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## A Birthday Poem for Christ

Adam King (c. 1560–1620),  
*Genethliacon Iesu Christi* (c. 1586)

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### Introduction

The *Genethliacon Iesu Christi* (or ‘*Poem on the Day of Christ’s Birth*’; henceforth abbreviated to *GIC*) is the first part of a three-poem cycle on the life of Christ that deals with his life, passion and resurrection. It was written by Adam King (born c. 1560; died 10 August 1620), the son of an Edinburgh lawyer. From 1580 until 1595 King had a distinguished academic career at the University of Paris, where he was professor of mathematics and philosophy at the Collège de Lisieux, Procurator of the German Nation (twice) and leading candidate for Rector of the whole university (1589).

Two variants of *GIC* are extant, neither of which provides a date for its composition. A printed version was produced in 1637 as part of the Neo-Latin anthology *Delitiae Poetarum Scotorum*. The other copy is in a manuscript that contains Adam King’s entire poetic corpus (University of Edinburgh Centre for Research Collections: shelfmark Dk.7.29). It was owned by William King, Adam’s nephew, a regent/lecturer at the University of Edinburgh. Bound in with King’s poetic corpus is a large cosmological commentary on George Buchanan’s poem *De sphaera* (see Text 3), written by King after his return to Scotland from France in 1595. It sets out in detail the content and outline of his intellectual and pedagogical approach to the science and philosophies of Nicolaus Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, Christoph Clavius, Johannes Kepler and Galileo Galilei, among many others.

This commentary was taught to and memorized by generations of students at the University of Edinburgh. King’s commentary is thus significant for our understanding of the development of modern science and philosophy in Scotland. As a commentary on poetry, it also provides evidence of the

important role poetry played in approaches to the new sciences within formal education in Edinburgh in the period immediately before the city and its university became one of the centres of the Enlightenment in Europe.

The evidence from the dateable poems contained in the manuscript suggests chronological arrangement and a date for the *GIC* of the mid-1580s. Internal evidence from the poem also strongly suggests this timeframe. The opening of the *GIC* contained in this edition addresses two topics that were particularly pressing at this time in Scotland and Europe: the Reformation and the new sciences. The religious context is apparent in King's manipulation of one of his primary literary inspirations: the *De sphaera* of the Scottish educationalist and writer George Buchanan (see Text 3). Throughout the opening section King recalibrates Buchanan's text to emphasize the specifically Christian and Catholic nature of the god who created the universe (lines 7–10), and to encourage the reader to venerate this god in the time-honoured fashion, on formalized and sanctified feast days (lines 5–6). From 1583 onwards, Calvinists in Scotland were actively trying to ban the observance of Christmas (especially) and other 'papist' festivals. In the period between 1584 and 1588 King produced some vernacular work (catechismal and calendrical) dealing with the observance of the sacraments and holy days; *GIC* should be viewed as part of his Counter-Reformation activities.

The second topic addressed in *GIC* is that of the new sciences of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. We have few details of what King taught while in Paris for over a decade. The circumstantial evidence suggests that the scepticism and anti-authority approaches of sixteenth-century Parisian intellectual culture would have been part of it. Petrus Ramus, the educational reformer, was one of the most active anti-Aristotelians in Paris, and he advocated the use of Copernicus in schools to undermine the authority of Aristotle, even while retaining a sceptical view of Copernicus. Despite Ramus' fame as a Protestant martyr, King, a professed Catholic, described himself as a 'Ramist' professor of mathematics, aligning his scientific and philosophical approach to that of Ramus. The Collège de Lisieux, King's place of work, was the first college in Paris to teach Ptolemy and Copernicus side by side. However, rejection of authority was not confined to the Ramists at this time in Paris, as a more pointed and comprehensive sceptical approach was practised by the so-called Pyrrhonists (named after a work by Sextus Empiricus, whose texts were keenly read by Parisian sceptics, including King). *GIC* shows that King had begun to accept at an early stage some of the new ideas and approaches, such as the rejection of Aristotelian cosmology and celestial spheres (lines 11–13) and scepticism towards the doctrine of terrestrial immovability (lines 45–50), which he

would later set down in more detail in his commentary, especially in relation to the observations of Tycho Brahe, Christoph Clavius and William Gilbert.

Metre: dactylic hexameter

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## Source of the Latin text

The text of *GIC* given here is a reproduction of the text in the Edinburgh manuscript (University of Edinburgh Centre for Research Collections: shelfmark Dk.7.29).

