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FLORA
An opera
Libretto by John Rodger
The action takes place in 1773 on the day when Boswell and Johnson visited the Macdonald house. Alan Macdonald is factor (tacksman) of the Sleat estate at Kingsburgh on Skye. Boswell and Johnson are touring the Highlands.

Principal characters

Flora Macdonald - 50-year-old woman (mezzo-soprano)
Alan Macdonald - Flora’s husband in his late 40s (baritone)
Sandy Macdonald - one of their sons in his late teens (tenor)
Boswell - tourist in the Highlands, tall slim in his early 30s (tenor)
Dr Johnson - tourist in the Highlands, very fat, in his early 60s (baritone)
Mixed chorus

Other characters

Kate - servant girl (mezzo soprano)
Various soloists from the chorus (both men and women)
Two men (non singing)
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Scene 1
Somewhere in the Highlands

(Enter Boswell leading Johnson on a makeshift horse; expansive, sentimental, romantic, ludicrous)

BOSWELL Doctor Johnson!

JOHNSON Yes, Mr Boswell?

BOSWELL Are you pleased with our country?

(long pause, no answer, they keep walking)

The 15, the 19 and the 45

BOTH were none of them successful

though in hearts the cause still thrives.

JOHNSON In the mountains or the islands

whatever the native terrain

we’ve come to study the Highlander

to whom the Gaelic tongue remains.

BOSWELL The 15, the 19 and the 45

BOTH were none of them successful

though in hearts the cause still thrives.

BOSWELL This subject gives me such feelings

that to hear those Highland names

or the sounding of the bagpipe

just sets my blood aflame.
I am filled with such a melancholy
and respect for martial courage
I'd readily march out on to war
with thoughts no season nourished.

The 15, the 19 and the 45

BOTH
were none of them successful
though in hearts the cause still thrives.

JOHNSON
But who gives to violence honour
will in times of peace and ease
be inclined to give us bother
and bring commerce to its knees.

BOSWELL
The 15, the 19 and the 45

BOTH
were none of them successful
though in hearts the cause still thrives.

BOSWELL
In truth there is but one name
whose company we seek
in these hills without our heroine
we would not stay one week.

BOTH
Miss Flora Macdonald and the 45
were none of them successful
though in hearts the cause still thrives.

(Exeunt)

(End of Scene 1)
Scene 2
The parlour at Kingsburgh

(Flora stands in the parlour looking out window)

FLORA  To push out a boat

that's a phrase

that's often heard in these parts

Quite a few people

have been pushing a boat out

pushing their boat out

They think ...

they think that I ...

-- oh I don’t know what they think --

but I’m not in their boat

I’m not in any boat

yet.

I still have my feet on the ground

wet and boggy though it may be.

The preparations are underway

nobody has forced me to do anything.
I'll carry through the tasks
that come my way
this time as a thousand times before
but does anyone know what I want?

With so much discord and dispute
what are we striving for?
No-one dares think of that question.
We just board another boat
push off,
and this time it's for America.

Quite a few people have been
pushing a boat out
pushing their boat out.

But I'm not in their boat
I'm not in any boat
yet.
Sandy entering and stopping to listen

Sandy Is that those fishermen you’re watching?

Flora (startled) What?

Sandy Boats. You did say something about boats

Flora (regaining her composure) Yes -- right -- and that’s exactly

why I called you in.

Sandy But my father said...

Flora Your father and I...

Sandy ... you want me to write out a letter for you.

Flora ... want you to write out a letter.

(pause)

Remember son, that we are islanders

that this is not like other places

I mean (turns to window again) there is the sea

here we are in the house

everything here has its own distance

and its own difficulty,

there are ... straits

that have to be crossed to accomplish ...

Sandy Is it sailing terminology that you’re after?

Flora (staring at her son for a second, then laughing)

It’s a slap on the ear

will come sailing to you in a minute!
SANDY I won’t harbour a grudge.

FLORA (bringing over a pen)

Here have you got a knife
to sharpen this one?

(Sandy taking out a knife)

I want it to be done
in your best handwriting

SANDY Well what is it?

(starting to sharpen pen)

I hope it’s not going to take too long.
The boys are waiting for me
and we’re going over the hill
to Uig this afternoon.

FLORA No that’s all right.

I’m expecting some visitors today myself.

SANDY I don’t see why
I have to write a letter out for you anyway.
Why can’t you write it yourself?
Can my father not write it out for you?
When I was not much older than you are now
I'd been to the city
to Glasgow and Edinburgh
No matter that my situation was particular
for everyone from these islands, from this way,
soon finds, once there
that their situation is particular.

You talk of walking over the hill.
I'll tell you that in the city
if you walk to the end of the street
you'd meet more girls.

And you, as a Gael, will be something there.
Your deeds and words there
will always meet with a reaction
Some will love you
and, of course, some will hate you.
When you talk of
"walking over the hill"
lovers and haters alike
will look out their window
at their own streets crammed
to cheek to jowl with houses
at their dead end views
of bricks and mortar
and suspect you of
guarding some secret soulfulness.

When you tell them of
the simple and the everyday
of pulling on your boots in the morning
of digging out peats
of how your father lost 300 cattle in one winter
of the dull drudgery of this life
and then of sailing across to the mainland
they'll think you're reciting a poem.
You'll be faced with such
chaotic and perverse notions
in the city
even if you've never written
a line of poetry in your life.
But these prejudices
won't be without their counterpart
here among the Gael.
Before you go you'll hear
that such romantic notions of the city dwellers
are only the other side
of that same coin upon which is stamped
their hatred of our language
of our families, of our morals.
It's ironic that it's a line of poetry
they'll throw you for proof
and a line of your own uncle's poetry.
-- mi-run mor nan Gall -- they'll say
as if it were already a formalised concept
a tried and tested code
of the Lowlander's behaviour.
Ah but I'm raving on.
You don't know, you can't know
what I'm talking about.

It's just this son,
your situation is particular
SANDY (pretending to write)

Is that a full stop after

"Your situation is particular"

or will I just write \textquote{dot, dot, dot}?

FLORA All I'm saying son

is everyone has to live

with others and get on

but you, you keep your own counsel.

SANDY (archly) \textquote{My own goods}, \textquote{my own wife}

and \textquote{let's go home},

the three finest sayings in the Gaelic language!

(changing mood now to seriousness)

So all this is just by way of letting me know

that you lot are pissing off to America

and I'm getting left on my tod

-- I'm not even invited!

FLORA No, That's not how it is at all!

And if you know that we are going to America

then you know why.

I can't answer for your brothers'

exaggerations and incitements.

