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King James' rody sterres

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

King James' rody sterres

In the opening stanza of *The Kingis Quair* the reading 'Ci[nthia]' for Citheria (the moon for Venus) had long been accepted, on the grounds that Venus was not known to have phases before Gallileo discovered them, and that therefore the 'hornis bright' of line 6 must belong to the moon. But in his edition of the poem J. Norton-Smith has argued that 'the objection to accepting the reading of the MS. disappears if we understand *hornis* as referring to the elaborate dressing of women's hair in a horn shape, popular at this time'.¹ There is, indeed, some elegance in this proposal. Norton-Smith points to 'an imaginative association between Aquarius (the water-carrier) and the action of washing unbound golden hair' (*ibid.*). And the association can be extended—to the horns of the Goat and the hair-style Venus sports when in his sign. Decorously, she suits her appearance to the sign she is in.

It is attractive to suppose that the scene-setting of the opening reflects an actual situation, containing clues to a more or less precise date, as well as offering a visualisable, immediate and realistic picture. Any such construction, however, has to contend with the difficult last line: 'North northward approchit the mydnyght'. If Venus is taken as subject of 'approchit', 'the mydnyght' cannot be the mid-point of the visible heavens on any realistic interpretation, since Venus never has an elongation from the sun great enough to place her in such a position. Nor would the *medium noctis* of the astrolabe provide the solution, since in approaching that line Venus would by definition be at the mid-point of her invisibility below the horizon. Norton-Smith's alternative was to suggest that 'the mydnyght' may be 'a kind of poetic variation on the well-attested ME use of "mid-day" to mean "the south" (cf. *Latin meridies*). Venus was a little north of the sun in declination and moving slowly southward during the period 10–18 February 1424' (p. 52). But to say of Venus that

¹ James I of Scotland, *The Kingis Quair*, ed. J. Norton-Smith (Oxford, 1971), p. 52.

'North northward she approached the south' would be odd to say the least. How else, then, is 'North northward' to be taken?

Looking at what we are told in the first stanza, the situation to be imagined could be as follows (the consequent inferences are bracketed): the stars high in the heaven are bright, and so is Venus. (The sun is set, but not so long set that Venus is invisible as well.) Venus is in Aquarius (and not close to the sun, since the stars are bright; the sun must therefore be somewhere in the area Sagittarius/Capricornus; say, 255° – 285° = late November–December).² Finally, midnight is approaching by degrees in a northerly direction (there being a sense of steady progress in the repetition 'north northwards').

Later in the poem (stanza 20) the sun (in spring) is beginning 'Upward his course to driue in Ariete'. The 'upwardness' of this course, culminating at the summer solstice, is reflected by a progressively greater altitude of the sun on the meridian, and its northwardness by an answering increase towards the north in the Sun's points of rising and setting. The signs Aries, Taurus, and Gemini of course also follow this same northerly path daily.³

While the sun lies in them, these signs cannot be seen to make their northerly progress; but when the sun lies in the signs opposite them it can be observed nightly. Now, in the initial impression that the scene-setting of the first stanza gives, the sun can readily be inferred to be in the Sagittarius/Capricornus region; and equally readily the signs visible and moving in steady progress away from the horizon can be inferred to be Aries, Taurus, and Gemini. In this sense the signs in which the sun drives his upward course are those in which the sun's nadir, the 'mydnyght', is now making its progress.

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² Norton-Smith's argument for a precise date is made at the cost not only of having Venus in fact invisible, but also of supposing it 'poetically acceptable to place Venus in Aquarius at the time of writing and in Capricornus a fortnight or so before' (p. 52). This poetic juggling is found to be allowable on the grounds that 'the boundaries of the constellations were not strictly drawn at the time' (ibid.); but we are dealing here, surely with signs, not constellations.

³ The 'northwardness' of this course is made very plain on the astrolabe by an increasing movement of the ecliptic line towards the centre of the instrument, which represents the (north) pole.