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**Author**

Rose, Christine

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## THE OXYMORON AND THE STRUCTURE OF *THE KINGIS QUAIR*

Christine Rose

One critically-neglected aspect of the rhetorical and poetical structure of the medieval Scottish poem *The Kingis Quair* is its fundamental construction from a large collection of images which are paired opposites. That is, the paradox, or its more compressed form, the oxymoron, is rhetorically the key to *The Kingis Quair*. The poem is structurally and thematically composed of many seeming self-contradictions, which the poet, through the dreamer/narrator's journey to knowledge about life and love, shows to be inwardly consistent. Because of the nature of his message about life and love, the poet achieves a final unity of effect, despite the coupling of apparently diverse elements throughout. The journey represented by the poem's dream-vision is one of recognition of the process by which such opposites as necessity and free will, fortune and fate, time and eternity, courtly love and Christian love, prison and freedom, pleasure and pain are reconciled by the narrator. And, these antithetical pairs themselves, as well as many other pairs, abound in the *Quair*, reinforcing the poem's tension. This tension is unresolved until the narrator, at the end, finally understands the bonds of love and his place in the divine order of the universe.

Previous studies of *The Kingis Quair* have, after dispensing with the question of authorship, dwelt mainly on genre and the Chaucerian relationships. While one critic (A. Von Hendy in a *Studies in Scottish Literature* article, 1965) comes the furthest in asserting the careful craftsmanship of the poem as a whole, all discussions of the poem have failed to uncover the pervasive paradoxical, contradictory, and what finally is the oxymoronic design which is so vital to the appreciation of this underrated work. It can be demonstrated that the poet of this love story has sustained these oxymoronic figures, these antithetical pairs, throughout the *Quair*, and it is this pattern of underlying rhetorical control which contributes significantly to the poetic unity, the philosophical interest and the indisputable charm of this medieval dream-vision.

The paradoxical figures of the poem tend to describe love, or the way it makes the lover feel, and the reader is supposed to ascertain the true view of the *Quair* on the topic of love from the interplay and final reconciliation

of the antithetical elements presented within the paradox. And, as we know, "No description of or statement about love, is more nearly true than its opposite."<sup>1</sup> The topic of love almost *requires* the oxymoron.

Of course, the oxymoron is a ubiquitous figure for poets who write about love in the Middle Ages, so it is in no way peculiar to the *Quair*. This contradictory and turbulent rhetorical structure, exploring the emotional range of lovers, especially the pain-is-pleasure idea, is intimately tied to the treatment of love in such works as the love lyrics of the troubadours, and later, Petrarch; *The Book of the Duchess* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. The influential medieval grammarian<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey of Vinsauf, in his *Poetria Nova* (c. 1210) has this to say about opposition of sense as an ornament of poetic style:

But your picture masters this color better still when the substantive has strife with the verb, and they have the appearance of hating each other, and yet within all is love and concord is meaning.

A technique which this illustrates:

He pours out lavishly, but in pouring out his riches, he renews them; his hand is never tired except when it rests.

And also this: "Before the face of God devout silence cries aloud."

Consider other instances and you will be surprised to find the same possibility in them:

When lovers make war with mutual wrangling, peace of mind grows from the strife of tongues. By this hate, love is established.

<sup>1</sup>Walter Scheps, "Chaucerian Synthesis: The Art of *The Kingis Quair*," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 8 (1971), 162.

<sup>2</sup>I use J. J. Murphy's term here instead of J. M. Manley's term "rhetorician," since Murphy in his *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley, 1974) makes the case for "grammarian" being what Geoffrey and Matthew of Vendome, for example, considered themselves. Murphy explains that in the Middle Ages rhetoric was only a part of the study of grammar, which had a broader meaning than today's definition (p. 136). See Manley's *Chaucer and the Rhetoricians*. Wharton *Lectures on English Poetry XVII* (London, 1926), and Robert O. Payne, *The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics* (New Haven, 1963) for the influence on Chaucer and Chaucerians of Geoffrey's work.

