

## 64. Reading John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* as petropolitical drama: Ecological exploitation and petromodernity

Kerim Can YAZGÜNOĞLU<sup>1</sup>

**APA:** Yazgünoğlu, K. C. (2022). Reading John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* as petropolitical drama: Ecological exploitation and petromodernity. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (30), 1032-1044. DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1188784.

### Abstract

Petrodrama is an emerging category of contemporary theatre that addresses the challenges of petromodernity and its impacts on human and nonhuman worlds with a main focus on ecological problems. Focusing on the tribulations and vicissitudes of the Anthropocene, the age of the human, petrodrama is mainly preoccupied with the interweaving of performance and politics, one that raises questions about the way political discourses and systems perpetuate ongoing exploitations of humans and natural resources, particularly oil. To this end, this article rereads John McGrath's play *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973) as petropolitical theatre concerned with ecological exploitations of Scottish Highland and oil culture. After providing an overview of John McGrath and his political views on theatre, the study examines the successive stages of social and ecological dispossession in the Scottish history and McGrath's deployment of petromodernity that configures every structure and relationships in society. In this sense, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* highlights the imbrication of ecological disenchantment and politics, demonstrating how people are deemed as secondary compared to natural resources. As a politically engaged theatre, the play thus articulates an anti-capitalist critique of (petro)modernity and allows the possibility of action against greedy neocolonialism and neoliberalism by means of epic performances.

**Keywords:** John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, political theatre, petrodrama, petromodernity, ecological exploitation

## John McGrath'ın *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* adlı oyununu petropolitik drama olarak okumak: Ekolojik sömürü ve petromodernite

### Öz

Petrodrama, ekolojik sorunlara odaklanarak petromodernitenin zorluklarını ve bunun insan ve insan-dışı dünyalar üzerindeki etkilerini ele alan, yeni ortaya çıkan bir çağdaş tiyatro kategorisidir. İnsan çağı olan Antroposen'in sıkıntılarını ve değişimlerine odaklanan petrodrama, esas olarak performans ve politikanın iç içe geçmesiyle meşguldür ve politik söylemlerin ve sistemlerin, insanların ve doğal kaynakların, özellikle de petrolün devam eden sömürüsünü nasıl sürdürdüğüne dair soruları ortaya atmaktadır. Bu amaçla, bu makale John McGrath'ın *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973) adlı oyununu, İskoç Dağlık Bölgesi'nin ekolojik sömürüsü ve petrol kültürüyle ilgilenen petropolitik bir tiyatro olarak yeniden okumaktadır. John McGrath ve tiyatro üzerine politik görüşlerine genel bir bakış sunduktan sonra, bu çalışma İskoç tarihindeki sosyal ve ekolojik mülksüzleştirme'nin birbirini izleyen aşamalarını ve McGrath'ın toplumdaki her yapı ve ilişkiyi yapılandıran petromoderniteyi konuşturmasını incelemektedir. Bu anlamda, *The Cheviot,*

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Niğde Ömer Halisdemir Üniversitesi, Fen Edebiyat Fakültesi, Batı Dilleri ve Edebiyatları, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı (Niğde, Türkiye), kerimcan.yazgunoglu@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5745-6717 [Araştırma makalesi, Makale kayıt tarihi: 27.07.2022-kabul tarihi: 20.10.2022; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.1188784]

*the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* oyunu, ekolojik hayal kırıklığı ve politikanın iç içe geçmesini vurgulayarak insanların doğal kaynaklara kıyasla nasıl ikincil görüldüğünü göstermektedir. Politik olarak angaje bir tiyatro olarak oyun, (petro)modernitenin anti-kapitalist bir eleştirisini dile getirmekte ve epik performanslar aracılığıyla ağızlı yeni-sömürgecilik ve neoliberalizme karşı eylem imkânı sağlamaktadır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, politik tiyatro, petrodrama, petromodernite, ekolojik sömürü

## Introduction

John McGrath (1935-2002) is one of the prolific playwrights in the post-war British political drama. He is considered as “Britain’s foremost political playwright-cum-cultural activist” in the context of a view that he is preoccupied with radical political issues rife with local colours (Kershaw, 2001). McGrath worked as a writer, director and producer in theatre, television and film. Passionate socialist and self-styled playwright, John McGrath, achieved wider recognition with the 7:84 Theatre Company and his Marxist plays. So wide and overarching is his scope that he can be regarded as “a cultural commentator willing to debate the institutional structures, internal organizations, conventions, subject matter and reception of theatre, film and television in relation to their wider social, political, economic, geographical and cultural contexts” (Holdsworth, 2002, p. xiii). Obviously, he touches upon variegated political predicaments inflicted by capitalism by means of using popular theatre techniques so as to inform the present political situation in his plays and film productions. What is more important is “his challenge,” as Nadine Holdsworth suggests, “to the contexts in which theatre takes place, his subject matter and experimentation with a wide range of theatrical forms and techniques such as social realism, variety, the rock concert, ceilidh, political pageant, monologue and carnival as a means of investigating how an audience can best be engaged, entertained and politicised” (2002, p. xiii). He was really interested in different styles, voices, impressions and thoughts in his varied plays. With his well-known play, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973), however, McGrath has built a reputation for his anti-capitalist, political viewpoints on environmental exploitations of Scotland and its natural resources, in particular, Cheviot, stag, and oil, by creating an idiosyncratic form of theatre that might be labelled as petropolitik drama. In this respect, this article examines *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* as petrodrama, analysing the representations of ecological dispossession of the Scottish Highlands and the imbrication of performance and petropolitics in an attempt to elucidate McGrath’s theory and practice of political theatre with a focus on petromodernity.

