

Alessandra Petrina

### Some Dream-Related Images in *The Kingis Quair*

A repentant sinner prays that divine grace may give him a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness; a dove flies down from heaven and brings him words of comfort. A despairing lover falls asleep after bewailing the hopelessness of his amorous quest; reassuring signs come to him in a dream.

Passages such as these were familiar to the medieval reader and belonged to a common cultural background, though to different spheres of interest. The first has come to us through a whole tradition of visionary religious poetry, particularly relevant in fourteenth-century France, with Guillaume de Deguileville's three *Pèlerinages*. The second image constituted the starting point of a number of allegorical poems on courtly love, the most important undoubtedly being *Le Roman de la Rose*. Both were among the main literary clichés of the late Middle Ages, and both found illustrious representatives in the English literature of the fourteenth century, in the works of Chaucer, Lydgate and Langland. In the following century one poem brought these two topoi together.

*The Kingis Quair*, attributed to James I of Scotland,<sup>1</sup> was probably written in 1424,<sup>2</sup> the last year of the king's captivity in England. It reflects James's indebtedness to some of the English literary models mentioned above, as the story itself indicates -- though in this case the autobiographical theme lends the poem originality. It starts in fact with the narrator, who, unable to fall asleep, first turns to Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and then, inspired by what he has read, decides to narrate the story of his own life: his capture and his despair during the long years of imprisonment, until one morning in March he saw from the window of his cell a lady, 'the fairest or the freschest yong[e] floure' (277), and immediately fell in love with her. Yet he was aware of the fact that he had no hope of ever meeting her, and lamented his fate during another sleepless night. Suddenly a white light and a voice entered the prison, and he had a visionary experience. He was carried upwards, outside the prison, through the air, and into the House of Venus, where the goddess bade him be patient and hope. In order for his wish to be granted he needed to become a true servant of Love; and he was taught and helped by Minerva, thanks to whose advice he was able to descend to the lower regions of the sky and see Fortune with her wheel. Fortune granted his desire for

freedom and requited love, though her tone was mocking rather than reassuring, and she warned him that his lifetime had already run "ouer prime" (1195); in the end she woke him up by twitching his ear. Once awake, and once his doubts had finally been dispelled, he rejoiced. Now, having narrated his whole story, he prays for other lovers to reach the same happy state, and gives his thanks to all the actors of the story -- the goddesses, the castle wall, the month of March, the axle-tree and the wheel of Fortune. In the *envoy* he recommends the poem to Gower and Chaucer, and concludes with the same line with which he started.<sup>3</sup>

The passage we are concerned with occurs in stanzas 177-179 (lines 1233-1253), when the dreamer / lover / narrator, waking up from his vision, entertains doubts about its veracity, and is promptly reassured:

In hye<sup>4</sup> vnto the window gan I walk,  
Moving within my spirit of this sight,  
Quhare, sodeynly, a turtur quhite as calk<sup>5</sup>  
So evinly vpon my hand gan lyght,  
And vnto me sche turnyt hir full ryght,  
Of quham the chere in hir birdis aport,  
Gave me in hert kalendis of confort.

This fair bird ryght in hir bill gan hold  
Of red iorofflis with thair stalkis grene  
A fair[e] branche, quhare writtin was with gold  
On euery list,<sup>6</sup> with branchis bryght and schene,  
In compas fair, full plesandly to sene,  
A plane sentence, quhich as I can deuise  
And haue in mynd, said ryght on this wise:

*Awak, awake, I bring, lufar, I bring  
The newis glad that blisfull ben and sure  
Of thy confort. Now lauch and play and syng,  
That art besid so glad an auenture --  
For in the hevyn decretit is the cure.  
And vnto me the flouris fair present,  
With wyngis spred hir wayis furth sche went.*

Three elements are worth discussing here: the narrator's query about his dream, the apparition of the *turtur* or turtledove, and the presence and meaning of the *iorofflis*. I shall attempt to establish the literary precedents of the various components of this passage, and at the same time to illustrate those points where James departed from the tradition and created original images, or rather original combinations of time-honoured sets of images.

