

**THE KINGIS QUAIR:  
TOGETHER WITH A BALLAD  
OF GOOD COUNSEL. EDITED  
BY WALTER W. SKEAT**

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The Kings Quair: Together with a Ballad of Good Counsel. Edited by Walter W. Skeat by James I & Walter W. Skeat

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**JAMES I & WALTER W. SKEAT**

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# THE KINGIS QUAIR:

TOGETHER WITH

A BALLAD OF GOOD COUNSEL:

BY

KING JAMES I. OF SCOTLAND.

EDITED BY THE

REV. WALTER W. SKEAT, M.A.

ELRINGTON AND BOSWORTH PROFESSOR OF ANGLO-SAXON,  
AND FELLOW OF CHRIST'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE.

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## INTRODUCTION.

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§ 1. IT is not my intention to say much here concerning the royal author of the *Kingis Quair*, as accounts of him are easily accessible. In particular, I would refer the reader to the excellent sketch of the life of James I. in chap. vi. of *The History of Scottish Poetry* by David Irving; and to the account in *Morley's English Writers*, vol. ii. part 1, p. 445, which is partly taken from *Burton's History of Scotland*. See also the *Life of James I.* in the editions of the *Kingis Quair* by Tytler and Chalmers, and *The Life and Death of King James of Scotland*, edited for the Maitland Club by Mr Stevenson in 1857.

§ 2. The facts of his life that immediately concern the reader of his chief poem may be briefly enumerated. He was born in July 1394, being the second son of King Robert III. and his queen Annabella Drummond.<sup>1</sup> The readers of Sir Walter Scott's '*Fair Maid of Perth*' will remember the sad story of the cruel death of James's elder brother, the Duke of Rothsay, a circumstance which determined the king to send his remaining son to France, ostensibly for education, but really with a view to his safety. Accordingly, in the month of March 1405, Sir David Fleming, the king's kinsman, conducted the young prince

<sup>1</sup> Life by Chalmers, in '*Poetic Remains of the Scottish Kings*,' p. 1.

to the Bass Rock, in the Firth of Forth, there to await the ship from Leith which was to carry him to France. As Sir David Fleming was returning to Edinburgh after taking leave of the prince, he was waylaid and slain. Shortly afterwards, the ship arrived, and the prince went on board with his tutor and companions. The ship was attacked by an English vessel off Flamborough Head in a time of truce, and, in defiance of all right and justice, James was taken prisoner, carried to Henry IV. at Windsor, and detained in England for many years. It is singular that the various accounts do not seem to be accurate in every particular. Thus Professor Morley speaks of the prince as being "a boy of fourteen," when it is quite certain that his age, in March 1405, was ten years and about eight months. Again, the date usually assigned for the prince's capture is the 12th of April 1405, being Palm Sunday; but in *The Annals of England*, 1876, p. 221, the date assigned is the 30th of March. There is even a doubt as to whether the ship was attacked in the open sea, or upon its venturing to approach the shore. These are questions of some interest, because James himself has something to say regarding them. In st. 22, he tells us he had passed "the state of innocence," *i.e.* seven years,<sup>1</sup> by the number of three years, so that he was over ten years old. As to the date of his embarkation, he is also explicit. In st. 21 and 22, he tells us that he "took his adventure to pass by sea out of his country, when the sun was beginning his course in Aries, and when it was four degrees past midday." He probably here refers to his first brief experience of the sea in passing by boat from North Berwick to the Bass Rock; a circumstance which impressed his mind so vividly that he

<sup>1</sup> See the note to st. 23.



was able to remember, years afterwards, that he entered the boat at one o'clock on the 12th of March, being the day when the sun entered the sign of Aries.<sup>1</sup> In st. 23, he tells us that, when the ship was purveyed with all necessaries, and the wind was favourable, he and his companions entered the ship *early in the morning*, and after many farewells and expressions of good wishes for their safe journey from those whom they left behind, they pulled up sail and went forth upon their way. In st. 24, he expressly says that his ship was attacked *at sea*, and soon overpowered, so that he was taken prisoner by the strong hand, or to speak it briefly, by force.

