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The Mental Traveller -- A Study of the Kingis Quair

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Notes and Documents

The Mental Traveller — A Study of the *Kingis Quair*

The *Kingis Quair* has often been found by surprised critics to be a lively and interesting poem, a "fresh" poem.¹ This adjective, however, or adjectives like it, has often been used in such contexts as a substitute for a proper critical analysis. To slide over the surface of the poem in this way is surely to neglect one of the essential bases of critical study, analysis of technique as a preliminary to and a signpost for a more general examination. I shall try briefly to carry out such an analysis to see why the *Kingis Quair* should be called "fresh."

In the first place, the poem is written from a single subjective point of view, that of the writer, James. The prison, for example, is described in terms of his lack of freedom. In the *Knight's Tale*, the prison of Palamon and Arcite is described as, (ll. 1055-1056)

"The greet tour, that was so thikke and strong
Which of the castel was the chief dongsoun"

and so on in other lines, while the state of mind of the prisoners is stated thus, (ll. 1070-73)

"This sorweful prisoner, this Palamoun
Goth in the chamber romynge to and fro
And to hymself compleynynge of his wo
'That he was born ful ofte he seyde, 'alas!'
"

On the other hand, James's reaction to the prison is described in five stanzas and six lines (stanzas 25.2-30.7) while we find only one line (25.1) describing the prison in non-personal terms. Even that line says "as in strayte ward and in strong prisoun". So far as the poem is concerned the prison is simply an image: the emphasis is not on the firm restriction of the prison, but on James's reactions to it. James, indeed, was in France with Henry V and it seems to me not unlikely that he fabricated his close imprisonment to provide a literal parallel to an allegorical state of limited ignorance.

Similarly, it is possible and certainly totally justifiable to see Venus and Minerva as representing stages in James's growth of understanding. In other words, the goddesses present the results of James's own thought.

and it may be seen that the ideas posited in the Minerva section are in some ways refinements of those of the Venus section. It is, in fact, part of James's method in this poem to lead the reader through the stages of development he himself has been through. Fortune, then, may be seen as the intrusion of the everyday world into the ken of a consciousness tending, at least temporarily, to the meditative. The burlesque of her placing him on the wheel suggests the commonsense necessity of action following rational meditation.

James comments on his state of preparedness for life in his youth chiefly in stanzas 14-16, but about the important events of that time he says little or nothing. He says nothing of the civil disturbance which lost him a brother. He refuses the opportunity for indulgent description implicit in the line, (23.1)

"Purvait of all that was us necessary",
talking of his hasty and necessary departure from Scotland. His capture was a breach of truce, yet he scarcely refers to it. Again, most surprisingly, there is no mention in the poem of a marriage.

All this seems to me both to throw doubt on the view of the Kingis Quair as simply a poem about James's courtship of Joan Beaufort and to lend support to an allegorical interpretation of the Quair. On the allegorical level, James sets out to express the movement of the individual assisted and inspired by growing insight and grace from ignorant innocence to knowledgeable maturity, a progress experienced on many levels and in many ways. James found a basis for this allegory in, presumably, the most important event of his personal life, his meeting his future wife. This, however, has certain purely personal details edited, in order that the general application of the story as told may be clear. An example of such editing of the literal for the sake of the allegorical is the treatment of the Lady. There, in stanzas 46-50, James does not describe in detail Joan Beaufort, but formally describes a figure who literally may be her, but on an allegorical level represents the insight or revelation or inspiration which initiates his journey to maturity.

As Mr. Preston has noted, the form of the Quair is atypically Chaucerian. He makes the point that, while in the Chaucerian poems most obviously comparable to the Quair in form, The Parlement of Foules and The Boke of the Duchess, the sections of the poem are

The edition used is that of the Scottish Text Society, ed. W. W. Skeat (Edinburgh and London, 1884).

separate and we have as readers to relate them, often by a fairly large
effort of the imagination, James, as poet, has related his parts closely.
This he does by what may be called the dovetail. This joint is usually
a line or half-line which in its sense acts as a glide from the thought
of one stanza to that of the next, as in, (7.7)

"... and leve all incidence".