Let us start, then, from the moment the dreamer (whom we shall henceforward call James) wakes up from his dream. The vision itself, with its apparitions contradicting each other, has not been completely reassuring, and has confirmed James in his conviction that

with thy flesche ay waking art in trouble  
And sleping eke of pyne so has thou double. (1210-1211).

This on its own would be a sufficient cause of grief for a dreamer in his predicament; however, James goes one step further, and casts doubts on the nature of the dream *per se* -- an atypical thought, and possibly the first move away from the literary tradition, since in vision-poems the validity of a dream is usually taken for granted. Commenting on this passage, William Quinn notes how 'James's use of the fantastic never loses sight of psychological integrity'.<sup>7</sup> The observation is correct, but Quinn does not seem to grasp the full significance of the dreamer's doubts. It is not merely a wish to preserve intact the psychological realism of the character that causes the question; the hesitation springs from the dream itself, which is presumably one of those deficient or incomplete dreams Artemidorus refers to in his *Oneirocriticon* when he writes 'one must also show some degree of independent skill in judging dreams which are mutilated and which do not, as it were, give one anything to hold on to' (I, 11).<sup>8</sup> It is, in short, a vision needing not only explanation but completion on the part of the dreamer. We might thus see the subsequent arrival of the turtledove and its message as the the second half of the advice or prediction which does not come via the dream.

The trouble with this interpretation is that we know far too little about James's education and literary background to make assumptions of this kind and to credit him with a knowledge of Greek theories of dream-interpretations. It is safer to look instead at the more obvious sources for dream analysis; and the most obvious in the case of a medieval poet is Macrobius' commentary on Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*. Macrobius' text, written between the fourth and the fifth century and well-known throughout the Middle Ages, is an encyclopedic investigation into various branches of learning, including geography, geology and the history of civilization. But the part that is of interest to us comes at the beginning (I, 3), when Macrobius, before starting his commentary on the dream itself, deems it necessary to define and describe different categories of dreams:

All dreams may be classified under five main types: there is the enigmatic dream, in Greek *oneiros*, in Latin *somnium*; second, there is the prophetic vision, in Greek *horama*, in Latin *visio*; third, there is the oracular dream, in Greek *chrematismos*, in Latin *oraculum*; fourth, there is the nightmare, in Greek *enypnion*, in Latin *insomnium*; and last, the apparition, in Greek *phantasma*, which Cicero, when he has occasion to use the word, calls *visum*. The last two, the nightmare and the apparition, are not worth interpreting since they have no prophetic significance.<sup>9</sup>

Macrobius then goes on to explain in detail the various categories listed above; but what is important here is that he has established the possibility of false or worthless dreams. Needless to say, he does not explain how the dreamer can ascertain whether his/her dream belongs to one of the truthful categories or not, and neither does Artemidorus. Other texts of this kind appearing after Macrobius' commentary, such as the *Somniales*, which belong to a more specifically Christian context, deal only with the images within the vision and are often no more than catalogues of symbols.<sup>10</sup> They do not seem to concern themselves with the nature of the dream, apparently deferring to Macrobius'

authority, and would have been of little or no help in the kind of speculation raised by James.

The use of Macrobius as an authority on dreams in the poem we are dealing with is confirmed by the fact that when James expresses his doubts on the nature of his dream, he uses terms that are strongly reminiscent of the Macrobian distinction:

Is this of my forethoght impressioun,  
Or is it from the hevin a visioun? (1224-1225)

