

Robert of Sicily

anon

fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose

by

Richard Scott-Robinson

This tale has been translated and retold from: Edward E Foster, 1997. Amis and Amiloun, Robert of Cisyle, and Sir Amadace. Medieval Institute Publications. TEAMS Middle English texts. Story taken from Bodleian Library MS Eng. Poet. a.1, the Vernon Manuscript, dating to around 1390.

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Princes proude that beth in pres · I wol you telle thing, not lees · In Cisyle was a noble kyng · Fair and strong and sumdel yung – Princes, valiant in battle, I want to tell you something that is true. There was once a king in Sicily who was young, strong and very well-regarded. He had a brother who was the Pope in Rome, and another who was the Holy Roman Emperor and had brought many Saracens to grief. This king was called King Robert. He was fearless, a conqueror of many, and a man of great honour. Nobody surpassed him in all the world, far or near. King or prince, he excelled them all, and he was the flower of chivalry. His brother was an emperor and his other brother, as I've said, was the Pope. Pope Urban. The emperor's name was Valemounde and he was a mighty warrior, eclipsed in strength only by his brother, King Robert of Sicily, whom I shall now turn to.

King Robert thought that there was no one his equal in all the world, and having absolute power, he had succumbed to the sin of pride. On Saint John's Eve, or Midsummer's Eve, the king had gone to church to hear evensong and it was becoming a little tedious for him. He was more concerned with worldly affairs than with Christ Our Saviour. When he heard a verse of the *Magnificat* he asked a cleric to translate it into Sicilian for him, for he had no Latin, which was the language that the choir were singing in. The verse was this: *Deposuit potentes de sede et exaltavit humiles.*

The cleric replied: 'Sir, God's might is such that he can make the high low and the low high in the twinkling of an eye.' The king foolishly replied: 'What rubbish! Who has the power to bring me down? I'm the flower of chivalry. I can destroy my enemies at will! There's no one alive who could defeat me. It's nonsense.'

With this error in mind, the king fell asleep, as the book tells us, and when the service had finished, a king like him made his way out of the church. Everybody followed the new king and paid King Robert no attention at all. The new king was an angel, sent to destroy King Robert's pride. The angel made merry in the king's hall and all his men were very happy to be with him.

King Robert woke up and cursed them all for leaving him there by himself. It was dark outside and he was alone. He shouted, but there was no reply. Only the sexton was there, at the back of the church, and he came across and said: 'What are you doing here? You're either a thief or a ne'er-do-well. I bet you intend to steal something from this church!'

'You ignorant churl!' the king shouted back. 'I am no thief, I am your king! Open this church door at once, so I can go back to my palace.'

When the sexton heard this, he imagined he must be dealing with a madman and decided to try to get him out of the church as quickly as possible. A little apprehensively, he opened the church door and the king ran out at once, as though he was a lunatic.

The king arrived at the gates to his palace and shouted at the gatekeeper to come at once and open them.

‘Who are you?’ asked the porter.

‘Who am I? I am your king, and you are going to be thrown into my deepest prison and hung and drawn for this treason. Then you’ll understand who I am. Open this gate, you dirty scoundrel!’

‘The king is with his men in the hall, I’m certain of it,’ replied the porter, and he disappeared into the palace to make sure. Entering the hall, he fell upon his knees before the new king and said: ‘At the gates there is a lunatic who says that he is king. He called me a dirty scoundrel. My lord, what do you want me to do with him, let him in or send him on his way?’

The angel said at once: ‘Let him in as quickly as you can. I will make him my fool, and he shall remain so for as long as he chooses to give himself these airs.’

The porter returned to the outer gates and called to the king that he was prepared to let him in. The king came up and hit the porter so hard with his fist that blood ran from the man’s mouth and chin. The porter punched the king back with such accuracy and venom that the king’s nose and mouth poured with blood. King Robert was beside himself with rage! But men came up to help the porter and together they threw King Robert into a puddle. Then they brought him, looking very bedraggled and un-king-like, before the new king and the porter said: ‘My lord, this scoundrel has punched me in the face without any provocation at all, and he claims to be king. For saying this I think he should be hung, drawn and quartered, for declaring so insolently that he is you.’