## Latin text

*Adami Regii Genethliacon Iesu Christi*

- Eia age qui puros caeli revolubilis ignes  
 aspicias immenso diffundere lumina mundo,  
 partiri que vices rerum: iam lucida certus  
 sidera moliri nutu, terrasque iacentes
- 5 munificum curare deum: lux ista quotannis  
 dum recolit pura natum de virgine numen;  
 agnoscas quibus officii, quantoque favore,  
 humano indulsit generi Deus ille salutem:  
 quaque tuos largus dextra providit in usus
- 10 omnia quae fecit: nitidi tibi flammea caeli  
 moenia, et immensi radiatos aetheris orbes  
 immunes senii, cursusque tenore sub uno  
 aeternos, certis accendere legibus ignes  
 iussit, perque vices caeca ferrugine vultus
- 15 induere, obductaque tegi telluris ab umbra.  
 Ille tibi propriis genitalia semina rerum  
 disposuit foecunda locis: sine pondere flammis  
 ire sub astra dedit: niveo quas aurea phoebe  
 ambiret complexa sinu, celerique per orbem
- 20 raptaret gyro: tenuous his aeris auras  
 supposuit; medii que leves per inania mundi  
 explicuit: vasto demum stagnata profundo  
 aequora, quae solidam sinuato gurgite terram  
 alluerent; iam prona sua gravitate deorsum
- 25 impulerat: terraeque parem glomerasset in orbem;  
 humanae nisi gentis amor, iussisset in altum  
 tollere se clivos; summorumque ardua montum  
 praerupto late latera exhorrescere dorso:  
 submissasque premi valles, stagnare lacunis
- 30 Nerea, praescriptis et plangere littora metis.  
 Tunc et iussa suo tellus proferre colono  
 munera: ut humanus quaecunque exposceret usus,  
 divite proventu, et magno cum foenore rerum  
 sufficeret: sobolemque aeterna lege propaget.

## English translation

Come now, you who see that the uncorrupted fires of the turning heavens  
 spread out their light through the vast universe, and that they apportion  
 changes across the world: now you see clearly that a generous god controls  
 the bright stars by his will, and that he manages the lands below. And when 5  
 that annual day brings again to our mind the divinity born of a pure virgin,  
 may you acknowledge with what duty and how much good-will *that* God  
 granted salvation to the human race, and with what a hand he generously  
 gave for your employment all that he made. He ordered that fires light up in 10  
 fixed laws the fiery walls of glittering heaven for you, and the radiant globes  
 of the vast firmament, which are immune to decay, and their eternal courses  
 under his control alone; and by turns that they cover their faces in the 15  
 sightless dark and lie hidden from the enveloping shadow of the earth. For  
 you he has distributed the fertile life-giving seeds of the universe in their  
 most fitting places: he made the flames without weight travel beneath the  
 stars, for golden Phoebe to envelop them after clasping them to her snowy 20  
 bosom, and to seize them in a swift orbit around her globe. And he set thin  
 breezes of air under these, and he spread out the light air through the empty  
 space of the middle zone of the world; then the seas flowed out from the vast  
 depths, to lap upon the solid earth in billowing torrent, after he had struck 25  
 them downwards with their own sinking force: and he would have gathered  
 them into a sphere covering the earth, if his love for the human race had not  
 demanded that the hills rise up towards the heights, and the steep sides of the  
 highest mountains menace far and wide with their overhanging ridge, that  
 the low-lying valleys sink down, that the sea be checked by chasms, and that 30  
 it strike the shores in predetermined boundaries.

Then the earth too was ordered to furnish gifts for its own inhabitants, so  
 that human employment might seek out everything, and to supply them with  
 its rich produce and the great profit of its materials, and by eternal law

- 35 Nec minus ambitas circum amplectentia terras  
aequora squammigeras per regna liquentia gentes  
didere iussa; suas nunc se cumulante profundo  
paulatim viduis undas subducere arenis:  
nunc laxo diffusa sinu, lateque refractis
- 40 obiicibus vasto sua littora plangere fluctu:  
dum nova pallentes sine lumine Delia vultus  
induit; aut tenui fingit sibi cornua flamma,  
atque iterum in plenum consumptis cornibus orbem,  
candenti tacitas despectat imagine terras:
- 45 iussaque phoebaeis facibus glomerata sub auras  
nubila, nunc sylvis lapidosa grandine frondes  
decutere; atque altos niveo sub vellere montes  
sternere; nunc pluviis sitientes imbribus agros,  
squalentesque situ tristi, siccumque fluentes
- 50 in cinerem vincire; levi que aspergere rore.  
Unde Ceres nostros sese genialis ad usus  
induat in florem; et gravibus flavescat aristis:  
unde tepescentes assurgat odora sub auras  
herba; nemus viridi pubescat fronde; racemis
- 55 luxuriet tumidis vitis foecunda: pecusque  
tondeat herbosi pratis nova gramina foeni.

