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Sir Robert Aytoun
- poems -

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Sir Robert Aytoun(1570 - 1638)

Robert Aytoun's career marks the progress of a poet of Scotland and England at the union of the crowns in 1603, when King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England. Aytoun's verses record his own political advancement, contemporary politics and scandal, as well as the changing styles of court poetry and song. His early works are in literary Scots and influenced by the Castalian movement and by King James, while the later works, especially his amorous verse, are adapted to the English courtly fashion. These poems show the influence of English courtly music, which they themselves influenced. Frequently quoted in commonplace books, many of his poems and songs enjoyed a popularity in both Scotland and England and reveal Aytoun to be part of the literary traditions of both North and South. Though obscure today, Aytoun was a noteworthy courtier, poet, and patron during the English Renaissance.

Aytoun's vernacular verse was collected by his nephew Sir John Aytoun. Though a preface to this manuscript, which is now in the British Library, reveals that this collection was prepared for publication, it did not reach the press. Most of Aytoun's Latin verse was collected in Delitiae Poetarum Scotorum (1637). David Laing published the first collection of Aytoun's English poems in 1827, including a brief biographical sketch. Charles Rogers published an edition of the Latin and English works in 1844, which was revised in 1871 because of the discovery of more material. A more accurate and complete text is Charles B. Gullans's 1963 edition, published for the Scottish Text Society, which includes the Latin and vernacular poems as well as a biography and a collection of letters.

There is some difficulty in dating Aytoun's verse. His epitaphs and poems relating to specific political events or court scandal can be more closely dated than the generic verse. Aytoun's Scottish "diers," poems in which the speaker is near death for love, are dated by Gullans from 1590 to 1603, and the sonnets from 1600 to 1605 or perhaps earlier, as the vogue for sonnets in England was in the 1590s. According to Helena Mennie Shire, the movement from earlier to later poems is marked by stylistic changes, especially those reflecting changes in court music, and corresponds to Aytoun's change from Castalian poet to Cavalier.

Aytoun was born on 25 February 1570 to a large landowning family of Fifeshire, the second of four sons and two daughters born to Andrew Aytoun and his wife, Mariona (née Lundie). He matriculated in March 1584 at St. Leonard's College, St. Andrews, receiving his B.A. in November 1588 and an M.A. in March 1589. He received an inheritance on his father's death in 1590. This information is all that is recorded of Aytoun's life in Scotland.

Aytoun's verses reveal the influence of Scotland on his poetry. It is unknown whether he ever approached King James's court in Scotland or knew any of the members of the Castalian band of court makars (poets). King James's Essayes of a Prentise, in the divine art of Poesie with its treatise for Scottish poetry appeared in 1584, the same year that Aytoun entered college, and its probable influence is reflected in several of Aytoun's poems which follow the fashion of King James's poetry. Alexander Montgomerie, "chief poet" of James's Scottish court and one whose verses are frequently quoted in the treatise, also influenced Aytoun's style and content.

Although Aytoun was not a member of the Castalian band, he continues a Scottish tradition, and Shire calls him the "Last Castalian." His early verse follows the fashion of poets in Scotland in the 1590s. A group of seven poems referred to as the "Diaphantus" poems were written by Aytoun in conjunction with Sir William Alexander (later earl of Stirling) and Alexander Craig, a fellow undergraduate at St. Leonard's. The poems are a collection of extended love laments in literary Scots. The first is a plaint of absence; the other six are diers. Highly rhetorical and in "poulter's measure," they may be influenced by a love lament written by King James at the request of Queen Anne, which was quite popular in Scotland in the 1590s. The second and sixth of the Diaphantus poems, "Quhen Diaphantus Knew" and "Will thow, remorsles fair," are by Aytoun; Alexander wrote the fourth and fifth poems, and the third, "Craiges passionado," is most likely by Craig. These poems, the only extant Scottish poems by Aytoun and Alexander, reveal a group of Scottish poets working together much as the members of the earlier Castalian band.

The style of the dier or passionado was not fashionable in early-seventeenth-century England, so that, although Aytoun later modified the "uncouth" Scots of the Diaphantus collection for publication in England, it caused little stir in that country. (No copy of this published version is known to exist.) The fashions of Scotland, which lagged behind those of England, may have hindered the acceptance of Aytoun's verse in England, but they provided a welcome ground for some of his later songs, which remained popular in Scotland throughout the seventeenth century.

Very little is known of Aytoun's movements in the period from 1590 to 1603. He was in Paris for all or part of this time, perhaps continuing studies of civil law.