‘You are a fool,’ said the angel to King Robert. ‘How dare you be so brave as to attack one of my officers. You will be punished for this. Who are you?’

Robert of Cisyle tells a very similar story to a number of other medieval verse narratives, including Sir Isumbras, Sir Cleges and Sir Gowther: a nobleman, toppled suddenly from wealth and honour, has to endure extreme poverty and ill-fortune before the Wheel of Fortune begins to climb for him once again. In the case of Sir Isumbras, this is a punishment from God for excessive pride. So too for King Robert. He falls asleep in church one evening and wakes to find everybody gone and a new king on the throne. Himself: An angel is impersonating him. King Robert’s insistent protestations that he is the king are taken to be the ravings of a madman; nobody recognises him any more. Only after the passage of three years does the angel relinquish the facade and allow King Robert to return to his rightful place at court, on his throne, instead of under a table with the dogs.

Other romances with a similar theme, such as the Middle English Octavian, hint at the involvement of animals during a turn of the wheel. Sir Gowther spends time under the table with the dogs in his Middle English Breton lai. The noble Octavian is suckled by a lioness before being rescued; his brother Florent is taken by an ape before being sold to a Paris merchant and raised as the man’s son. This recalls Sir Isumbras’s life as an apprentice to a blacksmith, following his own sons’ capture by a lion and a leopard, animals they seem still to be involved with when they return at the end of Sir Isumbras. There are strong hints in these tales, and in others such as Emaré, that the allegory involves a transition from one life to another. But if this tale of King Robert is, therefore, a very Christian version of an essentially pagan story, placing an angel as the new king, it may have done a service by being able to make plain what other stories have dared only to hint at or allude to. Nowhere is it revealed as plainly as in Robert of Cisyle that this new and humbler life is in a different body, while his former self still lives.

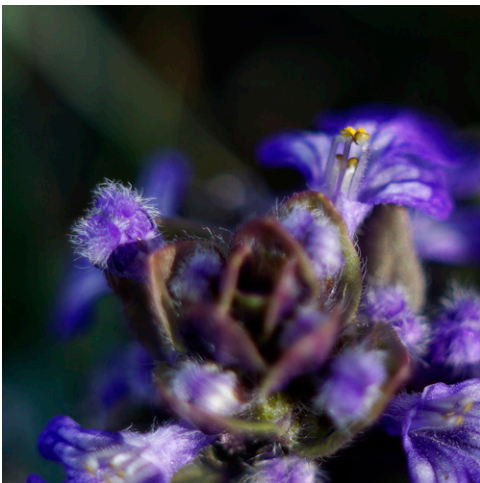
Robert of Cisyle, or Sicily, is found in ten manuscripts of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The story below is identical to that found in Bodleian Library MS Eng. Poet. a.1, the Vernon Manuscript, dating to about 1390.

‘You will soon understand that I am your king! What is the meaning of this impersonation? The Pope is my brother, and the Holy Roman Emperor is my brother also. They will quickly take revenge for this outrage, I assure you. They will not stand idly by.’

‘You shall be my fool,’ the angel replied. ‘You shall have your hair shaved off, all of it, just like a fool, and then a proper fool you will be. An ape shall be your counsellor, and you will look the same as each other because I’ll make him look like your brother, you’ll wear the same clothes and he’ll be your best friend, and he’ll teach you a few things, I should think. Dogs will eat with you in the hall. You will eat your food off the ground and dogs will taste it first. A dog will be your food taster. Will that make you feel grand enough?’

The angel called a barber and instructed him to shave the lunatic like a fool, all around his head, like a friar, a hand’s breadth above each ear, and on the top of his head to shave a cross. The madman cried out, struggled and tried to prevent it, he swore that they would all live to regret this villainy, insisting all the time that he was their lord. Everyone laughed at him for this, called him a fool and said that this proved it. And all this was

because he had no idea that God could reduce him to such a low rank. In one move he had blundered into checkmate.



