



University  
of Glasgow

## Scottish Literature in the Classroom

Scottish Poetry Collection for National 5 English:

‘The Bonnie Earl o’ Moray’ (Anonymous)



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## Using the Teaching Materials

The Scottish Literature in the Classroom project aims to support teachers of secondary English by providing resources on the new Scottish Set Texts at National 5 and Higher. This teaching guide is part of a series focused on the Scottish Poetry Collection for National 5. Each guide provides contextual information on the poem and author and a detailed reading of the given text, as well as discussion prompts and practice exam questions. Other online resources that may be helpful to teachers and students are also listed here.

Teachers are encouraged to utilise and adapt materials to best suit their own classrooms, combining with their own activities on, for example, poetic techniques and literary analysis.

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## Context

### Poem overview

‘The Bonnie Earl o’ Moray’ is a traditional ballad which tells the story of the murder of a young handsome nobleman. The ballad is believed to commemorate an actual event, the killing in 1592 of James Stewart (1565–1592), 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Moray and Lord of Doune Castle, by rival George Gordon (1562–1636), Earl of Huntly. Moray was a supporter of the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Bothwell, who led a failed rebellion against King James VI of Scotland in 1591. Huntly was commissioned by the King to apprehend supporters of Bothwell and took this as an opportunity to settle an ongoing feud with the Moray family by killing the Earl at his mother’s home in Fife.

Part of the story behind the ballad involves a parent’s search for justice. Moray’s mother called for vengeance, but Huntly was never tried for killing her son, and the murder remained a source of popular outrage. The ballad might be seen as part of the popular response to this rather gruesome episode in Scottish history.

This version of the ballad tells the story of the murder in two stanzas, the first depicting the Earl of Moray and his murder, the second introducing his killer, the Earl of Huntly, and his orders from the King.



*Image: Portrait in death of the murdered James Stewart, 2nd Earl of Moray. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.*

## Publication details

It is not known when ‘The Bonnie Earl o’ Moray’ was written or who wrote it, although it’s possible that it was composed quite some time after the murder it commemorates. Different versions of the ballad began to appear in print during the eighteenth-century, a popular time for collecting and publishing old Scottish songs. For example, an early version of the ballad appeared in William Thomson’s song collection *Orpheus Caledonius* (1733). Different versions of the ballad have been performed or have appeared in print since that time.

## Online resources

Further details about the song and its different versions are available at

<https://mainlynorfolk.info/folk/songs/thebonnieearlofmoray.html>

Biography of James Stewart, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Moray:

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/James-Stewart-2nd-Earl-of-Moray>

Information about the ‘mondegreen’: <https://grammarist.com/mondegreens/>

*Performances:*

- Sad the Maiden: [https://youtu.be/mxReH07\\_2YA](https://youtu.be/mxReH07_2YA)
- The Fèis Rois Ceilidh Band: <https://youtu.be/F9BmV23hFcl?feature=shared&t=37>

*Scots Language:*

Dictionaries of the Scots Language (DSL: <https://dsl.ac.uk/>) is a useful online resource for looking up the meanings of unfamiliar Scots words.

The Scots Language Centre (<https://www.scotslanguage.com/>) provides background on Scots for those familiar with the language and its history.

## Other resources

The Association for Scottish Literature’s anthology *Voices of Scotland* includes ‘The Bonnie Earl o’ Moray’ with accompanying teaching notes aimed at levels 2 and 3. It is

available to purchase at [https://asls.org.uk/publications/books/other\\_titles/voices-of-scotland/](https://asls.org.uk/publications/books/other_titles/voices-of-scotland/) but was freely distributed to all schools in Scotland in 2020.

The version of 'The Bonnie Earl o' Moray' printed here and [published on the SQA website](#) is the one that will be used in exams, valid from session 2025–26 onwards.

It's helpful to be aware that ballads often have 'variant' versions with different words, lines, or verses. When searching online for 'The Bonnie Earl o' Moray', you may encounter some of the other versions of this ballad.