The brief sketch of the life of Boethius, for example, is brought close
to a generalized view of life as liable to fluctuation of fortune and then
by the line, (10.1)

"Among thir thoughtis rolling to and fro",
to James's own experience. This arrangement of Boethius—generalization
—James leads one to see the contrast between the course of Boethius' life and that of James as it is to be shown to us: the former shows
that a virtuous youth dedicated to philosophy leads to an old age immune
from despair resulting from the blows of fortune, the latter that an ignorant youth may lead through stages of revelation or insight to
maturity comparable to Boethius'. The juxtaposition lends highlight
to the differences between the views of Boethius and James.

A similar use of juxtaposition, this time of likes, is that of a
description of his course in youth (st. 16) with a description of the
difficulties of writing (sts. 17-18). The juxtaposition is here supported
by the under-lying sea imagery introduced in the generalised stanza 15.
Stanza 18 sets out a specifically literary interpretation of this imagery,
but it must be studied further: it is unlikely that a medieval writer by
some mysterious right necessarily fully understands his own imagery
any more than a modern writer. It seems to me that the sea imagery
must in one of its aspects suggest, as it often does, the situation of the
human, lost on the sea of the world, threatened by the rocks of Chance,
and, without the help of religion, and here art as well, incapable of
finding a haven. The trouble of stanza 17, however, refers to a situation
obtaining some time after that of stanza 16 and after the achievement
of mature understanding which grew from the ignorant innocence
presented in stanza 16. This juxtaposition suggests that even if James
achieves knowledge, without grace and inspiration he may still founder.
Within specific universes in life, such as that of poetry, James may be
as lost as he was before. This suggests, on the one hand, that the poem,
in one of its aspects, is about its own writing, the Lady representing
poetic inspiration on this level, and on the other hand, that James is
involved in an endless process of discovering knowledge of himself and
his relationship with his world. Though the fact of the poem is a result
of knowledge arising from the ignorance of stanza 17, yet this ignorance was found after, or even in the state of bliss arising from, the process whose beginning is presented in stanza 16. The effect, in fact, is one of each cycle carrying the poet to a further insight and knowledge. The chief method James uses to suggest all these ideas is juxtaposition, but a quick-moving and yet closely bound form of it. This form, economically linking relating, and contrasting, ideas, is an advance on Chaucerian technique and suggests a highly competent artist.

James's ability to economically suggest the multiplication of ideas and images arising from juxtapositions like this is paralleled by the sensual and descriptive power of his poetry. Often this results from James's use of both concatenations of verbs and lists of nouns and adjectives. Stanza 35, for example, contains ten verbs, eight of them in its last five lines:

"Quhen that this song had song a lytill thrawe
Thai stent a quhile and therewith unaaffraid
As I beheld and kest myn eyne alawre
From beugh to beugh thy hipit and thy plaid
And frechly in thaire birds kynd arraid
Thaire fetheris new and fret thame in the sonne
And thandik lufe that had thaire makis wonne."

Such close concatenation of verbs creates a definite, if irregular, rhythm, and the active verbs held in such rhythmic tension suggest the lively quick activity, the chirping and fluttering of the birds. The line,

"From beugh to beugh thy hipit and thy plaid"

for example, with its rhythmical balance, its alliteration and onomatopoeia shows a very sure touch, an effective technical ability which marks James at his best. He is here in full control of his form in line and stanza; form and content unite: "(they) fret thame in the sonne" recreates the relative stillness of the momentary cease from hopping.

In stanzas 155-7, however, the catalogue, partly alliterated, of beasts might easily be taken for flat uninspired convention: some of the beasts are fabulous and most are given stereotyped descriptions as in "The wyly fox, the wedowis inemye" (156.4). James has, nevertheless, shown he deserves a close examination of his use of convention rather than dismissal as being tied by it. A poet of his calibre might slip into cliché for as much as a line, but not for three and a half stanzas. In fact, the length of the list, the brevity of the references and yet the variation in their lengths, and the intermingling of native, foreign and fabulous beasts, all tend to create an effect together of fabulous
fecundity. Such an Ark-sequence has affinities with the lists of phrases in stanzas 109-10. Here phrases which are almost cliché are used and one recognises one of the virtues of the list device as used by James: the effect is not one of bludgeoning repetition nor one of flat description but one of mutual rejuvenation of the phrases. Each comparison, held in rhetorical tension against that which precedes and that which follows it, adds to and reinforces what might have been a purely conventional description until it seems new and fully experienced. There is no superficiality of language; James’s economy, and the rejuvenation effect, create a lively sense of vitality in the list.