Every night he lay with the dogs, and often cried out in anguish, wishing that he had never been born. Everybody in the court, down to the lowest page and groom, made fun of the king, for nobody recognised him at all, his features had so changed. No king had ever been reduced so far. Alas, here is a pitiful thing, that, for his pride, this king should be reduced so greatly in front of his own people.

King Robert was always thirsty and hungry, for he found it hard to bring himself to eat or drink anything at all, the dogs just stole from his dish. He was nearly brought to his death before he could find it in himself to eat with the dogs in the hall. How could things get any worse? But when he saw that he had no other choice, that the angel was king and there was nothing he could do about it, he ate with the dogs.

While the angel ruled, the land of Sicily remained prosperous and at peace. There was no treachery, no machination and no scheming, just love and charity between all men. Every man loved every other, better than a brother, and there was harmony between man and wife. It was wonderful to be ruled by such a king.

The angel was king for over three years, and all this time Robert went about in melancholy and distress. Then it happened one day, near the end of April, that letters arrived from the Holy Roman Emperor, Sir Valemounde, to the King of Sicily, inviting him to spend some time with himself and his brother the Pope. They had been apart for too long, Sir Valemounde wrote, and he urged him to drop everything and come without

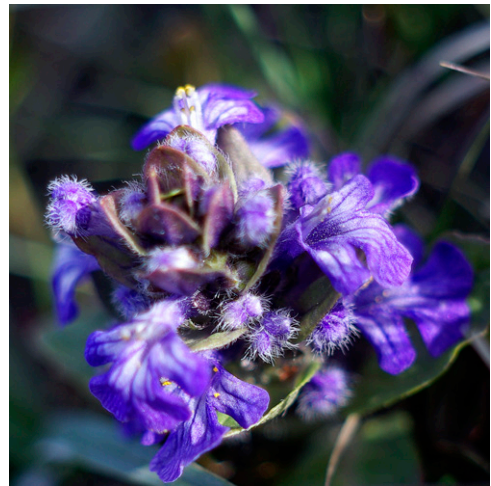
delay, in royal pomp, to Rome, and to be there by Holy Thursday.

The angel welcomed the messengers and gave them some fine gifts, clothes of Persian fabric finished in ermine, finer than any to be had in Christendom. These clothes were adorned with pearls, and no one in Christian lands could have made them. Everybody marvelled how such cloth could be woven, and nobody had any idea how it was made, nor where it could be bought.

The messengers accompanied the king to Rome. Robert the fool went also, clothed in a jesters garments with foxes tails hanging from them, so that everybody would know that he was a fool.

The angel was clothed all in white. Such fine silk had never been seen before, nor such fine pearls. His clothes were entirely white; and his steed also, it was the finest horse that anyone had ever seen.

The angel arrived in Rome, in a manner befitting a king, more splendidly than any king before him, and everybody looked on in wonder – his entourage was magnificent, his men were superbly fitted out, clothes, girdles and other things. Everything was truly resplendent. Every young squire looked like a king. All were clothed magnificently, except for King Robert. People stared at him because he stood out like a sore thumb with an ape riding alongside him, dressed in the same clothes that he was wearing.



The Pope, the emperor and all the lords welcomed the angel as king, recognising him as King Robert, and made a great fuss of him. The brothers made themselves comfortable and the angel was accepted as one of them without any question; there was no doubt in his brothers' minds that he was their brother Robert and they were very lucky to have a brother who was held in such high honour and regard.

King Robert suddenly jumped up like a fearless fool and cried excitedly to the Pope and to the emperor, demanding that they avenge him against the man who had seized by a ruse his crown and the whole of Sicily. Neither the Pope nor the emperor had any idea what was going on, they didn't recognise the fool at all. And for this reason he was held to be even more to be a fool, a thousand times more, for making such a ludicrous claim.