## John McGrath and his political theatre

For a start, John McGrath, born in Birkenhead and was grown up in an Irish Catholic family, did National Service as a gunner in Egypt, Germany, Jordan, Malta, Libya and Italy. After National Service, McGrath studied English literature at Oxford University. As Nadine Holdsworth points out, “Irish Catholic background, experience of Army and Oxford life opened his eyes to the class privilege endemic to the social organization of British society, knowledge that was to inform his advocacy of revolutionary socialism, as well as providing subject matter for several later plays” (2002, p. xiv). His early life played a vital part in configuring the political vision of McGrath. His “revolutionary socialist vision,” as David Bradby and Susan Capon underline it, “encompassed every aspect of life; it was not limited to politics understood as a narrow specialist concern, but was always concerned to see how the aspects of our daily lives are infused with and informed by the material conditions of our existence” (2005, p. xix). McGrath’s

vision here focuses on how politics infuse into every part of human life and change it. Going beyond insular understandings of political discourses, his plays include several glimpses from quotidian struggles by blending popular forms of entertainment with insightful political thoughts with which he is actively engaged in his life. His political theatre “sought to inform and to entertain,” as Richard Eyre states, “and it broke your heart in the process” (2005, p. xv). Furthermore, there are three distinguished phases of his career in terms of the transition from mild approach to radical attitude towards theatre. First, he worked in the mainstream theatre from 1958 to 1970 (Kershaw, 2001). What interests one here is that he wrote about post-war British imperialism, modernity, neoliberal capitalism, moral stances, and political predicament in *Events While Guarding the Bofors Gun* (1966), *Bakke's Night of Fame* (1968) and *Random Happenings in the Hebrides* (1970), which staged in the mainstream venues such as the Hampstead Theatre Club and Royal Lyceum. The subjects with which he dealt indicate the idea that his later plays would become political in terms of the content. Second, it was from 1970 to 1988 that his prolific career began as “a writer, director, and producer of popular political drama in theatre companies he founded” (Kershaw, 2001). His plays started to propose a novel mode of understanding based on critique of global capitalism and (petro)modernity holding absolute power in the world, and to suggest that new theatre discourses have capacity to inform and change by entertaining working-class people. Of great significance is his political commitment against oppression, injustice, and inequality in his plays. Lastly, from 1989 onwards, as an “independent writer-producer of socially and politically provocative theatre,” McGrath is concerned with deleterious repercussions of global capitalist institutions and his controversial dialogue with his contemporaneous playwrights (Kershaw, 2001).

Moreover, socio-political and cultural shifts in the 1960s and 1970s have so tremendously influenced McGrath's vision and works that his aim began to mobilize the working-class politically in terms of cultural reconfigurations within the society. When one looks at the politics of his theatre, what comes to surface is that John McGrath was “energised and politicised by the climate of national and international, socio-political protest during the late 1960s and by key political thinkers of the Left such as Antonio Gramsci, Rosa Luxemburg and Mao Tse Tung” (Holdsworth, 2002, p. xv). He went to Paris during the Uprisings of May 1968 and met Jacques Prévert, who played an active role in the uprisings. In that respect, in “The Personality of a Revolution,” McGrath states as follows: The “walls of Paris are alive, vibrant with passionate politics, with humour, rare graphic genius, the spirit of revolt, determined – funny, but determined” (2002, p. 28). This statement is also valid for McGrath's understanding of theatre in general. His political stance was also affected by the Apartheid regime in South Africa. Later on, McGrath participated in the Liverpool Everyman Theatre, working with Alan Dossor. This had great impact over his understanding of community-based political theatre. The work of Bertolt Brecht and Joan Littlewood reconfigured McGrath's political theatre vision, as well. His stance towards socialist-democratic systems, working-class consciousness, consumerism, individualism, environmental problems, and multinational capitalism is encased in an apprehension of the human condition.

More importantly, McGrath founded the 7:84 Theatre Company with Elizabeth MacLennan and David MacLennan in 1971. Its specific name, “7:84,” refers to such fact: According to the statistics in *The Economist*, 7 % of the British population owned 84 % of the wealth at that period (McGrath, 2002). Conspicuously, the name itself displays his socialist vein. In the context of a view that the 7:84 Theatre Company was “one of the most striking examples of an attempt to put theory into practice and to relate political theatre to political realities” (Itzin, 1986, p. 117), it might be said that the 7:84 is a kind of agit-prop theatre with a socialist vision. As John Bull also posits, the 7:84 is “a socialist theatre group committed to taking political theatre to non-theatrical venues and, at least in intent, to non-theatrical audiences” (1984, p. 22).