This technique is used most subtly in stanzas 46-50. Faced with the problem of presenting the Lady, a generalised symbol as well as Joan Beaufort, James conveys her beauty and worth not by a list of personal details but by a list of her ornaments and dress and of her more abstract, more imprecise qualities. Again, the list suggests an abundance of beauty and worth, and the rhythmical and rhetorical tension it generates holds together the composite picture. And this admiring picture suggests the Lady is, in fact, both individually and inspiring beautiful and a fitting symbol for inspiration/grace/insight.

James, nevertheless, sometimes fails to make this technique effective. In stanza 109, we find two minor examples of it:

"Bothe of thy wit, thy persone and thy myght" (109.2),
"To hir hie birth, este and beaute bryght" (109.4).

Here, when James loses tension and balance, the lines are merely a flat formal statement.

While the descriptio pulchritudinis is a list for chiefly symbolic purpose, let us not forget another possible effect of the list, that arising from the concatenation we discussed, in stanza 35, that of naturalism. Just as Henryson observes animal life minutely and depicts it on one level realistically in verse, so James does. James does not, except in the Cantus of the birds, go beyond the presentation of what may be observed. This naturalism is further exemplified in James’s smarting eyes in stanza 8, a naturalistic touch emphasizing the subjectivity of the poem, besides complementing James’s troubled psychological state. The fish, most probably roach, of stanza 153, although they, as the watery tribe, suggest the earlier sea imagery, and this, we remember, was connected with man at the mercy of Fortune, in a naturalistic way, with their rhythmically expressed darting and their glittering, onomatopoeically and alliteratively expressed, are alive. This naturalism, however, is not a basic
and unalterable condition of James's style, but rather a device he is free to use or not in context.

Since this is so, one must suggest reasons for such use as he makes of this technique. Often the reason is simply that he wants to bring about what I shall call the tie-back effect. James seems to feel a need to give his poem a validity in all levels at, as nearly as possible, all times. The smarting eyes, being both naturalistic on the literal level and on the allegorical level a symbol of discontent and poor social communication, work on more than one level in themselves, but the fish seem not to. The fish, however, are connected by juxtaposition and the concept of ranks of order to the list of fabulous fecundity round Fortune. Fortune is an allegorical figure, but one connected to external nature. The pulling of James by the ear on to Fortune’s wheel is, besides being funny, an action presented naturalistically, an effect especially noticed as it is in a symbolic context. The effect of the integration of these two effects with the rota...
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that James may wish, "A! wele were him that now were in thy plyte" (53.7). James has presented his reaction to his imprisonment in stanza 27, where he compares his lack of liberty with the apparent liberty of the animals of creation. Now, his first reaction after the appearance of the Lady is to wish to be free like the dog. This, however, is not to be free; it is to lose the capability for rational thought which makes the human a free agent. Thus, James's first reaction on seeing the Lady is shown as a desire to force his development to freedom in knowledge; and it is shown that this forcing, considering his limitation at this time, would result in loss of the ability to reason and final loss of liberty. James's running about at the Lady's feet might suggest immature puppy-love and James's desire to be like the dog suggests his immaturity at this point. The dog becomes a symbol for loss of choice and so of freedom, but not mainly through itself; it becomes such a symbol because we note James's reaction to it.

A progress to liberty in maturity is shown in the poem and is based very clearly on personal experience. It is not going too far to say that the Kingis Quair, perhaps because of its use of a subjective viewpoint, is like a "confession" poem. Yet the Quair remains totally objectively valid; we feel at no point that we might, even momentarily, be being used as witnesses of the artist's self-indulgence. James successfully extracts from his own experience a series of insights which impinge on and help define a general experience. Because the writer's grasp of the experience, ideas and thought of the poem is complete and because his consistent and skilful use of poetic techniques helps to integrate all the parts into a whole, the Kingis Quair is a totally valid work of art. Its "freshness" is simply a function of its total validity.

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