



Riach, A. (2017) David Lyndsay - the man who gave ordinary Scots a voice. *National*, 2017, 19 May.

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Deposited on: 01 May 2018

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David Lyndsay: Scotland's first great playwright

Alan Riach

David Lyndsay (c.1486-1555) was a younger contemporary of Robert Henryson, then more immediately of William Dunbar and Gavin Douglas. Born in the last years of the reign of James III, he lived through those of both James IV and James V, and was in service to James V's second wife and widow, Mary of Guise (mother of Mary Queen of Scots). In 1513, the year of Flodden, Lyndsay had a tenement flat in Edinburgh's High Street while Douglas was provost of St Giles's Kirk. After the death of James IV at Flodden, Lyndsay's commitment was to keeping safe the fifteen-month old James V, and encouraging him in his education. Moral authority is clearly pre-eminent in Lyndsay's writing, and characteristic of his poem "The Dreame" (c.1526). He wanted the young king to learn its worth.

In the 1530s, Lyndsay was sent on diplomatic travels, especially to France, partly to ease trade agreements but also to negotiate for a future wife for James. He stayed close in the king's affection: the two of them exchanged at least one courtly flyting, insulting each other in rhetorically flamboyant verse. Lyndsay's "Answer to the King's Flyting" (c.1535-36) reprimands James for his sexual adventures: "Thocht ye rin rudelie, like an restless ram, / Schutand your bolt at mony sindrie schellis [various targets], / Belief richt weill, it is ane bydand gam [a waiting game]." He advises the king to "tak tent, and your fine powder spair, / And waist it nocht".

By 1540, Lyndsay was looking after the envoy of Henry VIII, sent from England to encourage James V to follow the English king's ideas about church reformation. The Scots king valued Lyndsay, awarding him and his wife financial support, and in 1542 referring to him as "knycht" and "Lyon King of Armes" assuring him of a pension for the rest of his life. Lyndsay lived on as the drive towards Reformation intensified its focus. He died only a few years before that focus concentrated and erupted in irrevocable action, though he'd encountered the violence and tension of his era. After the reformers who killed Cardinal Beaton held St Andrews Castle in 1546, Lyndsay went to negotiate with them during the siege. He spent time in Denmark in 1548 again looking for a trade deal and the promise of help against English hostilities. Denmark was by then officially Protestant: Lyndsay's commitment to reformation was informed by such international experience.

He came from a landed family in Fife and was a prolific poet at court, continuing to write poems throughout his life, work such as “The Testament of the Papyngo” (1530) and “The Tragedie of the Cardinall” (1547), which ends with the exhortation:

I counsale everyilk christinit kyng

With in his realme mak reformatioun,

And suffer no mo rebaldis for to ryng

Abufe Christis trew congregatioun.

Lyndsay’s later works include “Squyer Meldrum” (c.1550), a semi-pastiche chivalric romance, and “Ane Dialog betwix Experience and ane Courteour” (1553), nothing less than a history of the world. All his poems are lively and fascinating in their own right and if he had written nothing else he would still be an important writer of real significance, but his masterpiece is not a poem but a great play, an epic work in more than one sense. Like Gavin Douglas’s *Eneados*, it is radical, vibrant with immediacy and action, and politically, nationally, foundational.

Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis (1552, based on a 1540 “Interlude” and revised and expanded in 1554), is a large-scale political satire portending Reformation and demanding political and ecclesiastical self-correction. King and Church are led astray by self-indulgence and the attractions of sin, but Lyndsay insists that the answer is not only to mend their ways in the social structures of their era but also to pay attention to the complaints of the common people – John the Commonweal speaks up eloquently when he and “The Poor Man” enter in the second half of the play. The immense hinterland of the unrepresented people of Scotland is finding its own voice.

What makes the play so exceptionally valuable in European terms is not only that its dramatic urgency combines universal allegorical figures in an unfolding story that delivers both high moral certainty, coarse, snappy comedy and sheer theatrical adventure, but also that the voices of the poor and dispossessed are heard loud and clear in the full context of the authorised social arbiters of power. In Part One, the young King is beset by the corrupting temptations of the vices: Wantonness and Sensuality are opposed by Good Counsel and Chastity. Chastity and Verity are put in the stocks at the most threatening moment for the

King. In this world, the attractiveness of the temptations is real, and the danger of the conflict is theatrically immediate. Something similar is seen in Dunbar's poem "The Golden Targe".

The key figure to keep in mind for modern reference is Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), whose theory of "alienation" in the theatre is exactly applicable. Brecht's idea that an audience was going to think as well as enjoy what they were seeing was Lyndsay's prerogative too. The Interlude of 1540 was performed to King James and his court at Linlithgow and the play of 1554 to his widow the Queen Regent, Mary of Guise. The 1552 production in Cupar and the 1554 production at the Edinburgh playfield, in the open air, were performed to the court but were also open to the public generally. So it wasn't an elitist production for an intimate theatrical space addressed to a courtly audience, it was a public spectacle designed to entertain as well as enlighten and challenge. The royal household, courtiers and sophisticates, and commoners of all professions, were among the audience, all at the one time. Immediate pleasures were joined to the urgency of the message, in national, religious, economic and social terms.