It's all right for them to talk,

three of them are settled already in positions.
We're trying to give you all the chance
to make your own life first,
and then decide for yourselves
if you want to follow us.

-- Besides, I thought you had somebody
waiting over the hill for you?

SANDY (ignoring this last question)

So you want to send a letter
to some old fart Sir Something-or-other?

FLORA Your father once knew the Duke of Atholl.

SANDY My father knew him,...

FLORA It's worth a try.

He could pull strings

SANDY ... yet the letter is from you.

FLORA If it is written, however,
in your handwriting
he has before him
a demonstration of your competence.
I've already composed the letter mentally.
Have you sharpened that pen yet?
Are you ready? Dated and addressed?
(Sandy shrugging his shoulders, making as if to start writing. Flora comes behind him and tries to grab pen)

No, look, like this, up here...

SANDY (recoils, raises pen out of her reach)

Don’t touch it!

FLORA I’m just going to show you ...

SANDY I thought this was to be a

(affecting manner) “demonstration of competence”?

FLORA Don’t be cheeky. I can write fine.

SANDY Yes but some poor sod’s got to read it!

FLORA Okay, okay

(walking off round the room while Sandy dates it etc.)

Ready? Begin like this....

“My Lord, Necessity often forces both sexes to go through transactions contrary to their inclinations ...

(End of Scene 2)
Scene 3
At the Kyle of Lochalsh

(The tourists enter in the usual manner,
swaggering, ridiculous)

BOSWELL Now we'll cross the Kyle sir
it's not too far I'm sure
if this rain stops for just one minute
we shall see the other shore.

JOHNSON And will the crossing be done
in a superaqueous way?

BOSWELL 'Twould be handy to have a bridge
but the ferry is on its way.

JOHNSON Thus by going into the sea
we will get us out the water!

BOSWELL But do you not agree, sir
these waters are Scotland's boast,
when it comes to lakes and rivers
this country has the best and most?

JOHNSON Splish splash splosh
Sir you have too much!
Splish splash splosh
We would not have your water
Splish splash splosh
that's walking in the Highlands
Splish splash splosh
here every man's an island.

You Scotsmen love your country
more than you love enquiry
when you talk of Scotia
it is not conversation
your bragly talk has this effect
it's all mere consopiation

Splish splash splosh
Sir you have too much!
Splish splash splosh
We would not have your water
Splish splash splosh
that's walking in the Highlands
Splish splash splosh
here every man's an island.
In England all our drink
is confined within the river banks
here your roads and houses sink
your clothes and hair are damp and dank

Splish splash splosh
Sir you have too much!
Splish splash splosh
We would not have your water
Splish splash splosh
that's walking in the Highlands
Splish splash splosh
here every man's an island.

One gentleman in whose house we rested
had the finest books and china
and good linen laid on the bed
but when I took my boots off
in a vile and sodden bog
I felt my bare feet spread.
Splish splash splosh
Sir you have too much!
Splish splash splosh
We would not have your water
Splish splash splosh
that's walking in the Highlands
Splish splash splosh
here every man's an island.

(Exeunt)

(End of Scene 3)
Scene 4
The parlour at Kingsburgh

(Flora in room. Racket of men offstage.

Enter maid, Kate)

KATE They’re bringing in the master!

FLORA What?

(Enter two men carrying Alan longwise, one at his feet and one at his arms)

ALAN (moaning) Right! Put me down! Carefully!

Aaaaaaaagh! My back!

Get these spurs off me! Aaaagh!

FLORA (Directing men to bring him over)

Set him down on the couch!

ALAN (to Flora) Aaaagh it’s my back ya stupid...

aaagh! ... get that cushion out the ... aaggh!

FLORA What happened? What’s going on?

ALAN Get these spurs off me!

(Men standing back, sheepishly)

FLORA (leaping to it) Oh God yes! Get them off!

You’ll rip the material to shreds!

But what happened? Did you come off your horse?

Is it your back? Did he fall?

(Men murmur not answering her question)

ALAN Right men, you two can go now

FLORA Oh yes. (Going over to sideboard, opening drawer)

Thank you for bringing him home
(Holding out some money to each of them)

Thank you so much.

(The men leave)

ALAN Aaaagh my back.

FLORA What did...

ALAN It was those damn spurs...
...coming off the horse...
...I should have...

FLORA Where did you come off?

ALAN I didn’t fall...
It was those Martins.
Those damn Martins...
...what do you expect?

FLORA (takes a deep breath, turns to Kate who is gawking)

Could you go and make us a pot of tea please.

KATE Right away Mrs Macdonald. (Exits)

ALAN If it hadn’t been for those spurs...

FLORA Never mind the spurs, just lie back.
Tell me where it hurts,
then you can tell me why.

Is it here?

ALAN No

FLORA Your back? Here?

ALAN No ... aaagh!

FLORA and down along ... your ribs?

ALAN Aaaagh ... that’s enough!
FLORA  Okay, lie out, put your head on this.
       I don’t think there’s anything broken
       -- badly bruised ribs.
       -- Get your breath back.

ALAN  *(gasping for air at first)*
       It seems that nothing
       will turn these people for us.

FLORA  You mean the Martins?

ALAN  Them and others.
       I swear I’ve tried so hard.

FLORA  You’re simply overworked.

ALAN  Since those Martins
       were put out of Floddigarry
       to let us have the tack
       they’ve brought out every other heart against us
       and nothing we do can win them back.

FLORA  But what about your work?
       Can’t you explain the good that...

ALAN  The latest farming ideas, point for point,
       have been laid out to them,
       -- Himsel did us no favours --
       the weight of our own money
       has backed it up.
       I’ve taken the spade in my own hands.
       I’ve dug and planted,
       the new methods -- successful --
are there to be seen
in our own fields.

But no-one, no ideas, no hard work, no sums of money
can set store against a Black Spring
against three months of rain
followed by eight weeks of snow,
and all that on top
of the back hatred spread by the Martins.

And now these damn spurs
-- where are they? --

(with a dash of the hand he clears them off the table at his
side and they clatter down on the floor)
bring me down to this!

FLORA I don’t see what the spurs...

ALAN Because I had him, don’t you understand
-- I had him -- and then these spurs
I had forgotten to take them off!

FLORA Had who?
No I don’t understand.

ALAN (slowly catching breath, sighing)
I was riding out
to check on some men
I had set to digging
out a new drainage system
over some sodden land.
As I was coming up to the site
down. 
the rain came on heavily
so I turned towards the new
barn over at the town for shelter

I could hear voices as I approached
and when I entered that barn,
which I had helped to build with these hands
I found besides my own men
that some of the Martins were in there too.
A little banter started up.
Good natured enough on the surface
One thing led to another,
and John Martin
threw up a challenge to a wrestling match.