King Robert became very upset at this, distraught even. 'Alas!' he cried. 'Even my brothers cannot recognise me! Now I really am brought low!' For he had fully expected his brothers to save him from this nonsense and to return his crown to him at once. But now all he could do was to cry out in anguish: 'Alas! Alas that I was born!' He cursed the day that he had drawn his first breath, he didn't want to live any more. He tore his hair, he wrung his hands. 'Alas!' he cried. 'Alas! Alas!' Then he reflected upon what he

had been told, concerning his pride, and he remembered Nebuchadnezzar, a noble king from long ago who had been peerless, so the stories went, and without equal. His general Holofernes, who was a prince among knights, swore by his king as though his king was a god and said that there was no god except for Nebuchadnezzar, and the king had been pleased with this and happy to go along with it, and loved Holofernes the more for it, which did for them both eventually. Holofernes came to a bad end and Nebuchadnezzar had to hide himself in the desert. He lived there for fifteen years, on grass, roots and other dreadful food, and he clothed himself in moss, and this was all through the grace of God. Then Nebuchadnezzar cried to God for mercy, and he was restored into his former state.

‘I am in the same situation as Nebuchadnezzar, or even worse,’ cried King Robert. ‘God gave me such high honour that I was called a conqueror in every land and was famous throughout Christendom, I was considered to be without equal, and because of this I have succumbed to the sin of pride, just like the fallen angels whom God cast down from joy in the twinkling of an eye. He took away their power, and he’s done the same to me, for my guilt, and now I’ve been made the lowest of the low.

‘And it’s right that I have been! Lord, have pity upon thy fool! I harboured error in my heart and this error has been my undoing. Lord, I didn’t believe in you. Have pity upon thy fool! I denied Holy Scripture, and for that I have had all my joy taken away from me and it’s right that I am now a fool. Lord, have pity upon thy fool! I am your creature and it is right that I suffer like this. I deserve more. Lord, have pity upon thy fool! Lord, I have done you wrong and I shall do so no more. I shall be your fool from now on. Lord, take pity upon thy fool!

‘Blissful Mary,’ he continued, ‘I cry to you, since you are so courteous and full of generosity, ask your son, who died for me, to have pity upon his fool. Blissful Mary, so full of grace, I confess to you all my failings; please ask your son if, for your love, he might take pity upon his fool.’ Then he cried alas! no more but thanked Christ for his mercy and became calm and collected and was content at last to thank God for the situation he found himself in.

Pope, emperor and king remained in Rome for five weeks, and when the five weeks had passed, the emperor and the king made their way back to their own lands. It was a grand departure. The angel returned to Sicily, he and his men, and they were soon home. When he came into the hall of the palace, he called for the fool.

‘Fool, are you king?’ he asked.

‘No sir.’

‘What are you.’

‘I am a fool, sir. More than a fool, if that is possible.’

The angel went into a chamber and asked for the fool to be brought to him there. When

the fool arrived, he asked all his men to leave, and soon the two of them were left alone together.

‘You are forgiven,’ said the angel. ‘Consider how low you have been brought, and all because of the sin for which you were guilty. You were a fool before the King of Heaven, and so a proper fool you became. God has forgiven you now, so make sure you pay him the proper respect and fear him as you should. I am a well-regarded angel, and I was sent here to look after your kingdom for you. I will have greater joy in heaven amongst all my friends in a single hour than in a hundred thousand years spent here on Earth, even if I had the whole world at my command. I am an angel. You are a king.’

The angel disappeared. In the twinkling of an eye, he was gone.

King Robert went back into the hall and called his men to him. They all came at his command, to their rightful lord. Everything was just as it should be.

From that day on, King Robert loved God and Holy Church, and lived his life well. He reigned thereafter for a little more than two years, keeping God’s commandments. The angel gave him foreknowledge of the time of his death, and when this moment was getting near, he made a written record of how almighty God had laid him low and justly punished him. He sent a copy of this account, secure under his royal seal, to both of his brothers. And when the time came that he had said that he would die, this is indeed what happened.

This story is true. In order to be held properly in memory it lies in Saint Peter’s Church in Rome, and through it God’s might is revealed, for it shows that God can make the high low, however distressing this might be to them, and the low high, at his will.

Christ, who died for us – let us rise so high that we become one with his family in heaven, where there is joy, comfort and love, forevermore.

Amen.