

**CHAUCER'S INFLUENCE UPON KING  
JAMES I OF SCOTLAND AS POET.  
INAUGURAL-DISSERTATION FOR  
GAINING THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILISOPHY AT THE  
UNIVERSITY OF LEIPZIG**

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Chaucer's influence upon King James I of Scotland as poet. Inaugural-dissertation for gaining the degree of doctor of philisophy at the university of Leipzig by Henry Wood

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HENRY WOOD

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CHAUCER'S INFLUENCE  
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The King's Quair occupies a somewhat peculiar position in English Literature. It is a much praised, but comparatively little known production. Even allowing that the better critics and historians of literature have formed independent judgments upon it — all except Warton praise it — yet the fact remains, that the usually assumed poetical worth of this work is out of proportion to the interest felt for the poem itself. It has been said, for instance, to reach Chaucer's highest flight<sup>1</sup>; from another quarter it has been favorably compared with the creations of great modern poets<sup>2</sup>, and King James has been declared, also by one of his own countrymen, to be a greater poet than Barbour or Lyndsay.<sup>3</sup>

The judicious historian of Scottish Literature, Dr. Irving, has not failed to confine this praise within more proper limits<sup>4</sup>, and his judgment has been followed by others. But it has in some way become traditional, at least in Great Britain, to

<sup>1</sup> 'The King's Quair equals anything Chaucer has written.' Pinkerton, *Ancient Scottish Poems* p. LXXXIX.

<sup>2</sup> 'It would perhaps be difficult to select, even from Chaucer's most finished works, a long specimen of descriptive poetry so uniformly elegant as this specimen. Indeed, some of the verses are so highly finished, that they would not disfigure the compositions of Dryden, Pope or Gray.' Ellis, quoted by Rogers: *Poetical Remains of King James I.*, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Pinkerton, *Ancient Scottish Poems*, p. CXXV.

<sup>4</sup> 'This poem displays an elegant vein of fancy, and the versification possesses no inconsiderable merit, but its principle beauties are to be discovered in particular passages, rather than in the general structure of the whole.' *History of Scottish Literature*, *Edin. 1861*, p. 135

assume for the King's Quair a place beside Chaucer's creations, and beside the best poems of Scotland. Indeed, the circumstance that King James here makes use of the seven line stanza, so common in Chaucer and other poets, has procured for it the name 'rhyme royal'. But with all this, no special interest, at least in larger circles, has been awakened for the poem itself. *Laudatur et alget*.

The cause of such unlimited praise is doubtless to be sought in the first place in the national prejudice of the Scots<sup>1</sup>, but scarcely less in a general feeling of interest for King James himself.

This royal descendant of the immortal Robert Bruce, exposed from early life to extraordinary fortunes, is one of the most interesting persons of his time. His great services to the Scottish nation, his energetic rule, high character and tragical end, all combine to render critic or reader well disposed towards the productions of the king as poet. This current of favorable feeling has been strengthened by the pains of the Scottish chroniclers to represent King James as remarkably accomplished. He is said to have excelled in all bodily exercises, to have composed and sung to the harp more skilfully than the best minstrel, and Lesley (*De Rob. Gest. Scot. Lib. VII, p. 267*) says of his poetical abilities: '*ita poeta [erat], ut carmina non tam arte strinxisset, quam natura sponte fudisset*'

<sup>1</sup> That this very strong and lasting feeling of the Scots has also been at work in this case, is shown by the following quotations; the first from a chronicler, the second from a modern critic:

'This prettie child that plesand wes and zing,  
At the command of Harie that wes king,  
Wes put in keeping of richt cunning men,  
All craft and science him to teiche and ken.  
This young prince syne, some efter as we reid,  
Within schort tyme all other did exceed  
Into Ingland that levand wes on lyve,  
In all science, prattik or speculatyne'.

The Bulk of the Chroniclis of Scotland, v. 59000 ff.

This 'prettie child' is of course our 11 year old poet! 'Not one Scottish poet has imitated him (Chaucer), or is in the least indebted to him. . . . They praise him, but never imitate either his language, stanza, manner or sentiment.'

Pinkerton, *Ancient Scottish Poema* p. LXXII.



videretur'. It must be remarked here, that this account, as well as other testimony, does not concern the King's Quair alone. Not to speak of his Latin verses, as none of them have been preserved, King James is said to have written the two popular poems, 'Christis Kirk on the Grene', and 'Peebles to the Play', as well as two smaller productions, 'Sang on Absence', and 'Divine Trust'. The piece last named will be considered below, but as regards the two first mentioned, it may suffice to remark that Chaucer's influence is not discernible in them, and that they therefore do not directly concern this essay. Their consideration is also the more unnecessary, from the fact that James' fame as a poet rests upon the King's Quair. This last piece, when carefully studied, betrays in a remarkable degree our author's accurate knowledge of the works of Chaucer and Gower, and it is especially Chaucer's influence which reveals itself step by step through the work. To determine the extent and kind of this influence, on the part of the greatest English poet of his time, is the object of the following essay.