Far be it from me
to show up a spoilsport before my own men
I assented straight away to the bout
by swinging down off my mount
and grappling with John in the clay.

We were twisting around
but he was no match for myself
I had him in my grip
---damn it I had him---

and I swung him to the ground

but as I fell on him

my spurs caught in something,

snagged in a bag of meal or something

I tripped and he got the better of me,

and he ... (Maid comes in with tea tray)

well this is the state of me now.

FLORA

(Takes tray from maid, thanks her, send her out again, sets it down and starts pouring out tea)

(sarcastically) A wrestling bout?

(pause, making tea)

I better put extra sugar in your tea my lad.

ALAN

(huffing) Oh you don’t ... you just ... Ah!

(Flora passes him his tea. He puts it on the table beside him. She goes back to sit opposite him,

while he notices a piece of paper on the table beside his cup.)

FLORA

No I don’t — you’re right! (sighs)

(pause) (picking up spurs and taking them over to another sideboard at the other side of the room)

You’ve earned your spurs! (laughing out loud)

(pause)

ALAN

(lifting up sheet of paper and looking)

What’s this?

FLORA

That is the work I was doing this morning.
While you were out ... playing.

ALAN

(reading)

Now let's see,

"My Lord, Necessity often forces both sexes
to go through transactions
contrary to their inclinations ..."

(laughing)

Ha-ha – that's cute.

Do you expect a man

of the Duke of Atholl's standing
to be moved by a saucy nudge in the ribs
and a wink in the direction

of your career as Little Bo Peep

of the Jacobite penny dreadfuls?

You really make us out so pathetic!

FLORA

I make us out pathetic?

Well yes, I do.

(coming over and snatching the letter)

Let's see who comes out of it worst!

(Reading excerpts from letter)

"Such is the present transaction

as nothing but real necessity
could force me to give your Grace this trouble

and open my miserable state

to your Lordship's view.
My husband, by various losses
and the education of our children
fell through the little means we had
therefore of course we must, contrary to our inclinations,
follow the rest of our friends
who have gone this three years past to America.
Had I this boy off my hands
before I leave the Kingdom
I could almost leave it with pleasure.
Mr Macdonald, though he once had the pleasure
of a little of your Grace’s acquaintance
could not be prevailed upon
to put pen to paper
therefore I, with the assistance of what remained
of the old resolution
went through this bold task.
And with the prayers of a poor distressed woman,
once known to the world,
for the prosperity of your family.

I am with the greatest esteem and respect
your Grace’s most obedient servant.”

(Flora comes round, makes as if to massage Alan’s shoulder
with one hand, and then with the other passes the letter into
his hand)

ALAN (Throws the letter across the room)
Why didn’t you just go the whole hog
and say it was all your money
that I lost?

All written out in Sandy’s hand too,
that’s a nice way to get respect from him.

(pause)

FLORA (Swinging round by the window again)
Respect has to be ...

ALAN ... earned. Yes I know. (sighing)

But I know I’ve done enough for Sandy:
I’ve had him working with me
ditching, draining, marking out boundaries.
I’ve educated him in new ways.

At best he’ll be confused.

He’s seen the cattle drop from starvation
despite our efforts.

The whole place is stinking
of rotten carcasses.

We just need a breath of air.

FLORA We’ll get it. We’ll get that
it’s coming across the sea.

ALAN I know, darling
we’ll be away from here
from this sickening life here.

The people here cannot lift themselves out of it,
a different outlook is required.
(Pause)

FLORA (at window) Did you know we’re receiving visitors today?

ALAN The tourists? Yes I heard they’re on the island.

FLORA Boswell and Dr Johnson have been in Raasay for a few days.
Kate is preparing something in the kitchen and I’ve made up the beds in the spare room.

ALAN Dr Johnson is, I hear, very keen on the work of the Improvers.
I should like to take him out to inspect the estate, let him see for himself how science and learning is having a rough time of it in these islands when it meets up with rude tradition.

FLORA Yes, I think he would like to hear about my cousin, about Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair and his first dictionary of the Gaelic language.
It’s a shame the two never met.

ALAN Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair! that rebel versifier of the prasgan na Garbh-crioich! Ha – ha Your jokes would be getting funnier by the minute if it weren’t dragging us down into a morass of rebel sentimentality.
First you think to win over the Duke of Atholl
with sordid allusions to a broken prince's sexuality
and now you compare
the enlightened and ordered intelligence
of the great Dr Johnson's dictionary
to a two hundred page list of Gaelic words
thrown together at random
as they came into the head
of a rascal, runaway teacher
without so much as an alphabetical
or any other kind of ordering.
Ha - ha!
You wonder why people are laughing at us?

FLORA  History was assigning that
"rascal, runaway teacher"
a different lesson.
His poetry ...

ALAN  ... His poetry?!!

(He jumps off the couch, come over to centre stage
in front of Flora)
Is this poetry? -- Down on one knee,
(goes down on one knee)
taking an Italian prince
(grabs a cushion and sits it on his knee)
-- or should I say a French queen? --
on the other knee
-- for that is how Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair
greeted him is it not, and sighing,
"O Thearlaich mhic Sheumais
Mhic Sheumais, mhic Thearlaich!"
-- That is the great poetic scene?!!

FLORA
You know nothing about that scene
because you were not here.
You can wrestle, big tough guy,
with your peasants in a barn
-- that will surely win you fame and fortune --
but you would not have dared
say these things to Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair's face,
or to any of those men who were there with him
when he met the prince.
You're a disgrace to the name Macdonald.
(lisping) Besides, I thought you had hurt your back?

ALAN
I can suffer it for poetry.
Should we rhyme of these great men's names then
in the manner of a Macdonald genealogy:
Clanranald, Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair,
Boisdale, your own stepfather Hugh, and the rest ...
all those to whom I would not dare
challenge face to face,
-- and their greatest feat of heroism? --
-- to ship off a scared prince
dressed in woman's clothing
in the care of a young girl --

This is the heroic deed
for which so many houses were burnt
so many men, women and children put to the sword,
and others transported in chains.
So many Macdonalds slaughtered
so that name can live on
in these two heroic images:--

the poet Macdonald with the prince on his knee;
and the prince in woman's clothing
in a boat with the girl Macdonald's head in his lap.

And now to round it all off
the girl herself turns poet
"Necessity often forces both sexes
to go through transactions
contrary to their inclinations ..."

Isn't that sweet?

FLORA  It would be if any of it were true.
If it were not just the wishful thinking
of a jealous, lily-livered, failed farmer!

ALAN  Failed farmer? -- Failed bloody marriage!
FLORA Your social conscience didn’t stop you marrying
to get your hands on all my money
which came from those very Jacobites
you profess to despise.
Where would your farming have been
without...

