

Classic Poetry Series

James I of Scotland

- poems -

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James I of Scotland (July 1394 – 21 February 1437)

James I, King of Scots, was the youngest of three sons of King Robert III and Annabella Drummond and was probably born in late July 1394 in Dunfermline. By the time he was eight years of age both of his elder brothers were dead—Robert had died in infancy, but David Stewart, Duke of Rothesay, died under suspicious circumstances in Falkland Castle while being detained by his uncle, Robert Stewart, Duke of Albany. Although parliament exonerated Albany, fears for James's safety grew during the winter of 1405–6 and plans were made to send him to France. In February 1406, James, in the company of nobles loyal to King Robert III, clashed with those of the Earl of Douglas, forcing the prince to take temporary refuge on the Bass Rock in the Forth estuary. He remained there until mid-March, when he boarded a vessel bound for France, but English pirates captured the ship on 22 March and delivered James to Henry IV of England. A few days later, on 4 April Robert III died, and the 12 year-old uncrowned king of Scots began his 18-year detention.

James was given a good education at the English court, where he developed respect for English methods of governance and for Henry V to the extent that he served in the English army against the French during 1420–1. The Duke of Albany's son, Murdoch, held a prisoner in England following his capture in 1402, was traded for Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, in 1416. By the time James was ransomed in 1424, Murdoch had succeeded his father to the dukedom and the governorship of Scotland. In April 1424 James, accompanied by his wife Joan Beaufort, daughter of the Earl of Somerset, returned to Scotland. It was not altogether a popular re-entry to Scottish affairs, since James had fought on behalf of Henry V and at times against Scottish forces in France. Additionally, his £40,000 ransom meant increased taxes to cover the repayments and the detention of Scottish nobles as collateral. Despite this, James also held qualities that were admired. The contemporary *Scotichronicon* by Walter Bower described James as excelling at sport and appreciative of literature and music. Unlike his father and grandfather he did not take mistresses, but had many children by his consort, Queen Joan. The king had a strong desire to impose law and order on his subjects, but applied it selectively at times.

To bolster his authority and secure the position of the crown, James launched pre-emptive attacks on some of his nobles beginning in 1425 with his close relatives the Albany Stewarts. This resulted in the execution of Duke Murdoch. In 1428 James detained Alexander, Lord of the Isles, while attending a parliament in Inverness. Archibald, Earl of Douglas, was arrested in 1431, followed by George, Earl of March, in 1434. The plight of the ransom hostages held in England was ignored and the repayment money was diverted into the construction of Linlithgow Palace and other grandiose schemes.

In August 1436, James failed humiliatingly in his siege of Roxburgh Castle

and then faced an ineffective attempt by Sir Robert Graham to arrest him at a general council. James was murdered at Perth on the night of 20–1 February 1437 in a failed coup by his uncle and former ally Walter Stewart, Earl of Atholl. Queen Joan, although wounded, escaped to the safety of Edinburgh Castle, where she was reunited with her son James II.

Works:

The Kingis Quair

Spring Song of the Birds

WORSCHIPPE ye that loveris bene this May,
For of your blisse the Kalendis are begonne,
And sing with us, Away, Winter, away!
Cum, Somer, cum, the suete sesoun and sonne!
Awake for schame! that have your hevynnis wonne,
And amorously lift up your hedis all,
Thank Lufe that list you to his merci call!

James I of Scotland

The Argument

GOD gives not Kings the style of Gods in vain,
For on his Throne his Scepter do they sway:
And as their subjects ought them to obey,
So Kings should fear and serve their God again
If then ye would enjoy a happy reign,
Observe the Statutes of your heavenly King,
And from his Law, make all your Laws to spring:
Since his Lieutenant here ye should remain,
Reward the just, be stedfast, true, and plain,
Repress the proud, maintaining aye the right,
Walk always so, as ever in his sight,
Who guards the godly, plaguing the profane:
And so ye shall in Princely virtues shine,
Resembling right your mighty King Divine

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The King's Quire (excerpt)

...
Bewailing in my chamber thus alone,
Despeir{.e}d of all joye and remedye,
For-tirit of my thoght, and wo begone,
Unto the wyndow gan I walk in hye,
To se the world and folk that went forby;
As for the tyme, though I of mirthis fude
Myght have no more, to luke it did me gude.

Now was there maid fast by the touris wall
A gardyn faire, and in the corneris set
Ane herbere grene:--with wandis long and small
Railit about; and so with treis set
Was all the place, and hawthorn hegis knet,
That lyf was none walking there forby,
That myght within scarce ony wight aspye;

So thik the bewis and the lev{.e}s grene
Beschadit all the aleyes that there were.
And myddis every herbere myght be sene
The scharp{.e} gren{.e} suet{.e} jenepere,
Growing so faire with branchis here and there,
That, as it semyt to a lyf without,
The bewis spred the herbere all about;

And on the small{.e} gren{.e} twistis sat
The lytill suet{.e} nyghtingale, and song
So loud and clere, the ympnis consecrat
Off lufis use, now soft, now lowd among,
That all the gardyng and the wallis rong
Ryght of thaire song and of the copill next
Off thaire suete armony, and lo the text:

CANTUS

"Worschippe, ye that loveris bene, this May,
For of your blisse the kalendis are begonne,
And sing with us, 'Away, winter, away!
Cum, somer, cum, the suete sesoun and sonne!
Awake for schame! that have your hevynnis wonne,
And amorously lift up your hedis all,
Thank lufe that list you to his merci call."