McGrath was against the bourgeois theatre, arguing that theatre must be about daily experiences of the working-class that could not come to the theatre. Hence, the 7:84 is a touring company, visiting local areas around Britain where people are unaware of the political theatre culture. In an interview with Clive Barker, McGrath notes: “We wanted to be able to tour plays which had a very strong and immediate contemporary connection, that would raise a socialist perspective on contemporary events, that would entertain people and would notably appeal to the working class” (2002, p. 48). It is noteworthy that the plays that the company staged encompass not only serious issues relating to contemporary politics but also popular entertaining devices. The aim of the company thus is to “attract a non-theatre-going audience to popular theatre concerned with the day-to-day realities of working-class life” (Holdsworth, 2002, p. xvi). It is due to the fundamental inextricability of politics, performance and theatre that the company problematises the established notions of bourgeois theatre by establishing a new discourse related to popular forms and the socialist agenda of that period. Moreover, the company changed the dominant idea of theatre by means of “tak[ing] out of the restrictive domain of the traditional theatre environment” (Holdsworth, 2002, p. xvi). Rather than indoor theatre or main halls, the plays were staged in “working-men’s clubs, trades union buildings, work-based social clubs and village halls” (Holdsworth, 2002, p. xvi). The company used local history, political struggles and daily experiences in the working class, for the audience would be “forced to confront their histories, failings and potential to generate socio-political change” (Holdsworth, 2002, xvi). Popular cultural forms, such as live music, stand-up comedy, caricature, variety and songs, were specifically used by the company in order to entertain the audience. The reason for this kind of theatre is that the 7:84 “sought to go beyond the merely propagandist,” and “utilised techniques culled from genuinely popular culture as well as from the earlier years of the fringe. Their intent, above all, was to involve the audience in the questions” (Bull, 1984, p. 109).

Particularly, in 1973, the company was divided into two: the 7:84 England and the 7:84 Scotland. The 7:84 Scotland’s first production is *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*, which brought great success to the company. It was “performed in twenty-eight Scottish villages and small-town venues in 1973” (Kershaw, 2001). Apart from this, Baz Kershaw points out in *The Politics of Performance*:

The geographic progression from the metropolitan centre to the provincial periphery signalled a decisive break, the final stage in a deliberate shift from the commercial mass-populism of the media, through the subsidised minority-elitism of mainstream theatres, to an ambitious stab at a (to begin with) self-financed popular localism. In moving to Scotland McGrath’s aim was to forge a new kind of theatre practice: political community performance. (1992, p. 148)

It can be understood from these statements that ‘political community performance’ is of utmost importance to understand McGrath’s vision of popular political theatre that is concerned with both daily political issues and entertainment by including the audience in performances.

In line with political community performance, McGrath theorises his understanding of popular political theatre in *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form* (1981) and *The Bone won’t Break: On Theatre and Hope in Hard Times* (1990). As Maria DiCenzo points out, what is so significant is “his attempt to theorize the relationship between theatrical form and social class” in *A Good Night Out* (2005, p. 7). In his writing, “The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre,” McGrath suggests that there are three different veins: the “commercial, or West End theatre,” “the orthodox subsidised theatres [the National and Royal Shakespeare companies]” and “the fringe, or touring theatre” (2002, p. 110). Regarding the fringe theatre as creative and Marxist, he deploys some devices and forms of the fringe theatre in his popular political community plays. McGrath, influenced by the writings of Antonio

Gramsci and by the work of Raymond Williams, as Michael Patterson explains, believed that “the struggle for a revolution in the economic structure of the nation must be accompanied by a change in its cultural consciousness” (2003, p. 113). His aim is to raise awareness within the working class because for McGrath, working class cultural consciousness might alter discursive and material practices of life. Therefore, cultural revolution is of great significance to his practice and theory of political theatre. In “A Good Night Out,” McGrath explicated eight aspects of the working-class theatre as opposed to middle-class one: Directness, comedy, music, emotion, variety, effect, immediacy, localism (2002, p. 123-127).

In brief, it is necessary to explain these elements with regard to the theory of popular political community theatre. For McGrath, the play needs to give messages explicitly; it needs to make the audience laugh through jokes and bawdry. In the play, popular music must be used for entertainment. The audience must be emotionally involved in the play. In the play, there must be variety in terms of switching from chorus to singer, from comedian to singer as in “music-hall, variety theatre, club entertainment, the ceilidh in Scotland, the noson Iawen in Wales, panto” (McGrath, 2002, p. 124). The play in this sense might not be monotonous, but be effective, creating immediate responses from the audience. In terms of immediacy, the content of the play must be closer to daily lives, experiences, and failures of the working class. The “sense of locality, of identity, of cultural identity with audience” is of really significance for McGrath to understand local struggles of the working class (McGrath, 2002, p. 126). The characteristics above are main elements of popular theatre with a political agenda. In addition, in “The Bone Won’t Break,” McGrath argues that the agitational works serve to “class-consciousness” (2002, p. 166). He goes on to state that one of the “main planks of the work was the need for ‘class-consciousness’ in the working class, that is, knowledge of, solidarity with those with common interests and roles in society” (2002, p. 166). Drama, according to McGrath, is closely associated with class-consciousness and amelioration of societies. As Michael Billington also wrote in the obituary, for McGrath, “the function of art was to reach as many people as possible, to heighten individual awareness and to help change society for the better” (2002). In this respect, popular political theatre makes the working class more aware of daily realities by reinforcing the bonds among working-class people. Indeed, McGrath achieves what Florian Malzacher suggests, one that we need to create “politically engaged theatre” where “things are real and not real at the same time. Where we can observe ourselves from the outside whilst also being part of the performance’ (2015, p. 30). In doing so, McGrath foregrounds political theatre as a catalyst of change by demonstrating how theatre has a capacity to call for action against material exploitations of capitalism and petromodernity.