ALAN Your money?
The English Jacobite money!
No wonder we’re hated here
you coming back flaunting your wad
in everybody’s face.
Did you notice what had
happened to everyone else
while you were being wined and dined in London?

(Pause)

FLORA For your information, the beginning of that letter
was not supposed to refer to the prince.
It’s not poetic at all
— it’s a straight excuse for my husband’s desertion of his
duties.

Even your own son asked
why you couldn’t write the letter.
The prince is not the only Molly
I’ve had to look after.

(Alan steps forward, strikes Flora)

(Long pause, Alan goes back, lies out on couch)
again. Flora gets up onto seat opposite, rearranging herself etc)

ALAN I've just had enough today
I can't take any more

(Pause)

FLORA You get it tough.
Perhaps we should tell Dr Johnson about this,
it would make an interesting study of Highland manners.

(Long pause)

ALAN Tell? About what?

FLORA I'm going to my room, I need rest.
I'll see you at supper.

(Flora gets up, exits in a hurry)

ALAN Flora! ...

(End of Scene Four)
Scene 5
A bedroom at Kingsburgh

(Flora sitting on a bed in room. Dim light)

FLORA So we are to go to America
a sea crossing to the colonies
will settle our worries?

Leave the children here,
Follow our kinsmen and women
to that new country
— a dumping ground — some say
for rebels, suspects, malcontents, fanatics
— what then are our worries?
Away from poverty and oppression,
for our two abject souls
does bad luck end in a land of plenty?
Every night I’m back aboard those ships
howling, heaving, seasick

(Procession of Highland prisoners, dishevelled,
filthy, in chains, starts filing on at the back of stage)

MEN Veteran...

FLORA those transports whose unhappy cargo
I’ll now follow

MEN ...Scarborough, Furnace...

FLORA of my own free will,

MEN ...Tryton...
FLORA Of my special treatment
in those days of defeat
I’m not unaware.

MEN Terror, Greyhound, Diamond, Eltham

FLORA For the few months I was held
prisoner aboard those ships
I was accorded the status of a “Lady”

MEN Shark, Loo, Pamela, Serpent

FLORA I had a gentlewoman’s relation
with the prince, they say
I was never locked down in the hold
with the rest of the Jacobite scum.

MEN Veteran, Scarborough, Furnace, Tryton

FLORA My own cabin, and my own servant Kate,
were two fine phrases I could use.

MEN Terror, Greyhound, Diamond, Eltham

FLORA I was not overawed by the rank
of those I met; Captains, Generals, Princes.
Never pretend, or repent or be ashamed, they said.
Be honest and the government
will not try you for your life.

MEN Shark, Loo, Pamela, Serpent

FLORA I was not tortured or flogged,
full rations were left at my door.
A commodore gifted me
a handsome suit of riding clothes
and some fine linen riding shirts
and was perplexed when I laughed out loud.

MEN Shark, Loo, Pamela, Serpent

FLORA My "modest" behaviour gained me many friends
the highest society visited me on board.
This misfortune, they assured me
would be my greatest honour.

MEN Veteran, Scarborough, Furnace, Tryton

FLORA But these names still
come singing out;
every night, when they unbatten the hatches,
let me look down
on the "lesser lights"

(One of the prisoners clanks forward in chains)

1ST YOUTH Dougal Campbell, age 18
A servant from Lochaber,
5 foot 4 inches
Brown complexion, well-made, ruddy.

FLORA They gave me a bag of herbs
to sanitise the rebel airs,
I packed them into my nose
and was led forward to witness
the count of my ex-countrymen.

2ND YOUTH Alexander Cattenach, age 18
A labourer from Badenoch
5 foot 5 inches
Black, ruddy, well-made, healthy

**FLORA**

The filth of that hold

surpassed imagination.

I was saluted with such intolerable airs,

too malignant to describe,

that I thought I would faint

and fall down among them.

**1ST MAN**

Duncan MacPhearson, age 36

A labourer from Invernesshire

5 foot 6 inches

Thin, pal, ruddy.

**FLORA**

Of some seventy prisoners on board

only fifty could make it

up the ladder to be registered.

at a snail creep pace

and with such looks on their faces.

**3RD YOUTH**

Hector McGillis, age 16

A herd from Invernesshire

5 foot tall

Black and lusty

**FLORA**

Of the rest, too ill to move

a sling was sent down

to bring them up on deck.

Raging with fever and distemper

they came moaning into the daylight

**4TH YOUTH**

Duncan McLeish, age 18
A pedlar from Perthshire
4 foot 11 inches
Pale, fair complexion, slender

MEN Bridgewater!

FLORA Not one of those men

MEN Two Sisters!

FLORA rounded up on deck for counting

MEN Happy Janet!

FLORA then herded back into the hold
for shipping to the colonies

MEN Veteran, Scarborough, Furnace, Tryton

FLORA could look at me
in my riding clothes
herbs stuffed up my nose,
and a hankie covering my mouth.

2ND MAN Angus MacDonald, age 50
A labourer from Argyll
5 foot 4 inches
Black hair, well-made, ill looking

MEN Terror, Greyhound, Diamond, Eltham

5TH YOUTH Hugh MacDonald, age 13
A servant from Arisaig
4 foot 7 inches
Slender and sickly

MEN Shark, Loo, Pamela, Serpent

3RD MAN Donald MacDonald, age 22
A labourer from Invernesshire

5 foot 6 inches

Black hair, lusty

MEN Veteran, Scarborough, Furnace, Tryton

6TH YOUTH Archibald MacPhearson, age 16

A cowherd from Skye

4 foot 9 inches

Thick set, pock pitted.

(Crescendo on this theme)

MEN Veteran, Scarborough, Furnace, Tryton

Terror, Greyhound, Diamond, Eltham

Shark, Loo, Pamela, Serpent

Bridgewater

Two Sisters

Happy Janet

(Calm, quiet again)

FLORA While I sat in my cabin, rocked by the tides,

and reading my prayer book,

in the hold down below my feet

contagion and epidemics grew.

The sickness came to the guards and crew

and the Lady Jacobites came aboard to dance.

(Ladies appear)

LADIES O Miss Macdonald

1ST LADY I could wipe your shoes with pleasure

and think it an honour so to do
When I reflect that you had the honour
to have the prince for your handmaid.

LADIES We all envy you greatly.

(Ladies still swooning etc)

1ST MAN They brought me to Captain Ferguson
who used me with all the barbarity of a pirate
stripped me, ordered me put in a rack
and whipped by his hangman,
all because I would not confess
where the prince was.