Aytoun reappears in recorded history in 1603, when his more than four-hundred-line Latin panegyric to King James was published in Paris. He won favor with King James and enjoyed a fairly rapid rise at court. In 1608 he became groom of the

privy chamber, and in 1609 he conveyed James's defense of the right of kings to demand an oath of allegiance to Protestant princes in Germany. He was knighted on 30 August 1612 and in that same year succeeded Sir William Fowler as secretary to Queen Anne. Aytoun also served as secretary to Queen Henrietta Maria, after Charles I became king in 1625, and remained at that post until death in 1638.

Aytoun's positions at court afforded him communication with important political and noble persons, as well as court playwrights, poets, and musicians. According to William Drummond of Hawthornden, Ben Jonson claimed "That Sir Robert Aiton loved him dearly." Another contemporary, John Aubrey, stated that "Sir Robert was one of the best poets of his time--Mr John Dreyden sayes he has seen verses of his, some of the best of that age." Aubrey continued, "He was acquainted with all the witts of his time in England. He was a great acquaintance of Mr. Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury, whom Mr. Hobbes told me he had made use of (together with Ben Johnson [sic]) for an Aristarchus, when he made his Epistle Dedicatory to his translation of Thucydides." In his notes on Hobbes, Aubrey wrote, "Aiton, Scoto-Britannus, a good poet and critique and good scholar."

Aytoun died on 25 February 1638 and was buried in the south aisle of the choir in Westminster Abbey, near the steps leading into Henry VII's chapel. A copper bust of Aytoun was erected at his burial place.

Aytoun's move to England and involvement in the English court and English fashions did not sever his connection to Scotland. William Lithgow records Aytoun's importance in the continuity of a Scottish literary tradition in the preface to The Pilgrimes Farewell to his Native Country of Scotland (1618): "Brave Murray ah is dead, Aiton supplies his place." The line of Scottish makars flows from Alexander Montgomerie to his apprentice, John Murray, and so to Aytoun. The assertion that this line is then continued by Robert Burns is debatable, but the original words of "Old long syne," very much in Aytoun's style, are found in an Aytoun manuscript, and were first attributed to Aytoun by Rogers in 1871. Burns also rewrote "I doe confess th'art smooth, and faire," included as one of the four "Doubtful poems" in Gullans's edition. Whether Burns in the eighteenth century did continue Aytoun's line or not, in the seventeenth century Aytoun's verse found a popularity in both the North and South rarely experienced by a poet born in Scotland.

To An Inconstant Mistress

I loved thee once, I'll love no more,
  Thine be the grief as is the blame,
Thou art not what thou wast before,
  What reason I should be the same?
He that can love unloved again
Hath better store of love than brain;
God send me love my debts to pay,
While unthrifts fool their love away.

Nothing could have my love o'erthrown,
  If thou hadst still continued mine;
Nay, if thou hadst remained thine own,
  I might perchance have yet been thine.
But thou thy freedom did recall,
That it thou might elsewhere enthrall,
And then how could I but disdain
A captive's captive to remain?

When new desires had conquered thee,
  And changed the object of thy will,
It had been lethargy in me,
  Not constancy, to love thee still;
Yea, it had been a sin to go
And prostitute affection so,
Since we are taught no prayers to say
To such as must to others pray.

Yet do thou glory in thy choice,
  Thy choice of his good fortune boast;
I'll neither grieve, nor yet rejoice
  To see him gain what I have lost.
The height of my disdain shall be
To laugh at him, to blush for thee;
To love thee still, but go no more
A-begging at a beggar's door.

Sir Robert Aytoun

To His Forsaken Mistress

I DO confess thou'rt smooth and fair,
And I might have gone near to love thee,
Had I not found the slightest prayer
That lips could move, had power to move thee;
But I can let thee now alone
As worthy to be loved by none.

I do confess thou'rt sweet; yet find
Thee such an unthrift of thy sweets,
Thy favours are but like the wind
That kisseth everything it meets:
And since thou canst with more than one,
Thou'rt worthy to be kiss'd by none.

The morning rose that untouch'd stands
Arm'd with her briers, how sweet she smells!
But pluck'd and strain'd through ruder hands,
Her sweets no longer with her dwells:
But scent and beauty both are gone,
And leaves fall from her, one by one.

Such fate ere long will thee betide
When thou hast handled been awhile,
With sere flowers to be thrown aside;
And I shall sigh, while some will smile,
To see thy love to every one
Hath brought thee to be loved by none.

Sir Robert Aytoun