Quhen thai this song had song a lytill thrawe,
Thai stent a quhile, and therewith unaffraid,
As I beheld and kest myn eyne a-lawe,
From beugh to beugh thay hippit and thai plaid,
And freschly in thaire birdis kynd arraid
Thaire fetheris new, and fret thame in the sonne,
And thankit lufe, that had thaire makis wonne.

This was the plan{.e} ditee of thaire note,

And there-with-all unto my self I thoght,
"Quhat lyf is this that makis birdis dote?
Quhat may this be, how cummyth it of ought?
Quhat nedith it to be so dere ybought?
It is nothing, trowe I, bot feynit chere,
And that men list to counterfeten chere."

Eft wald I think; "O Lord, quhat may this be?
That Lufe is of so noble myght and kynde,
Lufing his folk, and suich prosperitee
Is it of him, as we in bukis fynd?
May he oure hert{.e}s setten and unbynd?
Hath he upon oure hertis suich maistrye?
Or all this is bot feynyt fantasye!

"For gif he be of so grete excellence,
That he of every wight hath cure and charge,
Quhat have I gilt to him or doon offense,
That I am thrall, and birdis gone at large,
Sen him to serve he myght set my corage?
And gif he be nocht so, than may I seyne,
'Quhat makis folk to jangill of him in veyne?'

"Can I nocht ell{.e}s fynd, bot gif that he
Be lord, and as a god may lyve and regne,
To bynd and louse, and maken thrallis free,
Than wold I pray his blisfull grace benigne,
To hable me unto his service digne;
And evermore for to be one of tho
Him trewly for to serve in wele and wo."

And there-with kest I doun myn eye ageyne,
Quhare as I sawe, walking under the toure,
Full secretly, new cummyn hir to pleyne,
The fairest or the freschest yong{.e} floure
That ever I sawe, me thoght, before that houre,
For quhich sodayn abate, anon astert
The blude of all my body to my hert.

And though I stude abaisit tho a lyte,
No wonder was; for-quhy my wittis all
Were so overcom with plesance and delyte,
Onely throu latting of myn eyen fall,
That sudaynly my hert became hir thrall
For ever, of free will; for of manace
There was no takyn in hir suete face.

And in my hede I drewe ryght hastily,
And eft-son{.e}s I lent it forth ageyne,
And sawe hir walk, that verray womanly,
With no wight mo, bot onely wommen tueyne.
Than gan I studye in my-self, and seyne,

"A! suete, ar ye a worldly creature,
Or hevinly thing in likenesse of nature?

"Or ar ye god Cupidis owin princesse,
And cummyn are to louse me out of band?
Or ar ye verray Nature the goddessse,
That have depaynted with your hevinly hand
This gardyn full of flouris, as they stand?
Quhat sall I think, allace! quhat reverence
Sall I minister to your excellence?

"Gif ye a goddessse be, and that ye like
To do me payne, I may it nocht astert;
Gif ye be worldly wight, that dooth me sike,
Quhy lest God mak you so, my derrest hert,
To do a sely prisoner thus smert,
That lufis yow all, and wote of nocht bot wo?
And therefor, merci, suete! sen it is so."

Quhen I a lytill thrawe had maid my moon,
Bewailling myn infortune and my chance,
Unknawing how or quhat was best to doon,
So ferre I fallen was in lufis dance,
That sodeynly my wit, my contenance,
My hert, my will, my nature, and my mynd,
Was changit clene ryght in an-othir kynd.

Off hir array the form gif I sall write
Toward, hir goldin haire and rich atyre
In fret-wise couchit were with perllis quhite
And grete balas lemyng as the fyre,
With mony ane emeraut and faire saphire;
And on hir hede a chaplet fresch of hewe,
Off plumys partit rede, and quhite, and blewe;

Full of quaking spangis bryght as gold,
Forgit of schap like to the amorettis,
So new, so fresch, so plesant to behold,
The plumys eke like to the floure-jonettis,
And othir of schap like to the round crokettis,
And, above all this, there was, wele I wote,
Beautee eneuch to mak a world to dote.

About hir nek, quhite as the fyre amaille,
A gudely cheyne of smale orfeverye,
Quhareby there hang a ruby, without faille,
Lyke to ane hert{.e} schapin verily,
That, as a sperk of lowe, so wantonly
Semyt birnyng upon hir quhyt{.e} throte;
Now gif there was gud partye, God it wote!

And forto walk that fresch{.e} May{.e}s morowe,

An huke sche had upon hir tissew quhite,
That gudeliare had nocht bene sene toforowe,
As I suppose; and girt sche was a lyte.
Thus halflyng louse for haste, to suich delyte
It was to see hir youth in gudelihede,
That for rudenes to speke thereof I drede.

In hir was youth, beautee, with humble aport,
Bountee, richesse, and wommanly facture,
(God better wote than my pen can report)
Wisedome, largesse, estate, and connyng sure.
In every poynt so guydit hir mesure,
In word, in dede, in schap, in contenance,
That nature myght no more hir childe avance.

Throw quhich anon I knew and understude
Wele, that sche was a worldly creature;
On quhom to rest myn ey{.e}, so mich gude
It did my wofull hert, I yow assure,
That it was to me joye without mesure;
And, at the last, my luke unto the hevin
I threwe furthwith, and said thir versis sevin:

"O Venus clere! of goddis stellifyit!
To quhom I yelde homage and sacrificise,
Fro this day forth your grace be magnifyit,
That me ressavit have in suich a wise,
To lyve under your law and do servise;
Now help me furth, and for your merci lede
My herte to rest, that d{"e}is nere for drede."

James I of Scotland