FLORA I lived on with my servant,
agreed with the ladies
that my great punishment
was to be so
“cabinned, cribbed, confined”.

2ND LADY One could not discern by her conversation
that she had spent all her former days in the Highlands
for she talks English -- or rather Scots --
and not at all through the Erse tone.
She has a sweet voice, and no lady,
Edinburgh bred,
could acquit herself better at the tea table.

2ND MAN Each one of us
had only half a seaman’s ration
served up to us daily
in foul, nasty buckets.
While these men were left to die below regardless of age, injuries or social standing; rich shoulder to shoulder with poor teenagers alongside the old.

We came aboard and found Miss Flora Macdonald age 23 from the Isle of Skye. She was of low stature, fair complexion, and well enough shaped. Her behaviour in company was so easy, modest and well-adjusted that every visitant was much surprised.

Stripped naked and tied to a mast I was whipped with the cat o' nine tails till the blood gushed out at both sides.

I was served to the Edinburgh and London ladies larded with fiction. The whole story was well cooked up before their delicate tastes could down a dish of Highland stew.

O miss what a happy creature are you who had that dear prince to lull you to sleep
and to take such care of you
with his hands spread about your head
while you were sleeping!
You are surely
the happiest woman in the world!

4TH MAN We slept below
and were given no blankets.
Anywhere you could lay down your head,
a coil of rope,
the ship’s ballast,
the bare boards were good enough.

(Ladies start to dance as men start up again)

MEN Veteran, Scarborough, Furnace, Tryton
Terror, Greyhound, Diamond, Eltham
Shark, Loo, Pamela, Serpent
Bridgewater
Two Sisters
Happy Janet

1ST MAN Go throw the dog in irons, he said.
1ST LADY We must raise the Jacobite spirits,
Miss Macdonald.
Will you dance with us?

FLORA My prison was the Jacobite tea table,
while the dogs below
were howling for scraps!

1ST MAN (looking up as if noise of dancing coming through deck)
Fhoir na Goill sinn fo’n casan
Is mor an naire’s am masladh sud leinn.

**FLORA**

(to ladies with heavy irony)

No, I will not dance.

I cannot think of ... (diversion)

...until...

...until my prince is safe.

Perhaps not until I am blessed

with the happiness of seeing him again.

(Now Flora throws her head down on the bed;
anguish weeping, sobbing etc., while dance of ladies
and chorus swirl around her nightmarishly)

(Music and dance to climax, then all in stage in still
position. Flora sits up.)

**FLORA**

They brought me gifts of clothes,

food, a two-volume Bible,

linen, cambric, needles

a thimble and thread

let Kate and I sew.

Pictures of me were painted by the best,

I was taken out in society

and finally they raised money,

a subscription to send me back to Skye

a free woman

with a fat bank balance.

(stops, sob again for a moment)
These... *(she points back at the men)*

...they were shipped to America.

*(End of scene)*
Scene 6
On Skye

BOSWELL What sir, do you think of Highland manners?

JOHNSON The Gaelic language is for barbarians; abecedarians have they none.

They're not acroamatical

BOSWELL They can't get grammatical for not one volume appears in their tongue.

BOSWELL Big words!

JOHNSON What?

BOSWELL We're using big words and they probably don't know they probably don't know what we mean.

JOHNSON they probably don't know what we mean.

JOHNSON Of the Gaelic Bible and Macpherson's Ossian they boast out loud.

But when you ask them to view the original,
their mouths are shut
— those can’t be found.

BOSWELL Polysyllables
cause aching mandibles

JOHNSON and homonyms and palindromes,
but without letters,
of all man’s eloquence
we’re left nothing
but his jaw bones!

BOSWELL Big words!

JOHNSON What?

BOSWELL We’re using big words

JOHNSON and they probably don’t know

BOSWELL they probably don’t know what we mean.

JOHNSON they probably don’t know what we mean.

JOHNSON Their talk’s just serendipity

BOSWELL and flibbertigibberty!

JOHNSON that’s no gross iniquity

BOSWELL but it’s hullabaloo!

JOHNSON Who?!

BOSWELL Big words!

JOHNSON What?

BOSWELL We’re using big words

JOHNSON and they probably don’t know

BOSWELL they probably don’t know what we mean.
JOHNSON  they probably don't know what we mean.

(End of Scene)
Scene 7
The parlour at Kingsburgh

(Alan dressed now as Boswell describes him in "Highland outfit" putting final touches to his attire, perhaps looking in mirror etc.)

KATE Sir, sir, we have news that the tourists are on their way.
They're at the bottom of the road already.

ALAN Go and tell the mistress to dress and come down.
We'll receive them in this room.

KATE Right away sir. (exits)

(Alan, still fixing pleats and folds etc., goes over and gazes out the window. Comes back into the centre of the room looking hesitant, apprehensive. Goes over to hat stand, picks out a walking stick or cane, tries walking about the room with it a bit. Strikes a few poses. Puts the stick back and then lies out on the couch. Moans, then puts hand behind to rub his back. Goes to window, turns smartly, crosses room and exits.)

(Sound of voices off)

ALAN (re-entering with Boswell and Johnson, the latter with a walking stick)
This is the parlour sirs!

JOHNSON Ah, a warm fire and some home comforts!
We shall recover now from the ravages of your climate.

BOSWELL Inside some gentlemen’s houses of late
we have been wading up to our knees in muck.

JOHNSON They were scarcely drier in the inside than on the out.

ALAN Indeed.
I will arrange for some refreshment, gentlemen.

(Alan pouring some whisky, passing glasses)

JOHNSON I do not partake of a social drink sir
May I have some water?

(Alan fetches Johnson some water, himself and Boswell take
the whisky, drink it off, cheers etc.)

JOHNSON Would I be right, as I desire,
and as I suspect from your dress,
to consider you Jacobite sir?

ALAN There have been ... troubled times here.
I only hope for the best
for this island and its people.
The constitution...

KATE (entering and speaking to Alan in Gaelic)
The mistress is sleeping sir.

ALAN (brisk Gaelic reply then English again)
Then wake her!...
...sorry gentlemen...
...yes...the constitution...
...my wife, however,
is the heroine of a more orthodox stamp.
Perhaps you have...

BOSWELL Miss Flora Macdonald and the 45!

ALAN Mistress of this house.

*(drinking whisky, then pointing at Boswell with glass)*

*Mistress Kingsburgh.*

BOSWELL Ah the Highland appellation sir!

You will forgive my falling

foul of your intricate system.

ALAN It is not *my* system.

Holy matrimony is...

*(calming himself down, as if counting to ten)*

...My wife will join us shortly.

JOHNSON Depend on it, gentlemen,

no woman is the worse

for sense and knowledge.