### **Ecological dispossession and petropolitics: *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil***

Modernity has been dramatically restructured and reconfigured by petroleum and oil culture since the discovery of oil, which one might call as petromodernity. Petromodernity thus signifies human life beset by petroculture and petropolitics. The petromodern, as Jennifer Wenzel explains, denotes the “period characterized by fossil fuel use,” and involves “thinking simultaneously the disjunctive timescales and discrepant speeds of gradual sedimentation and fossilization in the prehistoric past, near-instant combustion and the fetish of acceleration in the hypermodern present, and environmental effects persisting into the distant future” (2017, p. 10). Such petromodernity shows how depending on oil in twentieth and twenty-first centuries has changed human and nonhuman lives, as petroleum has made human life much easier, but it has blinded humans from seeing numerous facts and issues that has happened to life. The “fuel apparatus of modernity,” as Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer point out, is

“all too often invisible or subterranean,” but “pumps and seeps into the groundwaters of politics, cultures, institutions, and knowledge in unexpected ways” (2017, p. 9). Whether visible or invisible, oil has mediated human relationship with humans, or with nonhumans, with other cultural, social, and political structures. Arguing that “it has become impossible not to feel that oil at least partially determines cultural production and reproduction on many levels,” Frederic Buell remarks that today “energy is more than a constraint; it (especially oil) remains an essential (and, to many, *the* essential) prop underneath humanity’s material and symbolic cultures” (2012, p. 274). Oil and culture in this way are conjoined, becoming fundamental part of life as oil has transformed humans and humans have construed such petrocultures. Therefore, petroleum might be considered as a medium that supports all modern media forms including films, music, plays, novels, magazines, photographs, sports, and internet as LeMenager argues (2014, p. 6).

Indeed, such a vision comes early from Bertolt Brecht: “Petroleum resists the five-act form; today’s catastrophes do not progress in a straight line but in cyclical crises” (1964, p. 30). Exemplifying such resistance and environmental catastrophes, John McGrath articulates how ecological exploitation and dispossession are imbricated within capitalist status quo and petroculture by constructing *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (henceforth, *The Cheviot*) as petropolitical drama. As the title suggests, *The Cheviot* draws attention to some important Scottish environmental, historical flashpoints from the early 1830s to 1960s. Hence, before delving into the play, it is necessary to touch upon these relevant historical exploitations. *The Cheviot* provides varied inquiries into the history of the Highlands and iterative exploitations of its people and natural resources by landowners and multinational capitalism from the clearances to the discovery of North Sea oil. When one begins with the Highland clearances, the crofters were forced to immigrate to the shore in the 1840s. As T.C. Smout states in *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950*,

the crofters and cottars had been cleared from the most fertile lands by greedy lairds and sheep-farmers; some had been, but many of the worst clearances down the west coast were yet to come, and those places in the north that had already experienced partial clearances (like Sutherland) escaped much of the destitution in 1846 because population pressure was less acute there. (1988, p. 13)

Obviously, this illustrates the suffering, violence and oppression of the Scottish people at that age. Smout points out that the Highland clearances “reached a peak in the 1840s and first part of the 1850s, especially in the aftermath of the great potato blight of 1846, which left upwards of 100.000 people in the north-west destitute and dependent on the charity of relief funds to keep them from starvation” (1988, p. 62). The sheep farmer and factor Patrick Sellar “had been responsible for some of the most brutal episodes in the Sutherland clearances in the second decade of the century” (Smout, 1988, p. 65). This ecological dispossession displayed malicious effects on the Scottish psyche with which McGrath is concerned. The national and historical conflicts play a vital role in understanding the struggles of Scottish people. Against these clearances, “[r]iots broke out first on Skye, at the Battle of the Braes in 1882, when a contingent of Glasgow police sent to enforce an eviction order were attacked and routed by a band of infuriated crofters and their wives. The trouble spread rapidly in Skye, and thence to Lewis and Tiree” (Smout, 1988, pp. 71-72). What is important to note here is that the resistance of Scottish people shows the active participation and political commitment of the people against feudal or capitalist landowners.