## 'The Bonnie Earl o' Moray'

Anonymous

- / - / - / - (/)		
Ye Hielands and ye Lowlands,	[You Highlands]	(A)
O, whaur hae ye been?	[where have you]	(B)
They hae slain the Earl o' Moray,	[have]	(C)
And laid him on the green.	4	(B)
He was a braw gallant,	[handsome]	
And he rade at the ring,	[rode]	
And the bonny Earl o' Moray,		
He might hae been a king.	8	
<i>O lang will his lady</i>	[long]	
<i>Lok frae the Castle Doune</i>	[look from]	
<i>Ere she see the Earl o' Moray</i>	[Before]	
<i>Come soundin' through the toun.</i>	12	
Now wae be to ye, Huntly,	[woe betide you]	
And wherefore did ye sae?	[why did you so]	
I bade ye bring him wi' ye,	[with you]	
And forbade ye him to slay.	16	
He was a braw gallant,		
And he played at the glove;		
And the bonny Earl o' Moray,		
He was the Queen's true love.	20	
<i>O lang will his lady</i>		
<i>Lok frae the Castle Doune</i>		
<i>Ere she see the Earl o' Moray</i>		
<i>Come soundin' through the toun.</i>	24	

## Traditional Ballads

Ballads are narrative poems or songs – they tell a story. They often recount dramatic events, e.g. battles, betrayals, catastrophes, or romances. Often rooted in the oral tradition, traditional ballads blend history and folklore to preserve cultural memory.

‘The Bonnie Earl o’ Moray’ follows some of the generic features of the traditional ballad (indicated in column two of the table below).

Feature	Traditional	Literary
Authorship	Anonymous, communal	Known author
Transmission	Oral, sung with music, evolved through variants	Written down, primarily read though sometimes recited
Origin	Folk tradition, medieval/early modern (13th–15th centuries)	Romantic era (late 18th–early 19th centuries), folk forms revived for literary audiences
Language	Simple and direct, stock phrases	Refined and poetic, often more descriptive
Structure	Simple quatrains, alternating iambic tetrameter/trimeter, rhymes (ABCB or ABAB)	Mimics quatrains but with flexible metre and rhyme
Content	Universal themes: love, death, betrayal, supernatural. Impersonal, often tragic or stark, focus on action/dialogue.	Similar themes but sometimes with philosophical or romantic overtones. Often reflect the author’s perspective/intent.
Purpose	Communal entertainment, cultural preservation	Artistic expression, often nostalgic or thematic

### *Authorship*

Anonymous. We don't know who composed the original version of 'The Bonnie Earl o' Moray'.

### *Origin*

It is not known when the ballad was originally composed, although it must have been sometime after 1592.

### *Transmission*

'The Bonnie Earl o' Moray' might originally have been transmitted from place to place orally, i.e. by being sung rather than written down. This form of transmission tends to introduce 'variants' as different performers embellish it in different ways, and sometimes editors printed different versions when collecting these songs. In some versions of the ballad, the Earl is described not as a 'braw **gallant**' but as a 'braw **callant**', which is a Scots phrase for a 'handsome youth'. Other versions change the layout and order of verses or outline different attributes possessed by Moray.

Indeed, the oral performance of ballads can lead to other kinds of varying interpretation. On hearing 'The Bonnie Earl o' Moray' as a child, the American writer Sylvia Wright misheard the line 'laid him on the green' as saying 'Lady Mondegreen'. From this twentieth-century misunderstanding of the ballad we get the word 'Mondegreen', which is the term for when we misinterpret the words from a song.

### *Language*

The language is simple – using Scots words and phrases – and direct. There are stock phrases or repetitions throughout. For example, the final four lines in italics repeat in each stanza:

*O lang will his lady  
Lok frae the Castle Doune  
Ere she see the Earl o' Moray  
Come soundin' through the toun.*

Another common feature of the ballad form is repetition with a difference, where a line alters slightly when repeated as in the second quatrain within each stanza:

### Stanza 1

He was a braw gallant,  
And he **rade at the ring**,  
And the bonny Earl o' Moray,  
He **might hae been a king**.

### Stanza 2

He was a braw gallant,  
And he **played at the glove**;  
And the bonny Earl o' Moray,  
He **was the Queen's true love**.

While repetitions act as an aid to memory when reciting a ballad, such incremental differences help fill out the story.

### *Structure*

Each stanza uses alternate rhyme and is made up of three quatrains rhyming ABCB.

### *Content*

The content deals with conventional ballad subject matter: death, betrayal.

### *Purpose*

The ballad preserves folk memory of a specific event, the aforementioned murder of a popular nobleman.