Some cunning men

choose fools for their wives,

thinking to manage them well

but they always fail.

There is a spaniel fool, and a mule fool.

The spaniel fool may be made

to do by beating

The mule fool will neither do

by words nor blows.
And the spaniel fool
often turns at last to mule
and suppose a fool be made to do pretty well
you must have the continual trouble
of making her do.
Men know that women
are an overmatch for them
and therefore choose
the weakest or most ignorant.
If they did not think so
they never could be afraid
of women knowing as much as themselves.

Depend on it, gentlemen,
no woman is the worse
for sense and knowledge.

ALAN My wife has supported me
...that is...
there have been, as I say,
troubled times here,
for a number of years...

BOSWELL the 15, the 19 and the 45!

ALAN those numbers and others,
--you have brought your ready reckoner, Dr Johnson --
some say the defeat of 1707
was the greatest,

Those numbers are others
have added up to a deal
of political ferment in these parts.
I have tried in my own way
to make improvements to this situation,
and my wife has stood behind me
with care and...good sense.

BOSWELL  Yes we are sad to hear
that *good sense* has not turned to your profit.

ALAN  I would like to show
you gentlemen around my land
let you see what improvements I have attempted.
You, Dr Johnson, would be interested
in the rough time science is having in these parts:
I have put an end to the runrig system,
separate holdings, forced enclosures,
and a building plan in stone and lime
has been started.
I have introduced the concept
of fallow, sown rye grass and clover,
three new types of potato have been brought in
to replace the small red Scotch type,
and a new breed of sheep
to replace the natives.
Money has been spent,
a lot of hard work has been done.
Formerly the land here was laid out
to support the clan system,
to verify mutual obligations.
It passed from proprietor
to tacksman to subtenant
to cottar to servant
and it ensured kinship, loyalty, service.
Now all that is gone or going.
We must now be commercial,
scientific, the land must be productive.
All that needs hard work.

BOSWELL You are working hard sir.
But it is surely against the grain of things.
I must observe that in Skye
there seems to be much idleness:
for men and boys follow you,
as colts follow passengers on a road.
The typical figure of a Skye boy
seems to be a lown
with bare legs and feet,
a dirty kilt, ragged coat and waistcoat,
a bare head and a stick in his hand,
which, I suppose, is partly
to help the lazy rogue walk,
partly to serve as a kind of defensive weapon.
JOHNSON I am pleased to hear of your attempt at improvement but I do not think we shall have time to view your lands. We came hither to see what we expected, a people of peculiar appearance and a system of antiquated life. There was perhaps, never any change in national manners so quick, so great, and so general as that which has operated in the Highlands by the last conquest and subsequent laws. Your clans retain now little of their original character their military ardour is extinguished, their dignity of independence is depressed, their contempt of government subdued and their reverence for chiefs abated. Of what you had before the late conquest of your country there remains only your language and your poverty.

ALAN The peasant here is caught in a trap of poverty how can he embark on a trial when he lives in famine conditions? For this reason my improvements: rotations, fallowing, rootcrops, grass, are all suspected, distrusted. The profit in better animal feeding
must outweigh the loss in food
from ground under fodder crops;
the increased cereal yield of proper rotation
must balance loss in fallow years.
The Highlands are used to decisions
always made on the short term.

BOSWELL But a decision to be a *Jacobite*
is not a short term one!

JOHNSON No, it is a way of life!
A Jacobite believes
in the divine right of kings.
He that believes
in the divine right of kings
believes in a divinity.
A Jacobite believes
in the divine right of bishops.
He that believes
in the divine right of bishops
believes in the divine authority
of the Christian religion.

BOSWELL *(toasting)* the 15, the 19, and the 45!

ALAN *(to Johnson)* I do not dispute that sir.
*(now to Boswell)* --your figures are immaculate!--
but I do not see the urgency
with which such a theory
bears on the matter in hand.
Your country has had a peaceful century
in which to tend its gardens
and ponder mysteries in the evening sunlight.
Your young companion here
proves by mathematics
that we have had a turbulent time.
The question for us now
is how to put meat on the table.

BOSWELL  A Highland chief should now do
everything to endeavour to raise his rents
by means of the industry of his people.
Formerly it was right for him to have
his house full of idle fellows
now he cannot have influence but by riches,
because ...

ALAN    The rents have been raised,
but a superstitious and distrusting
tenantry are reluctant to make the improvements
which allow them to pay these rents
--they prefer to leave for America.

JOHNSON I have found men
not defective in judgement or general experience
who consider the tacksman
as a useless burden on the ground
as a drone who lives upon the product of the estate
without the right of property
or the merit of labour,
and who impoverishes at once
the landlord and the tenant.

ALAN    Sir, I have ... my wife and I
have spent much of our own money
trying to make these improvements.
Our landlord, however, prefers to drink imported claret
than let his tenants afford humble punch.
He rarely visits his estates
--it is said that he is frightened of the sea crossing.

JOHNSON  *He* is frightened of the sea
and his tenants are frightened
when it comes to land!

BOSWELL  But is it true, as we hear,
that you also propose now,
to cross the sea to America?

ALAN    There will soon be no remembrance
of my family on this island.
The best of its inhabitants
are already following their friends to America.
Here we cannot promise ourselves
but poverty and oppression.
It is melancholy to see
the state of this miserable place.
There is, as I say, on all sides
suspicion, distrust, superstition.
The superiors summon the tenants
for not paying the greater rents
and the tenants the superior
for oppression and violent profits.
The factors and tenants are always at law
forcing them out of their lands
in May or June
without previous warning.
There is no respect of persons
as the best are mainly gone,
stealing of sheep constantly,
picking and thieving of corn,
garden stuffs and potatoes,
perpetual lying, backbiting and slandering,
honesty entirely fled,
villainy and deceit
supported by downright poverty.
Most miserable is the state
of this great and good family.
When the next emigration is gone
Only Aird, and three other old men
will be here that bear the name Macdonald.

KATE (enters)(in Gaelic) The mistress is coming down now sir.

ALAN (in Gaelic) Good. (in English) Gentlemen, (as Flora enters)
the Mistress of Kingsburgh -- my wife.

Doctor Johnson and Mr Boswell, the tourists.
JOHNSON)  
(ter) Miss Flora Macdonald!

BOSWELL)  

FLORA  Gentlemen, please excuse my keeping you waiting...

JOHNSON  Madam it was an honour to wait upon you.

BOSWELL  As you once waited upon...

FLORA  ...I was suffering from a headache
and retired to bed in the later afternoon.

BOSWELL  But are you much recovered now madam?
Do not let us...

