

Suggestions for learning and teaching Scottish Literature and Language

Country: Scotland. What like is it?

Visions of Scotland

The purpose of these notes is to suggest ways in which the chosen texts may be explored by students in S5 and S6 groups who are studying Scottish and English Language and literature. The assignments are not designed to be practice examination questions but are aimed approximately at Higher or Advanced levels. We believe that selectively used they offer interesting and worthwhile ways of getting to grips with the texts.

The texts chosen are extracts from Liz Lochhead's *Mary Queen of Scots Got her Head Chopped Off* (1987) and Sir David Lyndsay's *The Dreme* (c 1528). In addition to the Penguin edition of the play (1989) or the Canongate anthology of 20th Century Scottish Drama (2001) we recommend two recent ASLS publications:

Sir David Lyndsay: Selected Poems, edited by Janet Hadley Williams, (ASLS Annual Volume 30, 2000).
Liz Lochhead's Mary Queen of Scots Got her Head Chopped Off, by Margery Palmer McCulloch, (ASLS Scotnote 16, 2000).

RANGE:

- S5, S6
- Higher and Advanced Higher

KEY TEXTS:

- *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*. Lochhead, Liz (Penguin, 1989) OR *20th Century Scottish Drama*: ed. Craig, Cairns and Stevenson, Randall (Canongate, 2001)
- *Scotnote: Liz Lochhead's Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*. McCulloch, Margery Palmer (ASLS, 2000)
- *Sir David Lyndsay: Selected Poems*: ed. Williams, Janet Hadley (ASLS, 2000)

RECOMMENDED:

- *Armstrong's last Goodnight*. Arden, J (Methuen, 1965)
- *Scotnote: The Poems of Robert Henryson*: Baird, G (ASLS, 1996)
- *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*: ed. Crawford, R and Imlah, M (Penguin, 2000)
- *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Poetry*: ed. Dunn, D (Faber, 1992)
- *The New Makars*: ed. Hubbard, T (Mercat Press 1991)
- *Sonnets from Scotland*: Morgan, E (Marsicat Press, 1984)
- *Virtual and Other Realities*: Morgan, E (Carc Janet, 1997)
- *Dream State*: ed. O'Rourke, D (Polygon 1994)
- "The Poetry of Sir David Lyndsay": Royan, Nicola (article in *ScotLit* 22, 2000)
- *The Concise Scots Dictionary* (Scottish National Dictionary Association, 1999)
- *The Makars*: ed. Tasioulas, J A (Canongate Classics, 1999)
- *The Poetry of Scotland*: ed. Watson, R (EUP, 1995).



ASSOCIATION FOR SCOTTISH LITERARY STUDIES
TEACHING NOTES: SPRING 2001

A S L S

LEARNING AND TEACHING ASSIGNMENTS: VISIONS OF SCOTLAND

Mary Queen of Scots got Her Head Chopped Off, Act 1, Scene 1

Penguin edition, pages 11 and 12.

The Dreime of Schyr David Lyndesay, stanzas 115-131 (*Of the realme of Scotland*)

Sir David Lyndsay: Selected Poems, ed. Hadley Williams, pages 29–33.

Some suggestions for using these two brief texts for work in Scottish/English literature and/or language at Higher or Advanced levels. There is no implication that all of these need be tackled.

1. PREPARATORY ACTIVITIES

These are two focusing assignments which may be undertaken before students explore the two texts.

“When I think about Scotland I think of . . .” What does the place called Scotland mean to you today? In approximately 5 paragraphs write a personal view in which you would draw attention to its qualities in a way which might interest possible foreign visitors. Compare your own views with those of others in the class.

Scots, like other peoples, have always been ready to girth about the state of their country. In a group, discuss from your own experience what you think are the main weaknesses and drawbacks of life in Scotland today. Come to an agreement on the three things that most need to be improved in contemporary Scotland, and suggest briefly what you think should be done about them. Your group should present its complaints in a short hard-hitting oral report to the class.

2. READING ACTIVITIES

2.1 *Mary Queen of Scots Got her Head Chopped Off*

This passage is the first scene in Act 1 of Liz Lochhead's two-act play, which was first staged in 1989.

Read the scene over to yourself and identify any words and phrases you do not understand. Discuss difficult expressions with your class or group, and use *The Concise Scots Dictionary* to help you to get at the meanings. Now try to perform a first dramatic reading of the scene.

Individually or in pairs tackle some of the following questions about the text:

- What devices does Liz Lochhead use to make this opening scene stimulate and hold the audience's attention? How does the scene seem to suggest what might follow as the play develops?
- Analyse briefly the five distinct phases of this little scene, commenting on features of the language, imagery, syntax and structure of each.
- ‘Princes Street or Paddy's Merkit’ What do references such as these suggest about the play's treatment of historical events. Find another, similar example in this scene.

What qualities does the playwright give to La Corbie? Comment on the linguistic form of the name, *La Corbie*. Why do you think it is used?

Liz Lochhead's play is a modern treatment of the troubled life of Mary Stuart, daughter of James V (see *The Dreime* below). Like her father she became monarch at a very early age. Do some background reading on the historical situation of the play, e.g. in Margery Palmer McCulloch's Scotnote on *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off* (ASLS 2000). From your reading write a two-paragraph note on Mary's reign.