produce offspring. Moreover, the seas, which embrace all around the 35  
surrounded land, were ordered to distribute the scaly race throughout their  
watery kingdoms, and now, with their deep piled up upon itself, to withdraw  
their waves little by little from the empty sands, and now, spread out along the  
wide bay, and with sea walls smashed far and wide, to strike their own shores 40  
with mighty wave, as the new Moon dons a waning front without light, or  
fashions crescent horns for herself with a slender flame; and with her crescent  
again having given way to a full globe, she looks down upon the silent earth  
with a shining appearance. And the clouds, gathered together in the 45  
atmosphere by Phoebus' flames, were now ordered to strike down upon the  
foliage of the forests with hailstones, and to cover the high mountains beneath  
a snowy fleece, then also to shower with their light moisture the fields  
thirsting for a rainy downpour, and to surround and care for those fields that  
lie untilled in sad neglect, and flow away into dry ashes. Through this process, 50  
may fertile Ceres cover herself in flower for our enjoyment, and may she turn  
yellow with plump ears of corn; and through this process, may fragrant grass  
rise up under the warming atmosphere, may the forest be covered with green  
leaves, may the fruitful vine abound in swollen grapes, and may the cattle 55  
pluck fresh grass from the meadows of a grassy hayfield.



## Commentary

1–2 These two opening lines are closely related to lines 9–10 and provide a frame to a 10-line poetic exordium, setting out the poem's philosophical intention: a vision of the universe as evidence of God's design. King's chief literary and intellectual inspiration for this 'frame' is Manilius, *Astronomica* 2.23–4: *omniaque immenso volitantia lumina mundo, | pacis opus, magnos naturae condit in usus* ('and all the lights flying across the immense universe, a structure of harmony, he created for nature's great uses'). For King, the changes described in line 2 are cosmic and terrestrial variation, from the seasonal on earth (cycles of weather and life and birth) to material degradation and mutation more generally. See also the notes to the opening lines of Buchanan, *De sphaera* (Text 3).

3 *certus*: subject continued from previous clause.

5–10 *dum recolit . . . agnoscas . . . in usus*: King appropriates the structure and terminology from the introduction to Buchanan, *De sphaera* 1.8–15 (*dum . . . reseramus . . . agnoscat . . . ad usus*), which itself is indebted to Manilius, *Astronomica* 2.23–4 (especially *De sphaera* 1.9 and 1.15). For a detailed discussion of the textual and philosophical interplay between King, Manilius and Buchanan, see McOmish: forthcoming.

6 *pura natum de virgine numen*: This line and the following description of the sacrifice of the divinity in lines 7–8 represent a recognizable departure from the literary and intellectual influence of Buchanan and Manilius. The language here is liturgical, closely following the Eucharistic hymn 'Ave Verum Corpus' (*Ave verum corpus, natum de Maria virgine*). During the same period in which King composed this poem, he also made a Scots translation of Peter Canusius' Catholic Catechism in 1588. Fifteen pages of King's edition were used to assert the specific theological and ceremonial importance of the Eucharist and the observance of the feast day of the birth of Christ (Christmas), which Calvinists in Scotland were actively seeking to ban at this time: McOmish: forthcoming.

8 *humano indulsit generi Deus ille salutem*: It is no oversight or mistake that the King manuscript (and not the 1637 edition) moves from the lower case of god (*deum*) at line 5 to the upper-case God (*Deus*) here. Line 5 is directing the reader to the conclusion that, upon looking at the universe, one must conclude (*pace* Lucretius, *De rerum natura* 1.1021; 5.419) that *some* god is responsible for it. Here, King is fine-tuning Ovid's conclusion that some god is responsible for it: *quisquis fuit ille deorum* ('whichever of the gods it was': Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.33). However, he is also engaging with Buchanan, *De*

*sphaera* 1.70–1: *Scilicet humano generi pater optimus olim | prospiciens ...* ('Clearly the greatest parent, in his care for the human race ...'). King is subsuming Ovid's and Buchanan's generic god and his activities into a specific definition and promotion of *the* Christian God.