'Visioun' here is probably a translation of the Latin *visio*; but 'impressioun' is less easy to interpret. Of the two most recent editors of the poem, John Norton-Smith and Matthew McDiarmid, the latter ignores the problem altogether, while the former gives the rather inadequate translation 'fanciful power'.<sup>11</sup> Yet 'impressioun' might acquire more significance if we linked it to a word used in the previous stanza, 'sueu[en]yng'. In the Proem to Book 1 of *The House of Fame* (line 9), Chaucer uses 'sweven' in a list that includes 'avision', 'revelacion', 'drem', 'fantome' and 'oracles'. We may infer that he is translating Macrobius' five-fold division into Middle English vocabulary, in which case 'sweven' would correspond to *insomnium*.<sup>12</sup> In James's case 'sueu[en]yng' is used in a more generic context; but as a reader of Chaucer he certainly had this meaning in mind and probably transferred it on the word 'impressioun', ten lines below. If this is true, then the qualifying word 'forethoght', in the sense of 'act of thinking about something beforehand',<sup>13</sup> might remind us of the Macrobian definition of *insomnium* as the repetition of cares or preoccupations which we experienced when we were awake.<sup>14</sup>

Once again, we do not have enough biographical data to establish whether or not James had a first-hand knowledge of Macrobius' commentary; but, as we have seen, Chaucer's *House of Fame* would have been an excellent intermediary source. What is interesting here, however, is the wholly creative use James makes of this well-established tradition. He does not content himself with repeating the division of dreams into categories -- he puts this division into active use, transforming it into a dramatic moment of the story. In her *The Realism of Dream Visions*, Constance B. Hieatt notes how fifteenth-century poets of the Chaucerian school, such as Robert Henryson, tend to 'turn the conventions and patterns of the medieval dream vision to quite new uses'.<sup>15</sup> Apparently James went further, developing not only the internal patterns of the dream but the structure itself, and making this development an integral part of the psychological portrait of the dreamer. The novelty is highlighted by a rhetorical device typical of his style: following the type of learned reference we have just examined by more commonplace phrases, which indicate his emotional state. Thus our dreamer, waking and realizing that his spirit or 'besy goste' has been wandering, in Neoplatonic fashion, away from his body, in search of its 'first and verray proper nest' (1208), and

getting entangled in dreams of suspicious origin, disconsolately concludes that now: 'By twenty fold it was in trouble more' (1215).

If we turn to the appearance of the turtledove, we find that the field of investigation can be considerably narrowed. Although birds which wake or greet dreamers are fairly common in medieval literature,<sup>16</sup> turtledoves are comparatively rare, and this one behaves in a rather extraordinary manner. McDiarmid was probably the first to notice the resemblance between this image and an analogous one in John Lydgate's translation of the second version of Guillaume de Deguileville's *Pèlerinage de la Vie Humaine*.<sup>17</sup> The context is very different: the *Pèlerinage* is a long, rambling and (at least in the second version) tedious allegorical poem written by a Cistercian monk of the early fourteenth century, heavily laden with religious symbolism; and it does not gain much, apart from extra-length, from Lydgate's translation. However, the image McDiarmid refers to does present striking analogies with the one we are examining. It occurs when the pilgrim who is the hero of the story, having been tempted by Satan to swim in the sea and being cast up on Fortune's wheel, finds himself in peril of losing his life and invokes the help of Grace Dieu:

And whyl I lay thus compleynynge,  
 And knewh non helpē nor respyt,  
 A-noon ther kam A dowē whyht  
 Towardys me, by goddys wylle,  
 And brouhtē me a lytel bylle,  
 And undyde yt in my syht;  
 And affter that she took hyr flyht,  
 And, fro me gan passe away.  
 (19,726-32)

Stylistic considerations apart, it is easy to see why James should have been struck by this image and have decided to transpose it, with adequate modifications, into his own poem. One of the problems we are faced with at this point is that accepting Lydgate's influence in this passage would imply a later date for *The Kingis Quair*, since Lydgate began the translation in 1426, while he was in France, and brought it to completion only in 1428.<sup>18</sup> Yet there is no need to adjust the traditionally accepted dating of the poem, if we suppose that James derived his inspiration not from Lydgate but from the French original. Deguileville's poem was extremely popular throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth century in Europe. Its first version had been translated into prose more than once;<sup>19</sup> and Chaucer had translated one particularly famous passage from the second version, the 'ABC' prayer to the Virgin, which, incidentally, comes right after the apparition of the dove and constitutes part of the message she is carrying. This is the section corresponding to the Lydgate translation quoted above:

En mon meschef ainsi plaignant  
 Ravoler vy le coulon blanc  
 Qui ung escripteau mapporta

Et puis tantost sen revola  
 Je le desploiy et ouvry  
 Et quant fut ouvert tantost vy  
 Comment grace dieu me mandoit  
 Et bien a certes conseilloit  
 Que lescrip ie disse humblement  
 En saluant deuotement  
 Marie royne de paradis.<sup>20</sup>

Since the French original and Lydgate's translation are almost identical, it is reasonable to assume that Deguileville's text was equally likely to have been James's source. Moreover, an interesting point can be established if we concentrate our attention on the dove. In the first version, Deguileville had used a less poetically rewarding image -- a cloud briefly had stopped over the pilgrim's head and uttered the divine message (10,753-72); then from the same cloud a hand had given back to the pilgrim the holy staff of which he had previously been deprived (10,785-91) and an *escrit* with a prayer (10,875-76). This awkward contrivance was retained in the prose translations previous to Lydgate's. Deguileville himself modified and improved the image in the second version by introducing something akin to the numerous scriptural *columbae*, such as the one descending over Christ on the occasion of his baptism (Matthew 3:16). But the French *coulon* is slightly more generic than 'dove', referring as it does to turtledoves and pigeons as well. There is no doubt that in this particular context *coulon* means 'dove', with all its biblical connotations; yet we might be justified in thinking that James, meeting this more generic word, had decided to transfer it into his poem not as the traditional dove, but as a bird with different and subtler literary implications.

The turtledove (*turtur*), though little known in medieval England from a zoological point of view,<sup>21</sup> had a precise symbolic significance, linked to the common belief that it only ever had one mate; if this mate died, the turtledove would not choose another, and out of grief it would refuse to sit on anything green.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, it was most frequently used as a symbol of faithfulness and marital love, thus maintaining a partial connection with the religious connotations associated with the dove. In choosing this bird to conclude the dreamer's visionary experience, the poet achieves a double effect: he transfers the apparition from the context of a traditional religious allegory to the atmosphere of courtly love poetry; and he creates an internal symmetry in the poem: shortly before the apparition of the lady, in fact, the theme of courtly love had been introduced by a nightingale, whose song is later answered by the turtledove's in an extremely elegant pattern of echoes:

*Worschippe, ye that loueis bene, this May,  
 For of your blisse the kalendis ar begonne,  
 And sing with vs, 'away, winter, away!  
 Cum somer, cum, the suete sesoun and sonne!'  
 Awake for schame! that haue your hevynnis<sup>23</sup> wonne,  
 And amorously lift vp your hedis all:  
 Thank Lufe that list you to his merci call.<sup>24</sup>*

This corresponds to the more general symmetry of *The Kingis Quair* and makes evident the structural strength of a poem that at a first reading, especially because of its autobiographical content, might seem extremely loose, if not, as was suggested by earlier editors, fragmented.

It remains now to deal with the *red iorofflis* brought by the turtledove and bearing a golden inscription on their edges. They are gillyflowers or clove-scented pink flowers, traditionally associated with lovers, as in Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* (April, lines 136-39), and already present in French poetry of courtly love.<sup>25</sup> Once again, we occasionally find flowers presented as a message from heaven, or from the gods of Love, in the authors usually considered among James's literary sources -- in Lydgate's *Temple of Glas*, for instance, Venus throws into the lady's lap a branch of white and green hawthorn (503). Moreover, the choice of the gillyflowers is justified both by the fact that the action takes place in the month of March (when these flowers blossom), and by their vivid colour, contrasting with the bird 'quhite as calk' and with the gold of the inscription. This is not an image which was taken from Deguileville's text, although the apparent resemblance confused an otherwise brilliant editor like McDiarmid, who reads the passage as follows: 'the bird bears an illuminated scroll having a fair pattern of gillyflowers' (p. 138).