Choose another emblematic animal and in that role write an appropriate monologue about modern Scotland through its eyes (eg a cloned sheep, a farmed salmon, a motorway buzzard, a free range hen, the Loch Ness Monster, a wolf in a safari park, an oiled seabird, an urban fox, a penguin in the zoo, a stray cat, a budgie, the last herring in the Minch, etc, etc. . . . take your pick!)

Probably you will go on to read and study the whole of Lochhead's play. Take any opportunity you get to see a full performance or to take part in acting out of a scene or scenes from the play. The play was recently broadcast on BBC Radio 3 (11 February 2001).

2.2 *The Dreame of Schyr David Lyndsay (stanzas 115–131)*

This section, Of the realme of Scotland, is part of a longer work in which the poet in a dream meets a wise woman, Dame Remembrance, who takes him on a fantastic aerial survey of the whole cosmos. The trip starts in Hell, moves up through Limbo into Heaven, takes in the whole of the Earth and ends up in Scotland.

Read the passage over to yourself and identify any words and phrases you do not understand. Bear in mind that you are dealing with both 16th century spelling and Scots forms of language. Discuss difficult expressions with your class or group, and use *The Concise Scots Dictionary* to help you to get at the meanings. Now try reading the poem aloud. Tackle it as a dialogue of two readers, Sir David and Dame Remembrance.

Individually or in pairs look closely at what Lyndsay is saying about Scotland in this poem:

- What do the 'properteis' that Lyndsay identifies in stanza 117–120 suggest about the country?
- What are the main faults of Scotland which Dame Remembrance identifies?
- What does she judge to be the fundamental cause of these weaknesses?
- What comparisons are made between Scotland and other countries?
- What moral is drawn from the reference to the wolf and the sheep?
- Quote three lines which present the central paradox which puzzles Lyndsay.

By what poetic techniques does Lyndsay diversify the structure of the passage?

Consider the occurrence of plural personal pronouns and adjectives throughout the passage. Explain to whom they refer. What do you think they contribute to the tone of the passage?

Make a list of the abstract nouns in stanzas 123–127 and consider their effect upon the register of Dame Remembrance. What tone do you think they give to her statements?



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Quhen thow wes young, I bure the in myne arme
Full tenderlie, tyll thow begouth to gang
And in thy bed oft happit the full warme,
With lute in hand syne sweetlie to the sang. (*The Dreame*, lines 8–11)

The Dreame was probably written in 1528, fifteen years after the battle of Flodden. The new king, James V, who was only sixteen years old (younger than any of you) was just beginning to reign in his own right after a period of anarchic rule by squabbling regents. In the poem Lyndsay, who had been a servant and tutor to the boy James, tries to offer him some advice on how he should rule the country. Do some research reading and write a two-paragraph background note on the state of Scotland when James V came to personal power.

For a dramatic presentation of the young king and Sir David Lyndsay read John Arden's play *Armstrong's last Goodnight*, first performed at the Citizen's Theatre, Glasgow in 1964 (Methuen, 1965). In Act 3, Scenes 13–16, do you think James's conduct towards Johnny Armstrong is in keeping with Dame Remembrance's advice?

Discuss in group and/or class how far Lyndsay's view of Scotland holds good today, nearly 500 years later.

3. TAKING THE TWO TEXTS TOGETHER

Do you find anything remotely of interest in the fact that the two commentators in these texts are female ?

Write a prose dialogue between Dame Remembrance and La Corbie on the topic of the new Scottish Parliament.

Compare the use of Scots language forms in the two passages, taking account of vocabulary, syntax, register, literary genre and time of writing.

Both of our extracts make use of animal imagery. Lyndsay admired one of his immediate poetic predecessors, Robert Henryson, who had already written vivid Scottish versions of the animal fables of Aesop. Read one or two of these, e.g. the *Cock and the Jasp* or *The Wolf and the Lamb* in *The Makars* (ed. J A Tasioulas, Canongate Classics, 1999). Sample also Lyndsay's own satiric poem about the king's blethering parrot *The Testament of the Papyngo*. Is there any resemblance here to Lochhead's La Corbie? You will find helpful comment on the fables in *The Poems of Robert Henryson* by G Baird (ASLS Scotnote 11, 1996).

Make your own collection of 6 modern poems which offer views of Scotland past, present or to come. Consult for example some of the following anthologies:

- *The New Penguin Book of Scottish Verse*: ed. R Crawford and M Imlah (Penguin, 2000)
- *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Poetry*: ed. D Dunn (Faber, 1992)
- *The New Makars*: ed. T Hubbard (Mariscat Press, 1991)
- *Dream State*: ed. D O'Rourke (Polygon, 1994)
- *The Poetry of Scotland*: ed. R Watson (EUP, 1995)

Finally for a contemporary vision try some of Edwin Morgan's *Sonnets from Scotland* (Mariscat Press, 1984) and poems from his sequence "Beasts of Scotland", published in *Virtual and Other Realities* (Carcenet, 1997). "Beasts of Scotland" can also be found on Tommy Smith's jazz CD of the same title (Linn Records AKD 054).