10–11 *nitidi tibi flammae caeli | moenia*: cf. Lucretius 1.73 (and by extension 5.450). However, as in his use of Manilius above (1–2; 9–10), King is moving between Buchanan's text and what King sees to be Buchanan's own sources: firstly, Buchanan's full appropriation of Lucretius at *De sphaera* 1.11 and 1.74 (*flammanitia moenia mundi*, 'the flaming walls of the universe'), and secondly line 1.40 (*nitidi sublimis regia caeli*, 'the sublime palace of bright heaven').

11–13 These lines, which are otherwise a fairly close paraphrase of Buchanan, *De sphaera* 1.40–2, highlight again (see 6 n.) how King uses Buchanan's text to articulate a markedly divergent philosophical position. King has changed the incorruptibility (*immunis senii*) of the heavens (*regia*) found in Buchanan, which is Buchanan's rejection of the confluence of terrestrial and celestial elements (*pace* Lucretius 5.490–4). Instead, King presents the incorruptibility (*immunes senii*) as an aspect of the matter of individual celestial bodies, in this case the Sun and Moon in the firmament (*radiatos ... orbes* – language Buchanan uses for planetary bodies at *De sphaera* 1.33). A very important change, which highlights how early Adam King had begun to accept one of the central ideas of the new sciences: the corruptibility of the heavens above the moon – no change could happen in the traditional cosmological models of Aristotle and Ptolemy. The findings of Christoph Clavius and Tycho Brahe, published independently of each other, on the comets that appeared in the sky in 1572 and 1577 led to King's rejection of Aristotle and Ptolemy (see Lattis 1994: 147–50). King explicitly cites the data of Brahe and Clavius in his prose commentary of the early seventeenth century, when explaining his decision to reject the unchanging and solid celestial spheres (King MS, fols 39<sup>v</sup>–40<sup>r</sup>). See McOmish 2018 and forthcoming.

14–15 ... *ferrugine vultus | induere, obductaque tegi telluris ab umbra*: see Buchanan, *De sphaera* 1.112–13: *ferrugine vultus | induit, oppositae in medio telluris ab umbra* ('[the moon] bears a face of red-hue from the shadow of the earth that sits between sun and moon'). King's version emphasizes the subjection of eclipses to divine law, while in Buchanan the emphasis is on the curvature of the shadow of the earth as proof of its sphericity. See Naiden 1952: 96.

16–17 *genitalia semina rerum | disposuit foecunda locis*: King uses the terminology of Buchanan, *Psalms* 104.30–1: *foecundaque rerum | semina* ('the fertile seeds of the universe'; King reuses this passage from *Psalms* 104

again at lines 50–1). Both *Psalms* 104.30–1 and *De sphaera* 1.49 are Buchanan's own refashioning of Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.419, and knowing rejection of Lucretius 1.58–9 via Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.239, respectively. The *semina rerum* of both Buchanan and Ovid reflect the Stoic reworking of Lucretius' Epicurean atoms (*semina rerum*) into the four elements of fire, air, water and earth. Interestingly, King here (and indeed throughout his poetry) never explicitly states that there are four elements, as Buchanan does (*quattuor . . . genitalia corpora*, 'the four generative bodies': *De sphaera* 1.49), even though, as here, he speaks of fire, air, water and earth as key generative bodies. King's reticence may be due to his intimate familiarity with the work of the many early modern intellectuals who were sceptical about the doctrine of the four elements as traditionally conceived, especially Tycho Brahe, Girolamo Cardano, Johannes Pena, Christoph Rothmann and Johannes Kepler (King MS, fol. 4<sup>r</sup>).

*propriis . . . | disposuit . . . locis*: Compare Buchanan, *De sphaera* 1.53: *disposuere locis* ('[lightness and heaviness] put [the four elements] in their proper places'). The emphasis in King's text is upon the loving Christian God providentially placing the generative seeds in their places; in Buchanan, the physical mechanics play a more prominent role.

17–25 These lines present a particularly concentrated example of Adam King's awareness of Buchanan's literary and philosophical inspiration. King's primary point of reference is Buchanan, *De sphaera* 1.49–69. However, the content, form and structure of Buchanan's text is found in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.26–35 and 15.239–51, and Manilius, *Astronomica* 1.149–70 (cf. Buchanan, *De sphaera* 1.51, and Manilius, *Astronomica* 1.149). King includes two knowing references to the Ovid and Manilius passages, at lines 20–1 and 24–5. Firstly, 20–1, *tenues his aeris auras | supposuit; medii que leves per inania mundi*, references Manilius, *Astronomica* 1.152–3: *in tenuis descendit spiritus auras | aeraque extendit medium per inania mundi* ('air became thin breezes and spread out through the empty space of the middle zone of the world'); and 24–5 reimagines *De sphaera* 1.54–5 with specific diction from Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.30–1.