The narrative of resistance is reiterative itself in the history of Scotland. This issue is ideologically explicit in *The Cheviot*. The local colour is reinforced with other historical facts in the play. Another historical fact related to stag is as follows:

The famous incident, the Park deer raid of 1887, involved over a hundred men armed with rifles who took possession of land which originally had been cleared under the seaforths and which had just been turned by Matheson's widow from sheep farm into a sporting estate. They shot a large number of deer and ceremonially roasted and boiled them at Stromas. (Smout, 1988, pp. 70-71)

The stag hunting for leisure has been another significant problem in the Scottish history. The play explicitly addresses both human and animal exploitations and shows how green Scotland has been repetitively ravaged by capitalist structures. In the twentieth century, later, the Highland became a holiday theme park. In 1962, the North Sea oil was discovered. Delving into discourses of North Sea oil, Christopher Harvie argues that petroleum "failed almost totally to surface in the imaginative literature of Anglo-Britain," posing the question: "Where was the novel or poem of North Sea oil? Or the play?" (1994, p. 267). Due to the fact that oil has been carried via pipelines that are mostly invisible to the human eye, "oil encounter" finds no literary expression thoroughly in literature (Ghosh, 1992). As Harvie concedes, contemporary Scottish literature deploys oil as a literary device or metaphor so as to highlight how oil begins to seep into every part of life. "Some authors were vividly conscious of the implications of the oil, particularly for politics, and nearly all of them were Scots" (1994, p. 269), Harvie continues to point out, claiming that some Scottish authors

realized that the oil had triggered a very complex transformation, at once local and international. It was worth treating experimentally, using it as a means of focusing Scottish history. Thus while the thing itself was local, occurring in specific basins of activity, it was incorporated into the national repertoire of metaphors. (1994, p. 282).

Considering these issues, *The Cheviot* is portrayed as "a historical panorama" of Scottish history (Shellard, 2000, p. 152). Underlining the expropriation of land, ecological dispossession, and oil drilling, McGrath epitomizes "the savage progress of capitalism" in the play (1993, p. vi). In order to negotiate between the repetitive suppression and exploitation of the Highlanders and petromodernity, McGrath configures *The Cheviot* as a mixture of performances, entertainment, and petrodrama.

Petrodrama is an emerging category of contemporary theatre that is fundamentally concerned with the cultural, social, political, economic, technological, capitalist, and ecological dimensions of oil, from local problems to global challenges such as climate change. Focusing on the tribulations and vicissitudes of the Anthropocene, the age of the human, petrodrama unravels the interweaving of performance, petroculture, and politics, as it poses questions about the scale, temporality of oil extraction, its and impacts on local environmental and social structures. Petrodrama thus encompasses many characteristics of the oil economy;

the materiality and distribution of a 'natural' resource, with a geological history far longer than the Anthropocene-epoch repercussions of its extraction; the populations coerced, displaced or damaged by the production and distribution of this commodity that underpins modernity; and the power of new fuels to drive economic, ecological and technological transformations. (Solnick, 2021, p. 227)

These facets fuel one of the earliest representatives of petrodrama, McGrath's play, *The Cheviot*. Commenting on *The Cheviot*, Graeme Macdonald identifies petrodrama as "structured and conditioned by the oily machinations and social relations fuelling the extractive politics of the world's most inflammatory resource" (2015, p. 1). The play articulates petroculture's effects and Scottish vulnerabilities through different media of popular forms.

Indeed, the form of the play is ceilidh that, as McGrath states, is "[o]ne truly popular form of entertainment in the Highlands, past and present" (1993, p. x). As Baz Kershaw also remarks, the ceilidh is "a cabaret style of self-entertainment that had been practiced by Scottish communities for several

hundred years, consisting of singing, storytelling, joke-telling, dancing, and sometimes short acted scenes” (2001). *The Cheviot* in this sense tells of the reiteration of exploitation and displacement caused by capitalism and petromodernity through a kind of music-hall show. The petropolitik community performance takes place with the participation of the people or the audience in the play. McGrath, Pamela Howard notes, “envisaged a theatre where the spectators were not just part of the action, but the form of the scenes themselves – and as mobile as the scenic elements” (2002, p. 308). The form of the play may be seen as much mobile as oil. The ‘carnavalesque’ atmosphere permeates the play as McGrath points to the idea that “I wanted to keep this form – an assembly of songs, stories, scenes, talk, music and general entertainment – and to tell through it the story of what had happened and is now happening to the people” (1993, p. x). It is noteworthy that *The Cheviot* is a blending of petrodrama, agit-prop theatre, community theatre, docu-drama, the living newspaper and epic theatre with a traditional popular form. For instance, Joseph Farrell describes *The Cheviot* as follows: “The play mingled fact with invention, pathos with humour, satire with tragedy, the grotesque and the straightforward, the entertaining and the didactic, music with acting, politics with farce” (qtd. in Milne, 2002, p. 313). In the play, Masters of Ceremonies read historical facts from a giant pop-book on the stage, directly addressing to the audience. The eight elements on which McGrath elaborated in his theory and practice of popular political theatre are visible in the play; that is to say, these elements such as directness, immediacy, localism, music are concretised within the play.