McDiarmid's mistake is revealing, as we realize if we take one step back from the passage we have been examining and see what the resulting image is. In James's literary models, as we have shown, there were voices coming from the clouds, birds singing messages to dreamers, scrolls handed down from the sky, goddesses distributing flowers, or flower-patterns in gardens for dreamers to interpret. It would seem here as if James were trying to have all these things at the same time: the semi-celestial apparition, the words set in a song and the symbol-laden, colourful flowers with the words written on their edges. By bringing all these images together, James not only creates an excessively contrived representation, he also deprives the single elements of their meaning, thus making the passage distinctly obscure. It is not clear, for instance, who the 'I' of the song is -- the bird, or the song itself, or some kind of divine superintendent of the whole apparition.

Commenting on this passage, A.C. Spearing pointed to the 'unchaucerian certainty' of the gillyflowers,<sup>26</sup> which clears away the last shadow of a doubt the dreamer might have had about his vision. It would seem, in fact, that James is least Chaucerian precisely when the images he uses are most clearly taken from fourteenth-century poetry. In his modification and adaptation of symbols borrowed from a previous literary tradition we can possibly recognize the same pattern of development we had begun to glimpse in the previous sections, that is, maintaining individual

symbols and images intact while radically subverting the structure of thought from which they have originated. This is an indication of James's originality, if not excellence, as a poet. It is also a minor but significant instance of the evolution that takes place in late medieval poetry when 'the dream experience lost its mythical-magical significance to become ... a useful literary device',<sup>27</sup> and, as we have seen in this case, was sometimes manipulated almost beyond recognition.

*The Kingis Quair* was scarcely known, if indeed it was known at all, until the end of the eighteenth century; so, it is highly improbable that it had any imitators. The image whose family tree we have been attempting to trace did not undergo any further transformation.<sup>28</sup> Yet, it still has value for the literary critic as an instance of the development, florid high point and ultimate decay of a genre -- as well as affording the reader a moment of subtle charm in an undeservedly neglected poem.

---

<sup>1</sup>Born at Dunfermline in 1394, he was the youngest son and sole surviving heir of Robert III. In 1406, while sailing to France where he was to complete his education, he was captured by the English and sent as a prisoner to Henry IV at Westminster. In spite of repeated negotiations for his release, he spent the following eighteen years at the English court. In the last year of his imprisonment (1424) he married Joan Beaufort, to whom in all probability *The Kingis Quair* refers. Between February and March 1424 James and his wife went back to Scotland, where they reigned for thirteen years. In February 1437 James was murdered by a conspiracy of thanes. Joan died in 1445. The authorship of *The Kingis Quair* has been a subject of intense controversy, but the most recent editions of the poem (John Norton-Smith, 1971; Matthew McDiarmid, 1973) are unanimous in attributing the poem to James, and I see no reason to disagree with them. For further details of James's biography see John Norton-Smith, ed., *The Kingis Quair*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971, pp.xxi-xxv. I have followed Norton-Smith's edition when quoting from the poem.

<sup>2</sup>But in his edition of *The Kingis Quair*, Matthew McDiarmid argues for a later date of composition, around 1435: see Matthew P. McDiarmid, ed., *The Kingis Quair of James Stewart*, London: Heinemann, 1973, pp. 28-40.

<sup>3</sup>'Hich in the hevynnis figure circulere', line 1372.

<sup>4</sup>hye] haste

<sup>5</sup>quhite as calk] white as chalk

<sup>6</sup>list] edge

<sup>7</sup>William Quinn, 'Memory and the Matrix of Unity in *The Kingis Quair*', *The Chaucer Review* 15 (1981), p. 348.

<sup>8</sup>Artemidorus, *The Interpretation of Dreams: Oneirocritica*, transl. Robert J. White, Park Ridge, NJ: Noyes Press, 1975, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup>Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, transl. William Harris Stahl, New York: Columbia University Press, 1952, p. 87-88.



