctly experimental instinct in relation to dramatic structure, style, and tradition that continues to remain curiously unacknowledged and underexplored.

Like much of the New Drama, *Gruach* posits a definition of modern drama that reacts against complacent social and narrative structures and a superficial, escapist theatre. It does so, however, by insisting on a contemporary imperative to defy social realism and return “poetry” – through language, stage design, and narrative – to an audience starved of beauty and the representation of timeless, essential truths. The success of that ambition is suggested in the critical praise heaped upon *Gruach* in both publication and production. In terms that echo Bottomley’s emphasis on renewal and continuation, Nash observed that rather than imitating Shakespeare, the playwright had “followed the verse form of an imperishable tradition” to create timeless characters through his own “tremendously real imagination” (Bottomley and Nash 135). He had also defied contemporary conventions by refusing to create “so many puppets squeaking according to plan, and hopping about a la mode” (Bottomley and Nash 135). In 1949, the theatre historian Ernest Reynolds reinforced this reading: Bottomley’s dramas are “both interesting and important,” “far removed from the ‘gramercy, dame’ school of poetic drama” (79); *The Crier by Night* (1902) “is universal in its appeal” and “has that quality of permanence which all great poetry should have” (80).

Such readings have done little to establish a place for Bottomley in the dramatic repertoire or canon. As Bax argues, initially that marginalisation had as much to do with Bottomley’s willed retreat from the professional theatre as did it with any critical intransigence. In 1948, Bottomley judged that *Gruach* had been seen in “every part of the English-speaking world by now” (*Stage* 17). He had become convinced, however, that his plays could not find appropriate producers or sufficiently sympathetic critics. Bottomley did not even attend the London production of *Gruach*: he was discouraged that Basil Dean had not adopted Nash’s designs or allowed sufficient rehearsal time for a drama that depended so much on the



appropriate approach towards speaking verse (Bottomley and Nash 167). For Bottomley, only Shakespeare's verse could be performed under such conditions, as audiences and critics "know what is coming all the time" with Shakespeare (Bottomley and Nash 167). Ignoring repeated reports of the production's success, he asserted that his verse demanded more attention from producers in order to ensure the very realization of his project: "everybody is used to Shakespeare's little ways; but that puts them at sea with other people's verse when they haven't time to explore it. ... I'm really thinking of not letting any more plays be done in all those London theatres organised for Society drama" (Bottomley and Nash 179).

Bottomley was true to his word: while the plays he wrote after *Gruach* were performed by amateur societies with enthusiasm and some success, they never graced (or aspired to grace) the London mainstream stage. Instead, Bottomley moved towards a more synthetic ideal of poetic drama whose aesthetic would necessitate a new conception of theatre-space, performers, audience, and subject. Bottomley's subsequent plays, written for what he identified as a theatre-culture and theatre-space as yet "unborn," eschewed realist set design; experimented with cyclorama and curtained backdrops; demanded a close attention to the suggestive relationship between costume, lighting, and drama; moved away from narrative structures; and insisted increasingly on the independently musical significance of spoken verse. Notwithstanding his resistance to a rhetoric of linear progress, Bottomley insisted on a modern drama that would transcend, fix moments, capture heights of passion – and thus effect a transformative ideal of artistic truth for the modern age. In his last 'Shakespearean' drama, he provided a valuable manifestation of these instincts for the mainstream theatre, asserting a unique – and now critically overlooked – definition of poetic 'new drama' for the twentieth-century stage.

## Works Cited

- Abbott, Claude Colleer. Introduction. *Poems and Plays*, by Gordon Bottomley, The Bodley Head, 1953, pp. 9-19.
- Archer, William. *The Old Drama and the New: An Essay in Re-Valuation*. William Heinemann, 1923.
- Barker, Harley Granville. *On Poetry in Drama*. Sidgwick & Jackson, 1937.
- Bax, Clifford. *Some I Knew Well*. Phoenix House, 1951.
- Bottomley, Gordon. "To C.H.S. and C.S.R.," dedication to *Gruach. Gruach and Britain's Daughter: Two Plays by Gordon Bottomley*, Constable and Co., 1921, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Chiswick Press, 1925, 2-5.
- Bottomley, Gordon. *Gruach. Gruach and Britain's Daughter: Two Plays by Gordon Bottomley*, Constable and Co., 1921, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Chiswick Press, 1925, 1-66.
- Bottomley, Gordon. *A Stage for Poetry: My Purposes with My Plays*. Titus Wilson and Son, 1948.
- Bottomley, Gordon. "To T. Sturge Moore," dedication to *King Lear's Wife. Poems and Plays*, The Bodley Head, 1953, pp. 130-1.
- Bottomley, Gordon and Paul Nash. *Poet & Painter: Letters between Gordon Bottomley and Paul Nash, 1910-1946*. Introduction by Andrew Causey. Redcliffe, 1990.
- Bradley, Lynne. *Adapting King Lear for the Stage*. Ashgate, 2013.
- Causey, Andrew. "Introduction." *Poet & Painter: Letters between Gordon Bottomley and Paul Nash, 1910-1946*. Redcliffe, 1990.
- Carroll, William C. "The Fiendlike Queen: Recuperating Lady Macbeth in Contemporary Adaptations of *Macbeth*." *Borrowers and Lenders*, vol. 8, no.2, Fall 2013/Winter 2014, <http://www.borrowers.uga.edu/26/toc>. Accessed 24 Nov 2018.
- Cohn, Ruby. *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots*. Princeton UP, 1976.
- Foulkes, Richard. "'How Fine a Play was Mrs Lear': The Case for Gordon Bottomley's *King Lear's Wife*." *Shakespeare Survey*, 2002, pp. 128-38.
- Hassall, Christopher. *Edward Marsh, Patron of the Arts: A Biography*. Longmans, 1959.

MacCarthy, Desmond. *Criticism*. Putnam, 1932.

Mégroz, R. L. "Gruach and Britain's Daughter: Two Plays." *The Bookman*, December 1921: 177-8.

Morra, Irene. *Verse Drama in England, 1900-2015: Art, Modernity, and the National Stage*. Bloomsbury, 2016.

"Opening Minutes." *Femina Via Heureuse Prize: English Committee Minutes and Papers*, vol.1, 1904.

Review of *Gruach*. *The Saturday Review*, January 1922, p. 40.

Reynolds, Ernest. *Modern English Drama: A Survey of the Theatre from 1900*. 1949, Greenwood, 1950.

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by Robert S. Miola, W.W. Norton, 2004.

Sillars, Stuart. *Shakespeare and the Victorians*. Oxford UP, 2013.

St. John, Christopher, editor. *Ellen Terry and Bernard Shaw: A Correspondence*. G.P. Putnams, 1931.