FLORA  Do not fuss over me gentlemen.
--my husband is the one
at whom your sympathies should be directed.
This very morning he sustained wounds which...
...yet here he is -- bravely holding court.

(All three, Flora, Boswell and Johnson, stop, turn
and look at Alan -- silence for a couple of seconds)

JOHNSON  Are you well sir?

ALAN  I ... my wife is referring
to an injury I sustained this morning
while I ...
...I was overseeing some buildings
those of which I told you
--I am rebuilding some barns
and so on, in stone and lime
and my ... eh ... spur caught ...
that is I tripped on a bag
... a bag of meal, and ...
I feel hearty as ever.

FLORA  *(coy)* Boys will be boys!

Gentlemen we knew you were headed this way.
It was passed around the ladies that Mr Boswell
was touring the country in the company
of a young *English* buck!

JOHNSON  *(laughing)* Yet you see madam I am chaperoned
by a civil decent young Scotchman
who will protect the young ladies!

FLORA  *(mock coquettish)* But let us know, how do you young bucks
like the Highlands?

JOHNSON  *(reciprocating mood)* But who *can* like the Highlands?
I like the people well.

BOSWELL  Dr Johnson would not like to speak unfavourably
of a country where he has been so hospitably entertained.
But he did find, for example,
the riding in Skye, very disagreeable.

JOHNSON  The way is so narrow,
only one at a time can travel
so it is quite unsocial;
and you cannot indulge
in meditation by yourself
because you must always be attending
to the steps which your horse takes.
ALAN But has your jaunt answered expectations?

BOSWELL It has much exceeded it.

JOHNSON Wherever we have come
we have been treated like princes in their progress.

BOSWELL But this reminds us of another prince
who once toured in these parts.

JOHNSON (coy) They say in England, madam,
that one Miss Flora Macdonald was with him.

FLORA They were very right.

BOSWELL Madam we understand you are much troubled
by requests to hear of your part in that tale.
But we prostrate ourselves before you,
we have come far,
and count every moment wasted
that was not spent in your company
listening to your account.

JOHNSON We would gladly hear it madam.

FLORA If I have been troubled
I have also been well rewarded.
My husband knows of this.
It is not a happy tale, you know the sorry outcome
-- it was achieved through a sorry means.

Strange though it may seem,
most islanders cannot swim
and I do not like to sail on the sea;
the rock of the waves, and the swell
do not soothe or calm my dislike,
they instil a panic in me,
I sometimes think to hear voices in the wind,
whispers and screams in unknown tongues.
Yet my destiny seems to be adrift,
washed here and there
at the whim of the wind and waves.
Soon we are to leave here,
leave Skye, our home, for America,
who knows what the wind will blow us to.

But you are asking me about a specific sailing
it seemed straightforward at first
– to take our guest, dressed in women’s clothing
that My Lady and myself had sewed,
across the Minch in a boat.
But the swell came up during the night,
rain lashed in our faces,
we were bumped and banged on the waves,
fog came down and we could not get our bearings.
Some soldiers shot at us from the shore.
We hid in a cave
with a waterfall pouring down on our heads.
Of all this, as you see,
my memory is a confusion,
I became delirious, fevered almost
Some say our guest held my head
in his hands,
I do not remember this,
I do not know who witnessed it.
Finally we landed and I got him to safety.

BOSWELL It is said that you could not decide
at first, whether you should help the prince,
but that Captain Felix O'Neill persuaded you.
He even offered, it is said,
to marry you to protect your honour.

FLORA Oh, many things are said!

ALAN My wife got the pretender to Skye
and brought him to this house
where he received the hospitality
of my mother and father.

BOSWELL Sir, I do not call him the pretender,
because it appears to me an insult
to one who is still alive,
and I suppose, thinks very differently.
It may be a parliamentary expression,
but it is not a gentlemanly expression.

JOHNSON At any rate, gentlemen, the grandson of King James
was sheltered and aided
by high and low throughout this country.

FLORA Even when a price of £30,000
was set as the reward for his capture.

JOHNSON  In such a poor country
that sum must have represented a great temptation.
The Scots, with a vigilance
of jealousy which never goes to sleep
always suspect that an Englishman
despises them their poverty.
When Leslie, two hundred years ago,
related so punctiliously
that a hundred hen eggs, new laid,
were sold in these islands for a penny,
he supposed that no inference could possibly follow
but that eggs were in great abundance.
Posterity has since grown wiser,
and having learned
that nominal and real value may differ
they now tell no such stories
lest the foreigner should happen to collect
not that eggs are many
but that pence are few.
Money and wealth have
by the use of commercial language
been so long confounded
that they are commonly believed to be the same.

BOSWELL  Yet is there not the suspicion
that for a people so little used to commerce,
such a sum means nothing.

FLORA  £30,000 nothing?! Look out the window!
The people have no trousers!

(Flora and Alan laughing)

JOHNSON  Quantum cedat virtutibus aurum!

BOSWELL  (translating lap dog style)
With virtue weighed what worthless trash is gold.

ALAN  Yes, my son has Latin too
but the language does not alter
the truth of the matter.
The idea that not even that enormous sum
could procure a traitor
even from among those clans
who regarded his enterprise with indifference
is fine and congenial to ourselves.

But is it not strange
that one Jacobite follower, Barrisdale,
had switched to the Hanover side
precisely after thieving £30,000
from the prince's coffers?

One minister, MacAuley of Uist
in his zeal and affection for the government
had sent word to Harris
to block the prince's way,
and even the so-called great Jacobite bard,
Alasdair MacMhaighstir Alasdair was suspected of being a fraud.

"These were all traitor gentlemen" you might say, "but not one squeak came from the lower orders".

Ha -- do you imagine for one second that £30,000 would have been handed out to some filthy peasant standing before Butcher Cumberland?!

He would have been shot on the spot.

The truth of the matter is that a good opportunity was offered to any man who bore a grudge against his neighbour. Arrests were made frequently on mere suspicion and without a shred of evidence The whole place was in turmoil.

BOSWELL But Miss Flora Macdonald, she led them through to safety!

JOHNSON The whole place was in turmoil.

BOSWELL Miss Flora Macdonald!

ALAN Mistress of Kingsburgh!

FLORA This whole place is in turmoil!

(etc etc on this theme)

FLORA Gentlemen, I think we have pushed the boat out. Let's throw down an anchor for tonight.
--Your bed, Doctor Johnson, is a celebrated one,
Come, I'll show you to where the prince laid his head.

JOHNSON I am very grateful madam
to what do I own the honour.

FLORA Oh you know you young bucks
are always the favourites of the ladies.