## **Narrative, history and folk memory**

Though the ballad commemorates the real-life murder of the Earl of Moray in 1592, it does so in an imaginative rather than documentary fashion, and builds a narrative around loose details. Some details in this ballad are factual, for instance the murder of the Earl of Moray by Huntly or Moray's Lady residing in Doune Castle, which was the Earl's seat. According to some accounts, King James VI gave Huntly a commission to apprehend supporters of Bothwell such as the Earl of Moray, which explains the lines 'I bade ye bring him wi' ye, /

And forbade ye him to slay’ (lines 15–16). However, the ballad also deals in rumours, such as that the handsome young was the ‘Queen’s true love’ (line 20), lines which may have little basis in fact. Ballads are poetry, not history. Whether this ballad has its facts straight or not, it still offers a folk *interpretation* of events. Another of its main effects is to provoke an emotional response to the tale of this handsome youth slain in his prime. Moray was a popular figure and his death caused considerable outrage. The story told here perhaps captures some of this depth of feeling, lamenting the death of the dashing Moray and presenting him as a kind of hero, while clearly presenting Huntly – who was never brought to justice – as villain. By popularising this idea, the ballad ensures that the memory of Moray survives, not just as a man but as a symbol of what Scotland might have had – perhaps more just or virtuous leadership – had Moray not been killed. In this way, the ballad trades in speculative histories/futures, offering its audience not just a lament but a tantalising glimpse of an alternative political reality.

## Language

Traditional Scottish ballads are often written in Scots. ‘The Bonnie Earl o’ Moray’ itself uses an older form of Scots which differs from English in a few key ways.

The most obvious difference is pronunciation, as indicated in the following examples from the ballad:

Scots	English
ye	you
o’	of
whaur	where
hae	have
rade	rode
lang	long
wi’	with
toun	town

Reading the ballad out loud or listening to it sung can help understanding the differences in pronunciation. In some of the examples above, the main difference from English is in vowel sounds. For instance, an older Scots speaker might say ‘lang’ instead of the English ‘long’. Other common features of older Scots are:

- the interchange of ‘u’ for ‘w’, as in ‘toun’ (pronounced ‘toon’, at end of line 24).
- ‘v-deletion’, where the ‘v’ in ‘have’ is not pronounced in speech, e.g. ‘They **hae** slain the Earl o’ Moray’ (line 3).

Another feature we often see in Scots language poetry is ‘elision’, where a specific part of the word is omitted to represent Scots pronunciation: examples here are **o’** for ‘of’; or ‘I bade ye bring him **wi’** ye’ (line 15), where **wi’** is used instead of the English ‘with’. In the printed version, elision is signalled by an apostrophe (sometimes called the ‘apologetic apostrophe’, as it ‘apologises’ to English speakers that there appears to be something missing from the word!).

Besides punctuation, there are also a few peculiarly Scots words in the ballad, such as ‘bonny’ and ‘braw’ to describe how handsome and attractive the Earl of Moray is.

However, the language contains a lot of words in common with English, as highlighted below:

Ye Hielands **and** ye Lowlands,  
 O, whaur hae ye **been**?  
**They** hae **slain the Earl o’ Moray**,  
**And laid him on the green.**  
**He was a braw gallant,**  
**And he rade at the ring,**  
**And the bonny Earl o’ Moray,**  
**He might hae been a king.**  
*O lang will his lady*  
*Lok frae the Castle Doune*  
*Ere she see the Earl o’ Moray*  
*Come soundin’ through the toun.*

Scots and English are cognate languages. They come from the same family of languages and evolved from the same root. As well as a shared history, they share certain words.

That said, composing in Scots may create a different effect from writing in English. Scots can create difficulties to those used to reading English and can even potentially limit one’s audience; but it can also have positive effects. The use of Scots in poetry can, for example, suggest the language of ordinary people, while also implying that this language is as good as others (e.g. Latin or English) for creating art. It can also create an air of ‘authenticity’ by suggesting that the story is being told from within the community itself.

## Full analysis

### Form and structure

Although in the printed version of ‘The Bonnie Earl of Moray’, each stanza is presented as containing 12 lines, these stanzas can be subdivided into three **quatrains** rhyming ABCB. This form of verse is called a **ballad stanza**. (Indeed, in some other printed versions of the ballad, the story is divided into regular 4-line ballad stanzas instead of the longer 12-line verses printed here.)