So it is, too, with these examples: their inner statements love one another, although their exteriors are at enmity. The quarrel is all in their sounds, and the sense of what they say settles all the disputes.<sup>3</sup>

Geoffrey, too, uses love and lovers as a typical setting for this figure of unity-within-diversity, and prescribes that versifiers employ this type of figure to heighten the "color" of the verse.

In such manner as Geoffrey suggests, the apparent author of *The Kingis Quair*, James I of Scotland, in writing about love, allows his narrator to propose a variety of verbal juxtapositions. In fact, the poem is fraught with passages of *contentio*, or antithesis. The poet/narrator is a puzzled man indeed at the outset of his waking and sleeping adventures in the poem, but in the end he finds solace in understanding those basic Boethian paradoxes of necessity and free will, fortune and fate, and time and eternity. He has also synthesized for himself the union of courtly and Christian love principles. The poem is in its most basic form a story of the union of two literal opposites, man and woman, as well as the union of figurative and philosophical opposites. The rhetorical figures enforce this concept, and lend a coherence to the poem despite the proliferation of contrasts within it. By tracing the course of these oxymoronic figures through the poem, we can come to appreciate James' careful planning and sure rhetorical control.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *The New Poetics*, trans Jane Baltzell Kopp in *Three Medieval Rhetorical Arts*, ed. James J. Murphy (Berkeley, 1971), 64. The original text of *Poetria Nova* for the cited passage is as follows:

Vincet adhuc istum melior pictura colorem,  
 Quando movet litem cum verbo nomen, et ipsa  
 Oderunt sese facietentus, attamen intus  
 Est amor et concors sententia. Quod docet istud:  
 Dapsilis effundit, sed opes fundendo refundit;  
 Nunquam fessa manus, nisi quando quiescit et istud:  
 Ante Dei faciem devota silentia clamant.  
 Consule res alias et idem mireris in illis:  
 Litibus alternis quando bellantur amantes,  
 Crescit in hoc bello linguarum pax animarum;  
 Hoc odio conditur amor. Sic est et in istis:  
 Se voces introrsus amant licet exteriores  
 Sint inimicitiae. Lis est in vocibus ipsis;  
 Sed litem totam sedat sententia vocum. (ll. 877-890)

from Ernest Gallo, *The Poetria Nova and its Sources in Early Rhetorical Doctrine*. (The Hague, 1971) 60. Gallo has italicized the exempla in his text.

The first of these figures, a paradox, occurs in Stanza 5. The narrator is unable to sleep, picks up a copy of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, and begins to read himself to sleep. He says of Boethius:

That in himself the full recover wan  
Of his infortune, pouert and distresse,  
And in tham set his verray sekernesse. (st. 5)<sup>4</sup>

thus introducing the ongoing theme of security achieved from insecurity. Boethius finds help within himself and reaches security through virtue. The implication is that the narrator of the *Quair* applauds this method of attaining a measure of stability in the "unsekir warldis" (st. 6). Instead of causing sleep, though, Boethius' tale makes the narrator ponder his own experience of uncertainty and stress. The narrator begins his musings by telling us of his relation to Fortune, using the antithetical pair "friend" and "fo":

In tender youth how sche was first my fo  
And eft my friend. (st. 10)

As an example of how thickly wrought with these antithetical pairs this poem is, if one looks at the material between stanzas 5 and 10, a mere 28 lines, one can note the following contrasts: youth/age, joy/uncertainty, privilege/poverty, sleeping/waking, rising/falling on the wheel of Fortune, and prince/page. The *Quair* contains many such juxtapositions, not, rhetorically-speaking, oxymorons or paradoxes in all cases, but extended images of unity-in-conflict.

In stanza 26 appears "My dedely lyf, full of peyne and penance." This "dedely lyf" oxymoron is one of a number of images describing life as a prison, full of pain and woe. The poet/narrator's literal imprisonment in the tower makes his life like death. He calls to mind in the following stanzas the birds, the beasts and the fish outside his prison walls. Animals are charmingly depicted in the *Quair*, with their freedom and defined relation to Nature forming a contrast to the lover's physical confinement and confusion. In stanza 26 the lover is also *mentally* bound, since he cannot see beyond his own innocent, ignorant, and impotent personal life. He feels that he alone suffers. In some sense his impatience with his lot can be said to arise from lack of experience. The experience he desires is that of freedom, and most of all, love.