(exit Flora leading Boswell and Johnson)

(Alan walks about the room a bit as before, sorting folds and pleats in kilt etc. Goes to hatstand, picks out a walking stick, walks about the room a bit again, as if imitating Johnson. Looking in mirror etc. Hears Flora returning, goes back to lie on the couch rubbing his back)

FLORA (enters) The sleep of the just!

ALAN The point is the weather
is not to blame:
A black spring,
the barrenness of the soil
the lack of money or time
or of the science for change
--these are just circumstances

We're in the wring history
that's the problem.
Our history is too heavy,
it weighs down on us.
We can't get the clean
easy touch on things
--like them, like them upstairs.

(Flora moving over the window, looking out again)

But when we get away from here
then we'll get a new history.

FLORA (turning suddenly)

Do you think I want to go to America!

(Flora makes as if to leave room again. Alan dives
off couch and grabs hold of her by the arms.)

ALAN But don't you see that...

FLORA Let me go!

ALAN Wait! Wait! If we leave here then...

FLORA (struggling to get away) Leave me!

ALAN when we get away ... when we make the break from...

FLORA You'll have to break both my arms!

For I'll never leave!

(Flora gets away and runs out of room)

(End of Scene)
Scene 8
Somewhere in the Highlands

(Enter Boswell and Johnson travelling again)

JOHNSON Quantum cedat virtutibus aurum.

BOSWELL With virtue weighed what trash is gold

BOTH This should all be written down!

BOSWELL 'Twas a striking sight to behold
I'll transcribe it to my diary;
in Skye with Flora Macdonald
the champion of the English Tories!

BOSWELL In King James' grandson's bed
you laid your weary head

JOHNSON But lest King George should see this print
know that I had no ambitions in't.

JOHNSON So the name of Flora Macdonald
shall be mentioned in history
and mentioned with honour
in virtue of courage and fidelity.

JOHNSON Quantum cedat virtutibus aurum.

BOSWELL With virtue weighed what trash is gold

BOTH This should all be written down!

(Exeunt)

(End of scene)
Scene 9
A bedroom at Kingsburgh

(Flora in bedroom/boat scene again. This time the chorus are crew of some sort of boat/ship as it sails through a storm. It is a very nightmarish and apocalyptic scene. There should be some doubt for the audience as to whether Flora is dreaming as in the previous boat scene or if she is actually sailing -- to America or somewhere.)

FLORA

God, he said
God gave me this land
I will not let the rain wash it away.
Come down to the shore
and raise your skirts high
I will not leave you.

CHORUS

Then opened the windows of the sky
pied, grey-blue,
to the low'ring wind's blowing
a morose brew,
The sea pulled on his grim rugging
slashed with sore rents,
That rough-napped mantle, a weaving
of loathsome torrents.
The shape-ever-changing surges
swelled up in hills
And roared down into valleys in appalling spills.
The water yawned in great craters,
slavering mouths agape
Snatching and snarling at each other
in rabid shape.
It were a man’s deed to confront
the demented scene,
Each mountain of them breaking
into flamy lumps.
Each fore-wave towering grey-fanged
mordantly grumps
While a routing comes from the back-waves
with their raving rumps.

FLORA I asked you for a bridge
for sweet resined planks of pine
to lay my white feet on,
to walk to that solid ground.
You gave me your hand
and led me back to that solid ground.
Dry and white.

CHORUS When we would rise of these rollers
soundly, compactly,
It was imperative to shorten the sail
swiftly, exactly.
When we would fall with one swallowing
down into the glens
Every topsail she had would be off.

—no light task the men’s!
The great hooked big-buttocked ones
long before
They came at all near us were heard
loudly roar
Scourging all the lesser waves level
as on they tore.
It was no joke to steer in that sea
where the high tops to miss
Seemed almost to hear the keel scrape
the shelly abyss!

**FLORA**

We waded into the sea
with you, our husbands,
our fathers, our uncles, our bothers
on our shoulders,
with you, our princes, our kings,
we raised our skirts
but the wind billowed them out and out.
The sky got higher
and the tide came up,
our white feet are stuck in the mud
and the mud is blood.
I cannot marry you
you are my husband
I will not leave you.

CHORUS

The sea churning and lashing itself
in maniacal states,
Seals and other great beasts were even
in direr straits,
The wild swelth and the pounding waves
and the ship's nose
Scattering their white brains callous
through the billows
They shouted to us loudly, dreadfully,
the piteous word:-
'Save us or we perish. We are subjects.
Take us aboard.'
Small fish that were in the waters,
murderously churned,
Floated on the top without number
white bellies upturned.
The stones and shells of the floor even
came to the top
Torn up by the all-grabbing motion
that would not stop.

FLORA

You broke all the planks.
This bridge is a botched job,
nailed together,
battered, pounded,
bashed and leaky.
You have sent me a boat.
A BOAT
We are sinking!

CHORUS  The whole sea was a foul porridge
full of red scum
With the blood and the ordure of the beasts,
ruddy, glum
While screaming with their gill-less mouths,
their jaws agape,
Even the air's abyss was full of fiends
that had no shape.
With the paws and tails of great monsters
gruesome to hear
Were the screeching towerers. They would strike
fifty warriors with fear.

FLORA  The blood is coming up
washing over our children.
Waves of red, crashing down on them,
sweeping them away.
They are being torn
out of my womb.

CHORUS The crew’s ears lost all appetite for hearing in that din,
Rabble of mad sky-demons and their watery kin
Making a baying so unearthly deeper than the sea-floor,
Great notes lower than human hearing ever heard before.
What then with the ocean’s turmoil pounding the ship
The clamour of the prow flenching whales with slime-foiled grip,
and the wind from the western quarter restarting her windward blast,
Through every possible ordeal it seemed we passed.

FLORA The Man said he could walk on water.
I cradled his bottle and patted him on the head.
--You’re far too dry, I said

Going up and down, and up
and -- spleuch (she throws up violently)

all over the waves,
a foul purple scum
swelling up and down

How can we leave the things
we hate best.
The insides of our stomach
our upturned cracked-open womb of love.

CHORUS
We were blinded by the sea-spray
ever going over us;
With, beyond that, like another ocean,
thunders and lightnings to cover us,
The thunderbolts sometimes singeing
our rigging till the smoke
And stench of the reefs smouldering
made us utterly choke.
Between the upper and the lower torments
thus were we braised.
Water, fire and wind simultaneously
against us raised.

FLORA
I am ... spleuch *(she vomits)*
I am Princess ... ... spleuch *(vomits)*
... ... of this land

I have put my hands in this mud,
in this blood.
Break my arms, your ... ... spleuch *(vomits)* ... Lordship
break my head
break my heart
break my womb

I will not leave

... spleuch (*vomits*) ...

I will return.

END