‘The Bonnie Earl o’ Moray’ has a regular rhythm, with three strong stressed syllables in each line followed by a ‘caesura’, or pause, at the end of each line for a missed ‘beat’. This regular rhythm makes the verse suited to being sung along to music.

Ballads are also a form of *narrative* poetry in that they tell a story in condensed dramatic form. The first stanza introduces the ‘hero’ of the tale, the Earl of Moray; while the second stanza introduces the ‘villain’ Huntly. As well as stock characters, the story shows some other typical building blocks of narrative, for example:

‘Orientation’	Sets the scene	Scotland in the past
‘Complication’	Something which spurs the main action.	The King’s commission to Huntly, a rival nobleman, to apprehend Moray.
‘Resolution’	Resolves the main action.	Huntly kills Moray.
‘Coda’	What happens after the main narrative concludes.	Moray’s lady is waiting for him back at Doune Castle, but he’ll never return.

But in ‘The Bonnie Earl o Moray’, the story doesn’t appear in the order above. Here we might think about the difference between ‘**story**’, which is the way things would have happened in real life, and ‘**plot**’, or the sequence in which narrative information is presented to us, which isn’t always chronological. In the **plot** here, the action starts *in medias res* (‘in the middle’) with the news that the Earl has been slain. It then jumps back to tell us about the Earl’s character in life. The first verse then ends by jumping forward to the ‘coda’ and the Earl’s lady waiting forlornly at home. The start of the second stanza leaps back in time again to introduce Huntly and detail the command he was given and

disobeyed. Then the second stanza repeats the end of the first stanza. For a short and simple ‘folk’ tale, there’s quite a degree of narrative sophistication.

#### *Lines 1–4*

Ye Hielands and ye Lowlands,  
O, whaur hae ye been?  
They hae slain the Earl o’ Moray,  
And laid him on the green.

The first quatrain sets the scene for the story the ballad is about to tell. The reference to the Highlands and Lowlands in line 1 tells us that we are in Scotland, and acts as a call to the whole nation. The Scots pronunciation also situates the verse in Scotland. The first quatrain also lets us know what has happened, particularly line 2-3, which outlines the murder and sets the gruesome image of the body laid out on the green.

#### *Lines 5–8*

He was a braw gallant,  
And he rade at the ring,  
And the bonny Earl o’ Moray,  
He might hae been a king.

The second quatrain in the first verse jumps back to outline the character of the Earl o’ Moray as he was in life. By describing him as a ‘braw gallant’, the verse presents him as physically attractive and also suggests romantic and heroic qualities. Line 6 emphasises his gallantry by referring to his ‘riding at the ring’: an equestrian sport for noblemen at court which was similar to jousting, except participants on horseback tried to put their lance through a ring. Line 8 implies the wasted potential in the death of this gallant youth. The line may not be historically accurate (Moray’s father-in-law had been regent of Scotland after the abdication of his half-sister, Mary Queen of Scots, but Moray himself had little prospect of acceding to the throne), but it perhaps emphasises his regal qualities, exaggerating his standing to make the tragedy all the more poignant.

#### *Lines 9–12*

O lang will his lady  
Lok frae the Castle Doune  
Ere she see the Earl o' Moray  
Come soundin' through the toun.

The final quatrain of the first verse changes scene and moves forward again in time to present an image of Lady Moray looking down from their home in Doune Castle (lines 9-10) and waiting for her husband to appear, or 'come soundin through the toun' (line 12). Line 11 refers to her sight but line 12 refers to hearing: she will have to wait to 'see' him come 'soundin' through the town. The latter term suggests the sound that would herald this nobleman's return: as the *Dictionary of the Scots Language* states: 'sounding' refers to the 'act of causing a musical instrument to emit sound' such as the ringing of a bell or blowing of a trumpet ([https://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/sounding\\_vbl\\_n\\_1](https://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/dost/sounding_vbl_n_1)).

There is also a degree of what we could call 'dramatic irony' in this quatrain, in that we as readers know more than the character does. Unlike Lady Moray, we know that her husband will never return home because he is already dead. Consider how the effect of these lines might be to create sympathy. We sympathise with Lady Moray, who is waiting in vain for a husband who will never come home.