The central political narrative in the play is the aforementioned iterative exploitation of the Highlanders and natural sources by the ruling class and global (petro)capitalism by means of oppression and violence. It is clear that national and international politics depending upon landowning and capitalism come to the fore in the play. *The Cheviot*, as Derek Gladwin argues, “confronts forms of spatial injustice, from land dispossession to speculative capitalism, and finally to a multinational petrostate, which disenfranchised the people of Scotland for decades, as well as Britain as a whole” (2017, p. 95). Capitalism, poverty, dispossession, petroculture, and entertainment are the locus of the play, and these topics play a significant part in reinstating the Scottish consciousness. Michael Billington states that “a show like *The Cheviot*, later televised by the BBC, played a vital part in reinforcing Scotland’s sense of national identity and influencing the popular vote” (2009, p. 215). At the beginning of the play, the instructions display how the play is formed to some extent. The performers talk to the audience directly, and the interaction continues throughout the play by music and dance. On the background, the fiddler plays, and the jovial atmosphere permeates the room; the fourth-wall is demolished through the interactions between the audience and performers.

The play begins with a song, “These Are My Mountains.” Ironically, these mountains first belong to the cheviot, the stag, then Queen Victoria, and the multinational companies. As the play underlines it, lands, seas or mountains of the Highlands never belong to the human and the nonhuman. Instead, they are part of exploitative capitalism and the ruling class. “These Are My Mountains” exemplifies such a status:

As the rain on the hillside comes in from the sea  
 All the blessings of life fall in showers from me  
 So if you’d abandon your old misery –  
 I will teach you the secrets of high industry:  
 Your barbarous customs, though they may be old  
 To civilised people hold horrors untold –  
 What value a culture that cannot be sold?

The price of a culture is counted in gold. (McGrath, 1993, p. 8)

Industrial capitalism displaces people from their home, their work, and even their nation as it continues to exploit natural resources. Interestingly enough, natural resources here are not gift or treasure for local people. Rather, they become a curse or nightmare for them. The environmental and social exploitation of the Highlands is an endless loop as is stated in the play. The Master of Ceremonies points out as follows: "It's a story that has a beginning, a middle, but, as yet, no end-" (McGrath, 1993, p. 2). This statement reminds one that capitalist venture goes on to abuse and misuse natural resources such as petroleum.

Nonetheless, despite such intensive ecological dispossession, McGrath believes that there is always hope among the ruins of capitalism. After deleterious struggles, there must be victories. In the play, the revolt of Skye by women is considered as a victory. As Dominic Shellard remarks, it is throughout *The Cheviot* that "the resistance of the working class is seen as heroic and deserving of celebration" (2000, p. 152). When the police forced the people to evict, women were always at the forefront, thereby playing a significant role in the resistances:

OLD MAN: We will form a second line of defence.

*He turns to the audience as himself.*

When they came with the eviction orders, it was always the women who fought back ... Glen Calvie, Ross-shire. (McGrath, 1993, p. 11)

Obviously, in this scene, violence against women is vividly described in order to show the cruel, malignant and vicious side of capitalism and its supported institutions. What is important is that communal resistance is a kind of way out against capitalism and landowners. Patrick Sellar, an important historical figure, is portrayed as a 'seller' of Highland soil and culture. In the play, Sellar becomes the embodiment of oppressor and violence. Later on, the local history of exploitation is globally interconnected with other examples all over the world. Sturdy Highlander talks about this issue as follows:

But we came, more and more of us, from all over Europe, in the interests of a trade war between two lots of shareholders, and in time, the Red Indians were reduced to the same state as our fathers after Culloden – defeated, hunted, treated like the scum of the earth, their culture polluted and torn out with slow deliberation and their land no longer their own.

[...]

But still we came. From all over Europe. The highland exploitation chain-reacted around the world; in Australia the aborigines were hunted like animals; in Tasmania not one aborigine was left alive; all over Africa, black men were massacred and brought to heel. In America the plains were emptied of men and buffalo, and the seeds of the next century's imperialist power were firmly planted. And at home, the word went round that over there, things were getting better. (1993, p. 29)

It can be deduced from this long quotation that the historical narratives around the global exploitation of imperialism and colonialism are cases in point, and showcase the horrors the people faced and capitalist cultures' dehumanising effects on local people, people of colour, black people and first nations. This process by no means has an end. Thus, McGrath has an anti-capitalist stance against capitalist cultures and modernity.

McGrath reflects on where capitalism, class, and economic regimes mix in the play, demonstrating the corruption of state institutions and the bourgeois class. In fact, capitalist cultures, class, environmental and human exploitation are embedded in epistemic, existential, and financial discourses. Capitalism

and the Scottish upper class have enforced their own rules and discourse in order to gain more capital, while seeing the human and the nonhuman as commodities. Lord Crask and Lady Phosphate claim like that:

LADY PH: You had better learn your place,

You're a low and servile race –

We've cleared the straths

LORD CRASK: We've cleared the paths

LADY PH: We've cleared the bens

LORD CRASK: We've cleared the glens

BOTH: And we can do it once again-

LADY PH: We've got the brass

LORD CRASK: We've got the class

LADY PH: We've got the law

BOTH: We need no more –

We'll show you we're the ruling class. (McGrath, 1993, p. 43)