<sup>4</sup> All textual references are to James I of Scotland, *The Kingis Quair*, ed. John Norton-Smith (Oxford, 1971). References are to stanza number, not individual lines.

Another related figure should be grouped with this "dedely lyf" oxymoron. The poet in stanza 68, in an example of *erotema*, asks:

How may this be, that deth and lyf—both tueyne—  
Sall both atonis in a creature  
Togidder duell and turment thus nature? (st. 68)

Apparently, he continues to see the experience of love and life in these paradoxical terms. Yet at this later point he is questioning—perhaps not seeking an answer—but questioning his feelings, rather than dully accepting them as in stanza 26's "dedely lyf."

The chief oxymoron of the *Quair* is in stanza 41:

That sudaynly my hert became hir thrall  
For euer, of free will. (st. 41)

This "free thrall" is the great paradoxical puzzle of the poem.<sup>5</sup> For the poet/narrator, who has just been discussing literal imprisonment and liberty, has now moved into the figurative realm of being love's prisoner, bound as well as free. From this tower-prison he has seen a lovely lady walking in the garden below, and he freely dedicates himself to loving her, thus choosing to bind himself in the "golden cheyne" of love. He cannot free himself, but he does not want to. At this point, the speaker has poetically developed both sides of this oxymoron "free thrall" before presenting it. We have seen his deadening experience of actual incarceration, and his musings on the glories of freedom and free will in man, so that we are imaginatively prepared to accept "free thrall" as a viable stance for the speaker.

The succeeding stanzas continue to assert different antitheses. One is the question of the nature of the lady the prisoner espies. Is she a mortal or a goddess? For she is worldly, yet heavenly.

Gif ye a goddess be, and that ye like  
To do me payne, I may it nocht astert.  
Gif ye be wardly wight that dooth me sike . . . (st. 44)

A variation on the key "free thrall" paradox enters in stanza 61:

<sup>5</sup>C. S. Lewis in *The Allegory of Love* (Oxford, 1936) 236; Andrew Von Hendy in "The Free Thrall: A Study of *The Kingis Quair*," *Studies in Scottish Literature* 2 (1964), 19-20; and John Preston in "Fortunys Exiltree: A Study of *The Kingis Quair*," *RES* n.s. 7 (1956), 339-347, point out this oxymoron as a key to the study of the poem, with Von Hendy's being the most exhaustive treatment.

... my spirit was so light  
 Me thoght I flawe for ioye without arest,  
 So were my wittis boundin all to fest. (st. 61)

He feels free, yet is bound, and the problem which the *Quair* poet next develops is how to obtain the favors of the beloved who holds him in these bonds of freedom. The solving of this dilemma brings into focus another central opposition within the poem, that of the *Romance of the Rose* tradition courtly love, versus divine love. Perhaps this divine love is Christian love, but certainly it seems to be a love without overtones of unchastity. This is a serious business, and, in general, *The Kingis Quair* dreamer/lover feels lust, but ultimately settles on pure and chaste aims for his desires. The lover's problem gives him even greater pain than his previous feelings of deprivation. He now describes sleeping in oxymoronic terms: "From hennsfurth my rest is my travaile" (st. 69). Locked in prison, he can only bemoan his fate. In another antithetical statement he compares himself in the following stanza to Tantalus, who can draw water from the well, but cannot drink.

Stanza 71 is an extended *contentio* figure, ending with a paradox describing the speaker's state-of-mind, now that he is in love but deprived of the object of that love:

So sore thus sight I with myself allone  
 That turnyt is my strenth in febilnesse,  
 My wele in wo, my frendis all in fone,  
 My lyf in deth, light into dirknesse,  
 My hope in feere, in dout my sekirnesse  
 Sen sche is gone; and God mote hir conuoye  
 That me may gyde to turment and to ioye, (st. 71)

These statements of antithesis mark the narrator's distress, showing him worn out with sorrowing, and causing him to half-sleep, half-swoon his way into a dream-vision, establishing another antithesis in the action of the poem: that of sleeping and waking.

