

## “JOHN TAMSON’S MAN.”

To The King,  
That he war Johne Thomsounis man.

Schir, for your Grace bayth nicht and day,  
Richt hartlie on my kneis I pray,  
With all devotioun that I can  
God gif ye war John Thomsounis man !

For war it so, than weill war me,  
Bot benefice I wald nocht be ;  
My hard fortoun war endit than :  
God gif ye war John Thomsounis man !

Then wald sum reuth within you rest,  
For saik of hir fairest and best ;  
In Bartane, \* syn † her time began ;  
God gif ye war John Thomsounis man !

For it micht hurt in no degre',  
That one, so fair and gude as sche  
Throw hir virtew sic wirschip wan,  
As you to mak John Thomsounis man.

I wald gif all that ever I haif  
To that condition, so God me saif,  
That ye had vowit to the swan,  
Ane yeir to be John Thomsounis man.

The mersy of that sweit meik Rois,  
Suld soff't yow Thrissil, I suppois,  
Quhois pykis throw me so reuthles ran :  
God gif ye war John Thomsounis man !

My advocat, bayth fair and sweit,  
The hale rejosung of my spreit,  
Wald speid in to my errandis than ;  
And ye war ains John Thomsounis man.

Ever quhen I think yow harde or dour,  
Or mercyles in my succour,  
Than pray I God, and sweet Sanct An  
Gif that ye war John Thomsounis man !

The burden of this humorous address of the Poet Dunbar to James IV. is a proverbial expression of a man ruled by his wife, in common phrase, a *henpecked Husband*. Thus, in the collection of Scottish Proverbs by David Fergusson, under the head “of effeminate persons” one is—“He is John Tamson’s man, couthing carle.”

\* Britain. † sen i. e. since.

“I have little doubt” says Pinkerton, “but the original proverb was *Joan Thomson’s man*; man in Scotland signifies either *Husband* or *Servant*.” In support of his contention, Pinkerton quotes the following lines from Sam. Colville’s *Scottish Hudibras*, first printed in 1681:—

“We read in greatest warriors’ lives  
They oft were ruled by their wives.

The world’s great conqueror, Alexander,  
Obey’d a lady, his commander;  
And Antonie, that drunkard keen,  
Was rul’d by his lascivious Queen.

So the imperious Roxalan  
Made the great Turk *John Thomson’s man*.

It has been objected by some writers that this suggestion of Pinkerton’s will not hold water, for they argue that *Joan* is a name wholly unknown in Scotland, that it does not occur in any family or other writing, and besides, it is not necessary to the origin of the saying, that *man* should be understood as *husband*. The *servant* of “John Thomsone” may have been so ruled by his better half as to render him a byeword.

We think there can be little doubt of the intent of Dunbar’s prayer, his opinion clearly being that the King was ruled by the Queen. Margaret, Queen of James IV., had, in all likelihood, promised the Poet her assistance in procuring him a benefice; but to his sorrow he found that her influence with the King was not so strong as he would have wished it to be, and he wrote this poem to give vent to his feelings on the subject.

This Poem of Dunbar’s has been preserved to us in the Sir R. Maitland MS. The third line of the fifth verse—“That ye had vovit to the Swan”—requires some explanation. Sibbald tells us that “in the days of chivalry, it was customary for the knights to make vows to God *over* a roasted swan, peacock, heron, or other bird; and these vows were held to be inviolable. The bird was afterwards carried to the table.”

Again, in the metrical romance of Alexander, translated from the French in 1438, and printed in Edinburgh by Arbuthnot about 1680, one of the books or parts, “The Avowis of Alexander,” refers entirely to this singular custom of the knights and ladies taking solemn vows upon themselves when “the poun” or peacock is set before them. Martin also, in his description of the Western

Islands, says: "When the natives kill a swan, it is common for the eaters of it to make a negative vow (*i.e.*, they swear never to do anything or something that is in itself impracticable) before they taste of the fowl."

There is another poem on this subject, but of a much more modern date, entitled "John Tamson's Wallet." It would seem to have been written about the time of the Reformation, but as the two poems are in their nature distinct from each other, I will notice "The Wallet" at a future time.

There is said to be a social club in London, whose members are Scotsmen, named "John Tamson's Bairns"—meaning that its members were friendly, as brothers of one family. "We're a' John Tamson's bairns" is an expression of mutual good fellowship very frequently heard in Scotland. From what we have said, it would seem that this John Tamson is destined in all time coming to stand forward as the prototype of henpecked husbands.

There is an old Scotch proverb which runs, "Better be *John Thamson's man*, than Ringand Dinn's or John Knox's." Ringand Dinn is a play on the name Nimian Dun—the Scotch pronunciation of which sounds Ringan Din. From the above proverb it would appear that the wife of John Thamson's man did not rule with a rod of iron, but led her husband rather with a silken cord, for in the proverb she is represented as one who did not *ring*, *i.e.*, reign by means of din, or give knocks or blows. There is another allusion in the "Expedition of the worthy Scots Regiment called McKayes," which bears out the same theory. The author, when illustrating the power of connubial affection, in the example of Meleager's exertion for the sake of his wife Cleopatra, evidently takes it for granted that the woman's rule was a mild one, for he says:—

"Here it may be some will alleage he was *John Thamson's man*. I answer, it was all one if shee was good; for all stories esteem them happie, that can live together man and wife without contention, strife or jarres."

The only authority I have come across where the "*John*" is given as "*Joan*" is in the works of Francis Rabelais, who was born about the year 1483. In his history of Gargantua, when enumerating the games at which his hero played, he gives the name of one as "*Joane Tomson*."