What is at stake is that those who have the financial power can control and alter discourses and structures to rule out people or exploit natural resources. Here, discourses are intricately interrelated with the ruling class and its political, financial regimes. Therefore, all institutions in capitalist cultures and modernity have implicitly or explicitly participated in unjust, cruel actions of capitalist societies. In addition, during the clearances, many Scottish men joined the army in order to support England in the Crimean war. Paradoxically, the Scottish men went to the war so as to 'exploit' another country, while their lands were cleared and depopulated. As M. C. says in the play, the "old tradition of loyal soldiering was fostered and exploited with careful calculation" (McGrath, 1993, p. 47). The British Empire exploited both lands and people of the Highlands as such. In fact, people, lands and nonhuman animals have been deemed as disposable by capitalist cultures, just as commodities to be abused and disposed. The process of dehumanisation caused to another cruel actions. In the play, it is emphasised that those who had emigrated from Scotland to Canada or the U.S.A. began to enforce their cruel rules on first nations or black people. This is a kind of 'mimetic violence,' and it is cyclical. Political and financial regimes in capitalist cultures all over the world have the same repercussions for those who have no economic power or status. It can be said that capitalist cultures create their own 'monstrous' regimes irrespective of status, race, or class. As M.C. states in the play, "[a] whole culture was systemically destroyed – by economic power" (McGrath, 1993, p. 52). Capitalist cultures and petromodern regimes have engendered new forms of relationships between the rich and the poor, women and men, the human and the nonhuman, and thereby the outcome of this was to reduce financially weak humans,' women's or nonhumans' statuses and value in the public, while confining them to relegated positions, wastelands, and exploited spheres.

Delving into North Sea oil and its effects through the relationship between Texas Jim and Whitehall in the play enables McGrath to track the twentieth-century ecological exploitation and human displacement caused by petrocapiatalism. As a farcical character, Texas Jim is the very embodiment of contemporary petroleum corporations in the play, while Whitehall stands for the government in central London. Contemporary society, economy, and culture cannot be considered as independent from the imbrication of politics and oil industry. The relationship between Texas Jim and Whitehall exemplifies

such imbrication supported by multinational oil companies, such as “Conoco, Amoco, Shell-Esso, Texaco, British Petroleum” (McGrath, 1993, p. 63). Not only did these petroleum corporations buy and exploit the land, but also controlled and corrupted governmental structures by bribing, and transformed society. The play dramatizes how Texas Jim eagerly wants North Sea oil:

There's many a barrel of oil in the sea  
All waiting for drilling and piping to me  
I'll refine it in Texas, you'll get it, you'll see  
At four times the price that you sold it to me (McGrath, 1993, p. 63)

It is conspicuous that this is Texas Jim's boom promise for the Highlanders. In order to lure the Highlanders, Texas Jim tells them how they get rid of their miseries: “So if you'd abandon your old misery/ Then you'll open your doors to the oil industry” (1993, p. 63). Oil here is depicted as a gift of prosperity for the poor people. Later in the play, Texas Jim reveals the truth, stating that “All you folks are off your head / I'm getting rich from your sea bed / I'll go home when I see fit / All I'll leave is a heap of shit” (1993, p. 61). Texas Jim voices the hidden agenda of petroleum companies leaving behind pollution and toxicity. McGrath, as Derek Gladwin argues, “hyperbolises Texas Jim to magnify the otherwise hidden agenda of petrochemical companies, which is to manipulate local people out of their land” (2017, p. 102). Thus, oil industry and petroculture systematically produce dispossession, displacement, and exploitation as seen in the Clearances or stag hunting. These processes led local people to lose their sense of place, along with their sense of local identity.

Petrocapitalism has brought its deleterious consequences to this specific area. The people who earned their lives by fishing were forced to migrate to other places. As Texas Jim states: “So leave your fishing, and leave your soil, / Come work for me, I want your oil” (McGrath, 1993, p. 59). In this way, McGrath uses Texas Jim to explore how petroculturalist cultures corrupt and ruin humanity, civilization, and environments. For instance, notwithstanding supporting local economy related to the oil boom of North Sea, petrotourism becomes a spectacular ruin of the environment. The characters, the Crofter and his wife, financially depend on such tourism, but they feel uprooted. The oil rigs seem grandiose for the Crofter and his wife, who states that “You'll have come to see the oil-rigs – oh, they're a grand sight right enough” (1993, p. 70). But they are cognizant of how oil rigs caused to climate change and pollution: “WIFE: Och, it's terrible weather for July - / CROFTER: It's not been the same since they struck oil in Loch Duich” (1993, p. 70). Oil extraction and drilling associated with hydrofracking might result in contamination. Wife pays attention to this very fact, stating that: “When the weather clears up, you'll be wanting down to the shore to see the pollution – it's a grand sight, right enough” (1993, p. 71). This is an unsavoury position that puts every human and nonhuman world in touch with pollution. *The Cheviot* is a good illustration of the ways in which oil crosses the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, nature and culture, and profoundly transforms the land and its people. Dramatizing petroculture as such enables McGrath to support activism on stage, as Elizabeth MacLennan notes that “political activism on the stage is important and he believed it very strongly” (2005, p. 218). Petrodrama thus becomes a medium to articulate how petropolitics and petroculturalist cultures play a foundational role in reconfiguring and altering social, economic, technological, and environmental regimes.

## Conclusion

*The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* dramatizes how political theatre and petrodrama mix, construing a historic, ecological narrative of exploitation and displacement in the Scottish Highlands.