#### *Lines 13–16*

Now wae be to ye, Huntly,  
And wherefore did ye sae?  
I bade ye bring him wi' ye,  
And forbade ye him to slay.

The first quatrain of the second verse introduces the 'villain' of this tale, the Earl of Huntly, Moray's rival and killer. The phrase 'wae be to ye' ('*woe be to you*' – line 13) suggests Huntly's actions have got him in trouble. But in trouble with who? We should also ask, who is speaking here? Who exactly is the 'I' in line 15? In some printed versions of this ballad, these lines appeared in quotation marks to highlight that this is reported speech. We can perhaps work out from the fact that this 'I' has commanded Huntly (lines 15-16) to do something that he is the Earl's superior. Therefore, the person speaking must be the King himself, James VI.

However, Huntly has disobeyed the King's orders to fetch Moray and forbidding him from slaying the Bonnie Earl. He has brought woe upon himself.

#### *Lines 17–20*

He was a braw gallant,  
And he played at the glove;  
And the bonny Earl o' Moray,  
He was the Queen's true love.

These lines mirror the second quatrain in providing a further outline of Moray's qualities in life. Such lines effectively operate as a **eulogy** – a tribute to someone who has died. The difference of this verse from its counterpart in the first verse is that Moray is now said to have 'played at the glove' (line 18). This is most likely a reference to falconry and the protective gloves worn by those who take part in this pastime. Falconry was a noble activity and here further symbolises Moray's chivalry and gallantry.

Line 20 implies an illicit affair between Moray and the Queen. There is little historical evidence of this affair; however, in the ballad, the line might build on the image of Moray as a romantic character.

#### *Lines 21–24*

O lang will his lady  
Lok frae the Castle Doune  
Ere she see the Earl o' Moray  
Come soundin' through the toun.

The final quatrain is a straight repetition of the closing lines of the first verse. Such refrains are common features of ballad form.

## Discussion Prompts

### Introductory

- What can you find out about the events behind the ballad?

- Does the ballad remind you of any other stories you might have encountered? If so, what? And what do you think the connections are?
- How do you feel towards the characters in the ballad?
- Listen to the ballad being sung. What mood or tone does the performance set? And how does it impact on your understanding of the written ballad?
- What's the effect of relating this story as a song rather than a historical account?
- Can you think of examples of 'mondegreen' (misheard song lyrics)?

## Techniques

- What's the effect of using Scots here rather than English?
- What techniques does the poem use to tell a story? Can you find different parts of the narrative?
- Who is telling the story of the ballad, and who is their audience?
- How does time change within the ballad?
- How does the ballad create a strong sense of character? Identify words or images which help us form an idea of what the characters in the ballad are like.
- How does the ballad create distinct scenes or images? Choose an example to discuss.

## Themes

- What kind of relationships are covered in the poem?
- What kinds of emotions are on display? Find and discuss a part of the song that presents a strong emotion.
- Ballads conventionally tell stories about battles, love, betrayal, or catastrophe. Which themes are on display in 'The Bonnie Earl o' Moray'?
- Is it rare for a whole country to agree on who is the hero and who is the villain? Is this propaganda?
- How might this old ballad relate to the contemporary world?

## Practice Questions

Look at lines 1–4.

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the poet sets the scene for the story. (4 marks)

Look at lines 4–8.

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the poet presents the character of the Earl of Moray. (4 marks)

Look at lines 9–12

By referring to **two** examples of language, explain how the poet creates sympathy for the lady in the ballad. (4 marks)

By referring to this poem and to at least one other poem from the National 5 Scottish Poetry Collection, show how the poets explore strong emotions. (8 marks)

NB. Poems that ‘The Bonnie Earl o’ Moray’ (traditional ballad) might be compared with for the 8-mark question are:

- ‘The Twa Corbies’ (traditional ballad)
- ‘Lochinvar’ (Walter Scott)
- ‘A Red, Red Rose’ (Robert Burns)
- ‘Auntie’ (Nadine Aisha Jassat)
- ‘Little Girls’ (Len Pennie)

## Connections / Comparisons

The visual below highlights connecting themes that may be useful to consider for the 8- or 10-mark exam question. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list – you may wish to explore beyond these categories and consider how different themes might overlap or contradict one another within and between texts.