In his dream journey through the heavens to the spheres of Venus and Minerva, and back to earth to Fortune's domain, the dreamer stops first in Venus' realm, where he enters a little room painted with sighs. Echoing similar passages in *Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde*, but without Chaucer's critical observations about the sinister power of love,<sup>6</sup> the poet describes the room:

Depeynit all with sighis wonder sad,

<sup>6</sup> Norton-Smith, notes to *The Kingis Quair*, p. 71.

(Noght suich sighis as hertis doith manace  
Bot suich as dooth lufairs to be glad) (st. 96)

These sad sighs of pleasure are certainly paradoxical, as is "lufis rage" (st. 100)—a kind of union of virtue and vice. The *venus* of the *Quair* is perceived by the dreamer as a haven from this tempest of love. But Venus also has two sides. She says: "There as I mynt full sore, I smyte bot soft," (st. 105). Her love is a tender tyrant; hurting, yet mitigating the hurt with sweet rewards. Venus herself continues to speak in an antithetical fashion in the next two stanzas, generating a whole new set of paired opposites as she shows the lover his unworthiness to have his lady's love:

It is no mach of thyne vnworthynesse  
To hir hie birth, estate, and beautee bryght:  
Als like ye bene as day is to the nyght—  
Or sek-cloth is vnto fyne cremesy, e,  
Or doken to the fresche dayesy, e,  
Vnlike the mone is to the sonne schene,  
Eke Ianuarye is like vnto May,  
Vnlike the cuckow to the phylomene,  
Thair tabartis ar noght bothe maid of (ar)ay,  
Vnlike the crow is to the pape-iy, e,  
Vnlike in goldsmithis werk a fischis eye  
To prese with perll, or maked by so heye. (st. 109-110)

Venus is not the complete answer to the lover's moan, and she sends him on to Minerva's sphere for wisdom to temper his desires. Minerva discourses on God, man, moderation in all things, and she extolls knowledge as the remedy for sorrow at Fortune's instability. Winning satisfaction for lust with lies to women is frowned upon by Minerva as "feynit truth." This oxymoron is linked to an earlier stanza (56), where the poet tells the story of Philomela the nightingale, who was taken in by lies and lust. As Minerva says in admonition to the lover against this conduct, in another oxymoronic statement,

Ryght so the fatour, the false theif I say,  
With suete treason oft wynnith his pray. (st. 135)

And continuing in this image of duplicity, of truth and untruth, appearance and reality, Minerva explains:

So hard it is to trusten now-on-dayes  
The world—it is so double and inconstant— (st. 137)

The dreamer next echoes Venus's "sore mynt" line of stanza 105, by describing his love in stanza 141 as "the suete that smertis me so sore," and



assures Minerva and himself that he does not wish to sully his lady's reputation, but only desires her in "Cristin wise." The juxtaposition of Christian love and courtly desire resolves itself in stanza 142 in a synthesis which one could call "right" desire, where the dreamer vows never to put his love's reputation in question because of his own pleasures. Philosophically, this is one of the core statements of the poem, the other being Minerva's speech in stanza 149 about softening Fortune's blows through wisdom and foreknowledge. And, both of these core statements revolve around a reconciliation of antitheses.

The last stated paradox is in stanza 173:

From day to day so sore here arrow drest  
That with thy flesche ay waking art in trouble,  
And sleping eke of pyne so has thow double.

These lines are reminiscent of the "rest is travaile" speech of stanza 69. The final major antithesis is stanza 183's turnabout "from thralldom and peyne" into "largesse":

Eke quho may in this lyfe have more pleasance  
Than cum to largesse from thralldom and peyne?

This turnabout is effected for the lover by means of a "golden cheyne." Now he is still a thrall, but free in another way, since he has his beloved's favor.