§ 3. It is certain that James derived many advantages from his long captivity, and his tutor was allowed to take much pains with his education, notwithstanding that he was kept in strict confinement, at first in the Tower of London, next at Nottingham, again in the Tower, and finally in the Castle of Windsor.<sup>2</sup> All that James tells us about this time is in st. 25, where he remarks that his captivity lasted for nearly eighteen years, when he at last received comfort by the first sight of the beautiful lady whom he afterwards made his queen. He first saw her, just as Palamon and Arcite first saw Emelye, as he was looking out from a window in the castle into the castle-garden below; and his description of her, and of his own feelings towards her, is given in a well-known passage (st. 40 to 50), which has been frequently admired. The lady was Johanne (or Joan) Beaufort, daughter of the Earl of Somerset and Margaret Holand; and it is even probable that there is a punning

<sup>1</sup> See Chaucer's treatise on the Astrolabe, ed. Skeat, part 2, sect. 1.

<sup>2</sup> See the account by Irving, and the extracts from Rymer's *Fœdera* (tom. 8, p. 484, tom. 9, p. 2, tom. 9, p. 44) in Tytler's edition, p. 70.

allusion to her name in st. 47, where the poet mentions the "floure-jonettis." This fortunate attachment was at once encouraged, in the hope of gaining over the Scottish prince to English interests, and was soon reciprocated by the object of his affections, as we clearly learn from stanza 187, and he was at once allowed a much larger degree of liberty, as he acknowledges in st. 181. Accordingly, early in the following year, on the 2d of February 1424, the young lovers were married in the Church of St Mary Overy, and kept their wedding-feast in the Bishop of Winchester's palace, which was near at hand.<sup>1</sup> Arrangements for his return to Scotland, upon payment of a ransom, were soon made, so that he returned to his native land in April of the same year, and was crowned King of Scotland at Scone on the 21st of May.

§ 4. The story of the remainder of his life belongs to Scottish history, though there is one more point of supreme interest for all readers, namely, the dreadful narrative of his barbarous assassination at Perth, on the 20th of February 1437. "He was at the close of the day" (says Professor Morley) "loosely robed, chatting before the fire of the reception-room <sup>wife</sup> of the queen and her ladies. Three hundred Highlanders, with Graham at their head, broke that night into the monastery [of the Black Friars]. Bolts and locks had been tampered with. It was then that Catharine Douglas, finding that the great bolt of the chamber-door had been removed, thrust her arm through the staples, and suffered it to be crushed while time was gained for the king's escape into a sewer-vault below. The flooring was replaced, and the Highlanders, not finding the king, would

<sup>1</sup> Chron. of London from 1089 to 1483, London, 1827, p. 112; Stow's Annales, London, 1615, p. 364; Fabyan's Chronicle, ed. 1811, p. 593.

have retired, but one who suspected the way of escape caused the floor to be searched. James I. was discovered, and was killed by sixteen wounds in the breast alone. Although unarmed, he defended himself well, leaving the mark of his grip on those of his murderers with whom he grappled. His wife, who sought to shelter him, was wounded in the struggle." Such was the sad ending of a love so happily begun.

§ 5. I have already said that the poem of the Kingis Quair, that is, of the King's Book, was composed in 1423. I do not find that it has been observed that we can date it much more exactly than this. A careful study of the poem has led me to believe that it was probably not composed quite all at once; indeed, a poem of 1379 lines must have occupied several days at least, and even at the rate of fifty lines a-day, would have taken up nearly a month. We find, accordingly, that the earlier part of the poem dwells upon the king's state of despondency in the days preceding the month of May, in which he first saw the lady Joan, whilst the closing stanzas refer to a later period. Perhaps we may date its commencement as early as April or March, and its completion, probably, not earlier than June. We also gain some insight into the manner of its composition. It would seem probable that the poem was originally begun as an amusement only, with the avowed hope of beguiling his captivity; he lay awake in bed, thinking of *this and that* (not, at this date, of his lady), and, finding sleep impossible, began to read the treatise of Boethius *De Consolatione Philosophiæ*; he became interested in it (st. 5), and, after shutting it up, continued to think of the variations of Fortune (st. 8). St. 11 follows naturally upon st. 9, and I am inclined to think that st. 10, in which he speaks