---

<sup>10</sup>One typical example is the *Somniale Danielis*, ed. Lawrence T. Martin, Frankfurt: Verlag Peter D. Lang, 1981. See also Stephen Roger Fischer, 'Dreambooks and the Interpretation of Medieval Literary dreams', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 65 (1983): 1-20, and Steven F. Kruger, *Dreaming in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

<sup>11</sup>John Norton-Smith, ed., *James I of Scotland. The Kingis Quair*, p. 88.

<sup>12</sup>A view maintained also by C.S. Lewis. See *The Discarded Image*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964, p. 64.

<sup>13</sup>John Norton-Smith, ed., *James I of Scotland. The Kingis Quair*, p. 86.

<sup>14</sup>Macrobius, p. 46. In Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* (99-100) we find 'The wery hunttere, slepyng in his bed, To wode ayeyn his mynde goth anon'.

<sup>15</sup>Constance B. Heatt, *The Realism of Dream Visions*, The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1967, p. 109.

<sup>16</sup>Some instances are: William Dunbar's 'The Goldin Targe' and 'The Thrissill and the Rois', in James Kinsley, ed. *The Poems of William Dunbar*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, pp. 29-38, 141-146; and Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 383-394, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

<sup>17</sup>Deguileville, Guillaume de, *The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, transl. John Lydgate, EETS, London: Kegan Paul, 1901, pp. 526-527. The original text has come to us in two redactions: the first one is dated 1331 and was edited at the end of the last century (*Le Pèlerinage de la Vie Humaine*, ed. J.J. Stürzinger, The Roxburghe Club, London: Nichols and Sons, 1893), while the second version exists only in manuscript form and in a sixteenth-century edition (*Le Pèlerinage de L'homme nouvellement imprime a Paris*, Paris: Anthoine Verard, 1511). See Matthew P. McDiarmid, ed., *The Kingis Quair of James Stewart*, London: Heinemann, 1973, p. 138.

<sup>18</sup>See Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970, p.173. This is in fact one of the reasons why McDiarmid believes the date of the poem to be nearer to 1435 than 1424.

<sup>19</sup>See Rosemond Tuve, *Allegorical Imagery*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966, p.146, and Katharine B. Locock, ed., *The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man, Englished by John Lydgate*, EETS, London: Kegan Paul, 1904, p. xiii.

<sup>20</sup>Verard edition, *feuillet* 78. 'And complaining thus in my mishap I saw a white flying dove who brought me a scroll and then immediately flew away. I unfolded and opened it, and when it was opened I saw at once that Grace Dieu had sent it to me, well advising me humbly to say the words of the scrolls, devoutly saluting Mary Queen of Heaven'.

<sup>21</sup>In their study on medieval English bestiaries, W. George and B. Yapp have shown that in the manuscript tradition 'none of the pictures show a recognisable turtle dove, and some simply repeat the picture of *columba*'. See Wilma George and Brunsdon Yapp, *The Naming of the Beasts*, London: Duckworth, 1991, p. 162.

---

<sup>22</sup>Florence McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1960, p. 178.

<sup>23</sup>hevynnis] blissful mates

<sup>24</sup>Stanza 34. Note the repetition of the word 'kalendis', as well as the echoing of 'away' and 'awake'. On this point see Quinn, p. 348, and Carl E. Bain, 'The Nightingale and the Dove in *The Kingis Quair*', *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 9 (1964), p. 21. Bain sees the nightingale and the dove as symbolizing respectively courtly love and divine (or marital) love -- an interpretation which rests on the assumption that the lady referred to in the poem is actually Joan Beaufort, whom James married at the end of his imprisonment.

<sup>25</sup>Chaucer translates as 'clowe-gelofre' the French *clos de girofle*. See *Le Roman de la Rose*, 1340, and *The Romaunt of the Rose*, 1368.

<sup>26</sup>A.C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976, p. 182.

<sup>27</sup>Stephen Roger Fischer, 'Dreambooks and the Interpretation of Medieval Literary Dreams', *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 65 (1983), p. 19.

<sup>28</sup>But we do read in Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* that at one of the climactic point of the story 'anone there cam in a dove at a wyndow, and in her mowthe there semed a lytyll senser of golde' (XI, 2).