17 King's treatment of comets, his *sine pondere flammis* at the end of this line, represents another subtle deviation from Buchanan's natural philosophy. Buchanan, *De sphaera* 1.48–51 is King's point of reference, where Buchanan explicitly places the light flames (comets) in the sublunary universe (see 11–13 n.). Although King subjects the comets to the moon's general sphere of influence (necessary for a pre-Newtonian physical explanation of impetus to

motion), they are not explicitly sublunar; their only stated area of activity is beneath the stars (*sub astra*).

26–9 *humanae nisi gentis amor, iussisset in altum | tollere se clivos; summorumque ardua montum | praerupto late latera exhorrescere dorso: | submittasque premi valles*: King's text closely follows Buchanan, *De sphaera* 1.66–9: *nisi cura Dei se attollere montes | iussisset, vallesque premi ...* ('had not the love of God ordered that the mountains rise, and the valleys sink down ...'). Buchanan's own text is a condensed, streamlined presentation of providential intervention found in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.33–48.

30 *Nerea*: third declension Greek accusative form of Nereus, sea god, here used as metonymy for the sea.

*praescriptis et plangere littora metis*: King shows his awareness that Buchanan, *De sphaera* 1.66–9, is not the first time Buchanan has reworked Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.33–48. King takes this line from Buchanan, *Psalms* 104.20–1: *limitibus compressa suis resonantia plangit | littora, praescriptas metuens transcendere metas* ('contained within their boundaries, [the waters] struck the resounding shores, fearing to go beyond their prescribed limits').

31–9 Following on from the switch from cosmological to religious poetry in line 30, King's poetic point of reference now firmly moves to Buchanan's *Psalms*. These lines are a close paraphrase (and, at times, literal appropriation) of Buchanan, *Psalms* 104.56–61: *Nec tantum tellus, genitor, tua munera sentit, | tam variis fecunda bonis, sed et aequora ponti | fluctibus immensas circumplectentia terras, | tam laxo spatiosa sinu. Tot milia gentis | squamigerae tremula per stagna liquentia cauda | exsultant ...* ('And not only does the earth, father, so fertile with a diversity of good things, receive your gifts, but also the waters of the sea, extending vast with broad embrace, that encircle immense swathes of earth with their waves. So many thousand members of the scaly tribe with quivering tails rejoice in the clear seas ...', trans. R. P. H. Green 2011).

41–4 Paraphrase of Buchanan, *Psalms* 104.43–7, in which Buchanan articulates the phases of the moon. Although King re-employs some of Buchanan's diction (e.g. *tacitas ... terras*), his description of the phases is more detailed (new moon) and defined (waxing to full) than Buchanan's.

41 *Delia* is Diana, the virgin huntress and moon-goddess, who was said to have been born with her brother Apollo on the island of Delos (hence 'Delian'). She is here presented metonymically as the Moon.

45–50 King takes his core poetic inspiration from Buchanan, *De sphaera* 1.297–9: *Nube polus densa latet obrutus, humida molles | vis abit in pluvias,*

*aut grandine ruris honorem | decutit, aut operit, niveo ceu vellere montes* ('The heavens lie hidden, obscured by thick cloud, whose watery force falls down in gentle rain, or strikes down in hail upon the beauty of the countryside, or conceals the mountains, as if under a snowy fleece'). King refashions these lines to present the reader with a picture of the phases of the water cycle, which eshews the core intellectual point of Buchanan's text – terrestrial immovability (*pace* Copernicus and others).

52 Another interesting example of King moving between Buchanan and his sources. Here King takes the language and image directly from Buchanan, *De sphaera* 3.518. However, King was aware of Buchanan's own source for the phrase and faithfully reproduces Virgil, *Eclogues* 4.28, in his supplement to Buchanan, *De sphaera: Supplementum Sphaerae Buchanani* 4.566.

55–6 Proleptical use of *foeni* ('hay'), denoting the intended use of the field for hay production, but rendered with the seemingly paradoxical adjective *herbosi* ('grassy', 'still-green') to emphasize the freshness of the still-living pasture. The apparent incongruity of *herbosi . . . foeni* perhaps contributed to the decision of the editor of the *Delitiae Poetarum Scotorum* to replace *herbosi* with *auricomi* ('golden-haired') in that edition (vol. 2, p. 202); *herbosis* would have been an easier change.