In working I have chiefly used the edition of Rogers: *The Poetical Remains of King James the First of Scotland*, Edinburgh 1873. Only 150 copies were printed. *The King's Quair* was previously twice edited: by William Tytler, Edinburgh 1783, and by George Chalmers in *The Poetical Remains of some of the Scottish Kings*, London 1824. Neither edition is easily accessible. Pinkerton (*Scottish Poems 1792*, p. XXXVI) found in Tytler's text 'upwards of 300 errors'. Chalmers' text is much modernized. Rogers has constructed his text by comparing those of his two predecessors. The citations in the present essay are made from Roger's edition; but according to a new collation with the Ms., made for me by Dr. H. Krebs of Oxford.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Krebs' valuable services were secured for me

<sup>1</sup> From the same hand I have received the following description of the Ms., which is in the Bodleian Library in Oxford (Arch. Seld. B. 24 Infra). It is written on paper in quarto, and contains 228 leaves. Our poem extends from fol. 192<sup>a</sup>—211<sup>a</sup>. The title reads: 'Herefter followis the quair maid by King James of Scotland the first, callit the Kingis quair, and maid quhen his Ma(jesty) was in England'. The following words occur at the end: 'Amen. Explicit etc. etc. quod Jacobus primus Scotorum rex illustrissimus'.

by the kindness of Prof. R. Wülcker in Leipzig, for which I feel much indebted to him. The citations from Chaucer have been made from the text of Morris (Aldine Ed. 6 vols., London).

The subject of the King's Quair is James' love for his future queen, and he writes entirely in the character of the accepted lover (cf. VI, 9, 11, 16, 17, 21). This circumstance is of weight in forming a judgment of the book. While most of the courtly poets of the time celebrated a feigned love, or tricked out what was true in it to a fantastic and unreal figure, no trace of such inner untruth is to be found in our piece. The King's Quair shows indeed a large use of poetical machinery, and of the conventional in general, but it impresses the reader as true. The tone is tender and modest, but always natural. The earnestness impresses, because it is felt. The poet holds opinions concerning love, which have been often enough professed by courtly writers of the time, but seldom with such an appearance of truth as here. The work is in many respects almost modern.

King James doubtless wrote as he thought and felt, but the characteristics just mentioned remind strongly of that English poet of the time whose ways of thought lie nearest to our modern ways, — of Chaucer. This resemblance between the two is true above all in respect of the general tone in Chaucer's works, of his naturalness, of his strikingly modern expression of feeling. It is here less a question of particular passages, than of Chaucer's whole personality, as we see it in his works. The character which shows itself to us in the King's Quair is a similar one, although not so many sided and far less experienced; and everything indicates that the younger poet felt himself powerfully attracted towards the elder, and educated himself under the influence of the latter's works to ways of thought and expression, to which he otherwise never could have attained in such a degree.

But though our author must be ranked high in these respects, the King's Quair does not deserve corresponding praise as a poetical production, especially when considered as a whole. Many smaller parts show real poetical talent, but the invention is poor, the arrangement sometimes awkward. Several scenes as well as many minor details are directly borrowed

from Chaucer. In itself this is no cause of blame, but nevertheless there always remains something mechanical in our author's use of his material. A striking example of this is to be found III, 38 in the words of Venus, to whom the poet has turned for help:

'As I have said, vnto me belongith  
Specially the cure of thy seknesse;  
But now thy matere so in balance hangith,  
That it requireth, to thy sekernesse.  
The help of other mo than one goddesse'.



This extremely weak motive serves to introduce the poet's journey to Minerva and Fortuna in turn, where the opportunity is given him of discussing questions at that time in vogue. The scene in the temple of Venus is preceded by an episode in which our author, closely following Chaucer's Knight's Tale, describes his first meeting with his lady. The 6<sup>th</sup> canto cuts the knot by means of the joyful message which a dove brings, after which follow some very pleasing verses of thanks. And, finally, the 1<sup>st</sup> canto serves as a general introduction, and describes how the poet, stimulated by the perusal of the *Consolatio* of Boetius, determines to write down his experiences. The division of the poem into cantos dates from Tytler's edition. After this brief characteristic of the plan of the work, I proceed in the following to show particular borrowings from Chaucer, as well as slighter similarities between the two poets.

King's Quair I, 1:

'Heigh in the hevynis figure circular  
The rody sterres twynkling as the fyre;  
And in Aquary Cinthia the clere  
Rynsid hir tressis like the goldin wyre,  
That late tofore, in faire and fresche atyre  
Through Capricorn heved hir hornis bright,  
North northward approachit the myd nyght'.

Chaucer uses Cynthia for the moon twice: *Troilus and Cryseyde* IV, 226 and V, 146. In our poem II, 1 the sun is called Cynthus; this name does not occur in Chaucer.

Tr. and Cr. V, 2:

'The golde tressed Phebus, heigh on lofte'.

<sup>1</sup> Rob. Henryson, *Test. of faire Creseide* 177, says of Jupiter: 'As goldin wier so glittering was his here'. Lyndsay, *Ane Satyre* etc. 342: 'His hair is like the goldin wyre'.