Imaginatively, the poet's journey shows him as having been torn apart by these various warring forces depicted in the poem, but coming to terms with them. This reconciliation comes on two levels in the *Quair*: there is a synthesis of the courtly love tradition with the Christian concept of chaste loving, and an attuning of the larger concerns of Fortune and free will to the narrator's understanding. Free will is shown by the poet to coexist with Fortune's vicissitudes, and the natural and divine laws are portrayed as harmoniously unified, if only one understands the position of man in the universe—subject to Fortune, but able to attain some of God's foreknowledge. The type of love James I describes is not the union of the *Romance of the Rose*. Marriage is never mentioned, but a sober, more-than-lustful union of the lovers can be anticipated because of Minerva's cautions to look to God for guidance. The narrator, imprisoned by Fortune, released through knowledge and love, no longer will fret about the questions of the uncertainty of life. Through a philosophical understanding of free will, he achieves a certain distance from Fortune and necessity. He is indeed a "free thrall," finding peace in agreeing to love and be bound. It is this synthesis of love as imprisonment-yet-release which the poet/narrator attains at the end.

In the course of the poem, the narrator moves from conditions of despair

to optimism, from doubt to faith, from questioning to acceptance, from a state of insecurity to the ability to face life's problems. Love, as opposed to lust, is not the final answer, but it is an approach to that answer in the poem. Through the power of love, the narrator/dreamer comes to accept and reconcile himself to the divine order as described by Venus and Minerva. He achieves comfort through philosophy, joy through sorrow and deprivation, and peace through torment. All this is possible, the poem implies, if one understands the role of Fortune, and all the contradictions life holds. Even the movement of the dreamer's experience is contrived in opposition to that of Boethius, the alleged inspiration for the narrative of the *Quair*.<sup>7</sup> Boethius describes himself as a virtuous youth, dedicated to philosophy, which leads him in his old age to be immune to the blows of fortune. The youth in *The Kingis Quair* is not dedicated to philosophy, and therefore must be particularly subject to Fortune. He eventually attains some wisdom and release from ignorance of Fortune's workings because of his experiences with love.

*The Kingis Quair* is rendered self-consciously by the poet. He is aware of his art, and of his debts to Boethius and Chaucer, and mentions both his craft and his sources in numerous places. This poem is not an open-ended investigation, but, a carefully-planned retrospective on the theme of love, seen through the specific experience of this lover. According to Geoffrey of Vinsauf, *elocutio*, the artful rendering of words, was the proper business of the poet. Using a source and ornamenting "sentence" attractively and instructively, was what medieval poets often attempted. James I borrows some matter and much poetic technique from Chaucer, certainly in describing the paradoxical nature of love, as Chaucer describes it in *Troilus*. Chaucer is in turn indebted to Boethius for the concept of understanding everything by its contrary.<sup>8</sup> But, James is not only an imitator of Chaucer. He is consistently skillful in his technique and grasp of the philosophical content of the poem. Using tradition to his own ends, he modifies and makes his own whatever he borrows. All the oxymorons *are* finally manifest as united rather than diverse, and all the antithetical parts are integrated into a fresh, vital, and valid whole. His decoration never overwhelms his "sentence." His meaning emerges from the rhetorical structure, and the effect is unity rather than discord. And, in the end, what makes this small poem survive through the ages is not any trait that has much to do with medieval rhetoric. Rather, it is the ability of the poet to see through the pretenses of the courtly love tradition, and deliver a charming plea for moderation and right loving.

<sup>7</sup> John MacQueen, "Tradition and the Interpretation of *The Kingis Quair*," *RES* 12 (1961), 120, makes this comparison.

<sup>8</sup> Schepps, 162.

**Christine Rose** received her M.A. in Medieval Studies from Boston College and expects to receive her Ph.D. in the near future from Tufts University. Her dissertation is an edition, with critical introduction, of MS 938 Houghton Library, the unique MS of the early fifteenth-century M.E. translation of Nicholas Trevet's Anglo-Norman chronicle, with *Brut* Continuation. She is currently teaching in the English Department at UCSB. This paper is a revised and expanded version of one presented at the 16th International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, in May 1981, and was written at the suggestion of her longtime mentor Charles Lionel Regan of Boston College.