Political theatre focuses on political engagements that work with the social and material world in which humans live, and speculates on how theatre enables to construct new modes of live, activism, and consciousness, whereas petrodrama deals with depictions of how petroleum infiltrates into every bit of life, be it human or nonhuman, and looks at ways of linking human and nonhuman lives to the varied facets of petroculture and petromodernity. By interweaving political theatre and petrodrama, John McGrath conjures up a story of exploitation, dispossession, and petroculturalism in which one may well recognise humans, environments, nonhumans, the Scottish history, Scottish people's oppression, and expropriation of their land. In so doing, McGrath not only establishes a new form of drama for the tribulations of capitalism and oil culture, but also uses the dramatic stages of exploitation of Scotland as examples for capitalist changes wrought on humans and environments. McGrath spotlights a significant dimension of capitalism by drawing attention to the ravages caused by it, and thus, is critique of capitalist cultures that regard every human, nonhuman, and natural entity as commodity. Therefore, he is always against the oppression and exploitation of the ruling class and capitalism, yearning for social and political change. *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* in this sense is an important step to form a class-oriented consciousness, a petropolitik consciousness, highlighting the only way out of the chains of petromodernity.

### References

- Billington, M. (2002, January 24). John McGrath. Retrieved 2013, March 22, from <https://www.theguardian.com/international>.
- Billington, M. (2009). *State of the Nation: British Theatre since 1945*. London: Faber.
- Bradby, D. and Capon, S., eds. (2005). Introduction. In *Freedom's Pioneer: John McGrath's Work in Theatre, Film and Television* (pp. xix-xxii). Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- Brecht, B. (1964). *Brecht on Theatre: the Development of an Aesthetic*. (J. Willett, Trans.). London: Methuen.
- Buell, F. (2012). A Short History of Oil Cultures: Or, the Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance. *Journal of American Studies*, 46(2), 273-293. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875812000102>
- Bull, J. (1984). *New British Political Dramatists*. New York: Grove Press.
- DiCenzo, M. (2005). Theatre, Theory and Politics: The Contribution of John McGrath. In D. Bradby and S. Capon, (Eds.), *Freedom's Pioneer: John McGrath's Work in Theatre, Film and Television* (pp. 3-14). Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- Eyre, R. (2005). Foreword. In D. Bradby and S. Capon, (Eds.), *Freedom's Pioneer: John McGrath's Work in Theatre, Film and Television* (pp. xii-xvii). Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- Ghosh, A. (1992, March 2). Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel. *The New Republic*, pp. 29-34.
- Gladwin, D. (2017). *Ecological Exile: Spatial Injustice and Environmental Humanities*. New York: Routledge.
- Harvie, C. (1994). *Fool's Gold: The Story of North Sea Oil*. London: Penguin Books.
- Holdsworth, N., ed. (2002). Introduction. In *Naked Thoughts That Roam About*. London: Nick Hern Books.
- Howard, P. (2002). He Wrote What He Saw: the Visual Language of John McGrath. *NTQ* 72, 18(4), 307-313.
- Itzin, C. (1986). *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain since 1968*. London: Methuen.
- Kershaw, B. (1992). *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention*. London: Routledge.

- Kershaw, B. (2001). John (Peter) McGrath. In J. Bull, (Ed.), *British and Irish Dramatists Since World War II: Second Series*. Detroit: Gale Group. Retrieved 2013, April 5, from <https://www.gale.com/databases/literature-resource-center>
- LeMenager, S. (2014). *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Macdonald, G., ed. (2015). Commentary. In *The Cheviot, the Stage, and the Black, Black Oil* by John McGrath (pp. 17–80). London: Bloomsbury.
- MacLennan, E. (2005). Working with John. In D. Bradby and S. Capon, (Eds.), *Freedom's Pioneer: John McGrath's Work in Theatre, Film and Television* (pp. 210-219). Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- Malzacher, F., ed. (2015) No Organum to Follow: Possibilities of Political Theatre Today. In *Not Just a Mirror: Looking for the Political Theatre of Today* (pp. 16-31). Berlin and London: Alexander Verlag.
- McGrath, J. (1993). *The Cheviot, The Stag and The Black, Black Oil*. London: Methuen.
- McGrath, J. (2002). *Naked Thoughts That Roam About*. N. Holdsworth, (Ed.). London: Nick Hern Books.
- Milne, D. (2002). Cheerful History: the Political Theatre of John McGrath. *NTQ* 72, 18(4), 313-325.
- Patterson, M. (2003). *Strategies of Political Theatre: Post-War British Playwrights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shellard, D. (2000). *British Theatre since the War*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Smout, T. C. (1988). *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950*. London: Fontana Press.
- Solnick, S. (2021). Fossil Fuel. In J. Parham, (Ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene* (pp. 226-241). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Szeman, I. and Boyer, D., eds. (2017). Introduction: On the Energy Humanities. In *Energy Humanities: An Anthology* (n.p.). Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wenzel, J. (2017). Introduction. In I. Szeman, J. Wenzel, and P. Yaeger, (Eds.), *Fueling Culture: 101 Words for Energy and Environment* (pp. 1-16). New York: Fordham University Press.