Reading the play now you can see how valuable that mixed address was, how much Lyndsay could get away with in terms of sophisticated representations of dramatic conflict and coarse humour that hits the sensitive spots with merciless precision and force. The publisher of the play recorded that the 1554 performance lasted from 9am till 6pm. You could stay through the whole day, or drop in and out of parts of the play as you wished. In a very Brechtian way, the play is a series of open questions, and in this sense it remains unfinished. It's not an aesthetically "complete" and tightly structured story, like a domestic tragedy say by Ibsen or Strindberg; it's a vast quarry of possibilities ready for adaptation at any point. Modern productions have taken advantage of this. More could be done. After all, the circumstance of Lyndsay's work is not that far away from us. Scotland in 1552 had been at war with England on and off for eight years, the economy was depleted and politically it was a divided country. The corruption of church elders was symptomatic of a wider need for reform and social change. Lyndsay's demand for reformation was as much political as religious.

The Three Estates were the Church (the clergy and churchmen), the Nobility (the knights, aristocrats and courtiers) and the Burgesses (the merchant or middle classes who ruled the towns). All three, the play shows, are in need of reform. When John the

Commonweal and the Poor Man break into the play in a proto-Brechtian style they represent the rest of the community in need of what reform will bring.

At the end of Part One, the court is cleansed by the imposing figure of Divine Correction, but in Part Two, when the figure of the Poor Man comes out of the audience and enters the play's action, and John the Commonweal speaks up for the real world beyond the court, beyond the allegorical functions of the play and beyond the moral certainty Lyndsay endorses, a truly revolutionary intervention is taking place. Where the figures in Part One are allegorical, those in Part Two are drawn from social types. All can be rendered as vividly individuated characters in a good production, leavened with topical references to place and moment. The intrusion of representatives of people in society at large, pushing into a foreordained structure and demanding its change, a social reformation, is Lyndsay's great dramatic strength, and a vision that he passes on to later generations. What is the rule of law and kingship for, if not the welfare of the people?

Lyndsay's play was published in full in Edinburgh in 1602 and then in a slightly altered version in London in 1604. It would certainly have been read by Shakespeare, just when the great English playwright was writing *King Lear* (c.1603-06). Was there a direct influence? It's entirely likely. As John Corbett says, *Lear* "mistakes flattery for true love" and "rejects the good counsel of his faithful servant, Kent" while Cordelia "combines the virtues of chastity and verity." Flattery and sensuality are there in her sisters and flattery and deceit are there in Edmund. The *Satyre* is a lively and ultimately vitalising work, hopeful that corruption might be corrected, against all the odds. Shakespeare's play is one of the most terrible visions of corruption and consequent devastation. It's impossible to imagine that Queen Elizabeth would have allowed it. But the Scots King James VI and I gave permission, and the Jacobean world enhanced the visionary portent of both plays, Lyndsay's and Shakespeare's. Lyndsay offers hope in "Divine Correction" but Shakespeare's play has none of that. Things have got a lot worse since then. Both Shakespeare's *Lear* and Lyndsay's *Satyre* are there to help us now, after 500 years. The visions both hold forth are complementary, and remain horribly pertinent. The National Theatre of Scotland might think of a season in which productions of both might be seen, back-to-back. Epic theatre, indeed.

There's another surviving play of the period a little later than the *Satyre* which should be noted here, though its author is not known, a riotous verse-comedy, *Philotus* (published in 1603). Based on a story similar to Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, with cross-dressing,

mistaken identity and marriage of old and young, it shifts gear from farcical complexity to violence and obscenity with wild humour.

David Lyndsay wrote on the eve of the Protestant Reformation but still from a position within the Catholic Church. In Scotland in 1560, a Reformation Parliament rejected the authority of the Pope, the celebration of the Mass and the influence of French religious and political pre-eminence. John Knox (1505-72), leader of the Reformation in Scotland, opposed the rule of Catholic Mary of Guise and Mary Stuart (Mary Queen of Scots, the spelling of whose family name in the French style predominated after her childhood spent in exile in France). Knox's pamphlet *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558) set out to denounce them ("how abominable before God is the Empire or Rule of a wicked woman, yea, of a traiteresse and bastard").

Knox's writings display more character, salt and sting than most of the ministers' sermons I remember listening to when my mother had the power to insist I went to church, which rumbled on in ponderous and portentous tones that moved the prose along like so much slow-flowing sludge. Memorable as some of Knox's writings are, in parts, the value of their literary merits might be disproportionate to the effort you'd have to make finding them. But you never know. Reading Knox with that in mind is, I suppose, an argument against predestination. But it's no guarantee. But reading Lyndsay and Shakespeare keenly does guarantee an invigorated sense of human value that we all could do with these days. Try it.

[Boxed off:]

From the *Complaint of John the Commonweal* (lightly revised and glossed, from lines 2654-73 of David Lyndsay's *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*)

All the poor people cry with cares
The infetching of Justice Airs:
Exercised mair for covetice
Than for the punishing of vice.
Ane peggrel [petty] thief that steals ane cow
Is hangit; but he that steals ane bow [a whole herd],
With als muckle gear as he may turs [carry off],

That thief is hangit by the purs [purse (that is, he's only fined)].
Sic picking peggrel thieves are hangit,
But he that all the world has wrangit,
Ane cruel tyrant, ane strang transgressor,
Ane common public plain oppressor,
By buds may he obtain favours
Of treasurers and compositors.
Though he 'serve great punitioun,
Gets easy compositioun:
And through laws consistorial,
Prolix, corrupt, and partial,
The common people are put sae under,
Though they be poor, it is nae wonder.

The most accessible, succinct and information-packed introduction to the Satyre is John Corbett's *Sir David Lyndsay's A Satire of the Three Estates* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, Scotnotes series, 2009), available direct from the ASLS. The most scholarly edition easily available is that edited by Roderick Lyall, published by Canongate in 1989 in the "Canongate Classics" series. The ASLS also publishes the definitive edition of the *Selected Poems of David Lyndsay* edited by Janet Hadley Williams (2000).