

Classic Poetry Series

Gavin Douglas

- 2 poems -

Publication Date:

2012

Publisher:

PoemHunter.Com - The World's Poetry Archive

Gavin Douglas (1474 – September 1522)

Gavin Douglas was a Scottish bishop, makar and translator. Although he had an important political career, it is for his poetry that he is now chiefly remembered. His principal pioneering achievement was the *Eneados*, a full and faithful vernacular translation of the *Aeneid* of Virgil and the first successful example of its kind in the British Isles. Other extant poetry includes his *Palice of Honour* and possibly *King Hart*.

Douglas was educated at St Salvator's College, St Andrews and was a friend and correspondent of many of the internationally renowned men of his age, including Polydore Vergil, John Major, Cardinal Wolsey and Henry, 3rd Lord Sinclair. Because of his powerful family connections and role in high public life, he is the best-documented of the early Scottish makars. Indeed, of poets in the British Isles before him, only the biography of Chaucer is as well documented or understood. All his literary work was composed before his fortieth year while he was provost of St Giles in Edinburgh.

After the Battle of Flodden, Douglas became heavily involved in affairs of state, seeking a dominant role as one of the Lords of Council and bidding to attain one or more of the many sees, including the archbishopric of St Andrews, left vacant in the destructive aftermath of the Scottish defeat. He finally attained to the bishopric of Dunkeld in 1516, although only after a bitter struggle.

In 1517, in his more settled public position, Douglas was one of the leading members of the embassy to Francis I which negotiated the Treaty of Rouen, but his role in the volatile politics of the period, mainly centring around control over the minority of James V, was deeply contentious. By late 1517 he had managed to earn the enduring hostility of the Queen Mother, a former ally, and in subsequent years became manifestly involved in political manoeuvring against the Regent Albany. At the same time he remained ambitious for the St Andrews archbishopric which fell vacant once again in 1521. His career was cut short when he died suddenly during a brief period in exile in London.

Douglas's literary work was composed in a highly polished Middle Scots, often aureate in style. After the *Eneados* he is not known to have produced any further poetry, despite being at the height of his artistic powers when it was completed in 1513 six weeks before the Battle of Flodden.

Early life

Gavin (or Gawin, Gawane, Gawain) Douglas was born c. 1474, at Tantallon Castle, East Lothian, the third son of Archibald, 5th Earl of Angus by his

second wife Elizabeth Boyd.

He was a student at St Andrews, 1489–1494, and thereafter, it is supposed, at Paris. In 1496 he obtained the living of Monymusk, Aberdeenshire, and later he became parson of Lynton (mod. East Linton) and rector of Hauch (mod. Prestonkirk), in East Lothian; and about 1501 was preferred to the deanery or provostship of the collegiate church of St Giles, Edinburgh, which he held with his parochial charges. From this date until the Battle of Flodden, in September 1513, he appears to have been occupied with his ecclesiastical duties and literary work. Indeed all the extant writings by which he has earned his place as a poet and translator belong to this period. After the disaster at Flodden he was completely absorbed in public business.

Literary career to 1513

Douglas today is remembered most for his literary legacy produced during the years 1501–1513. For most of this period he was provost of St Giles in Edinburgh. No more than four of works by him are known to exist; *The Palice of Honour*, *Conscience*, his major translation the *Eneados*, and possibly *King Hart*.

Palice of Honour

The Palice of Honour, dated 1501, is a dream-allegory extending to over 2000 lines, composed in nine-lined stanzas. It is his earliest work. In its descriptions of the various courts on their way to the palace, and of the poet's adventures—first, when he incautiously slanders the court of Venus, and later when after his pardon he joins in the procession and passes to see the glories of the palace—the poem carries on the literary traditions of the courts of love, as shown especially in the "Romaunt of the Rose" and "The Hous of Fame." The poem is dedicated to James IV, not without some lesson in commendation of virtue and honour.

No manuscript of the poem is extant. The earliest surviving edition (c. 1553) was printed at London by William Copland (d. 1569); an Edinburgh edition, from the press of Henry Charteris (d. 1599), followed in 1579. From certain indications in the latter and the evidence of some odd leaves discovered by David Laing, it has been concluded that there was an earlier Edinburgh edition, which has been ascribed to Thomas Davidson, printer, and dated c. 1540.

Eneados

Douglas's most important literary achievement is the *Eneados*, a Scots translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, completed in 1513, and the first full translation of a major poem from classical antiquity into any modern Germanic language. His translation, which is faithful throughout, includes the thirteenth book by Mapheus Vegius. Each of the thirteen books in addition is introduced by an original verse prologue. These deal with a variety of subjects, sometimes semi-autobiographical, in a variety of styles.

Other accredited works

Two other poems are accredited to Gavin Douglas, *King Hart* and *Conscience*

Conscience is a short four-stanza poem. Its subject is the "conceit" that men first clipped away the "con" from "conscience" to leave "science" and "na mair"; then they lost "sci" and had nothing but "ens": that schrew, Riches and geir.

King Hart is a poem of doubtful accreditation. Like *The Palice of Honor*, it is a later allegory and, as such, of high literary merit. Its subject is human life told in the allegory of King Hart (Heart) in his castle, surrounded by his five servitors (the senses), Queen, Plesance, Foresight and other courtiers. The poem runs to over 900 lines and is written in eight-lined stanzas. The text is preserved in the Maitland folio manuscript in the Pepysian library, Cambridge. It is not known to have been printed before 1786, when it

appeared in Pinkerton's Ancient Scottish Poems.

Political career after September 1513

Three weeks after the Battle of Flodden he, still Provost of St Giles, was admitted a burgher of Edinburgh. His father, the "Great Earl," was then the civil provost of the capital. The latter dying soon afterwards (January 1514) in Wigtonshire, where he had gone as justiciar, and his son having been killed at Flodden, the succession fell to Gavin's nephew Archibald Douglas, 6th Earl of Angus.

The marriage of this youth to James IV's widow on 6 August 1514 did much to identify the Douglasses with the English party in Scotland, as against the French party led by the Duke of Albany, and incidentally to determine the political career of his uncle Gavin. During the first weeks of the queen's sorrow after the battle, Gavin, with one or two colleagues of the council, acted as personal adviser, and it may be taken for granted that he supported the pretensions of the young earl. His own hopes of preferment had been strengthened by the death of many of the higher clergy at Flodden.

The first outcome of the new connection was his appointment to the Abbacy of Aberbrothwick by the queen regent, before her marriage, probably in June 1514. Soon after the marriage (of Gavin's nephew) she nominated him Archbishop of St Andrews, in succession to William Elphinstone, archbishop-designate. But John Hepburn, prior of St Andrews, having obtained the vote of the chapter, expelled him, and was himself in turn expelled by Andrew Forman, Bishop of Moray, who had been nominated by the pope. In the interval, Douglas's rights in Aberbrothwick had been transferred to James Beaton, Archbishop of Glasgow, and he was now without title or temporality. The breach between the Queen's party and Albany's had widened, and the queen's advisers had begun an intrigue with England, to the end that the royal widow and her young son should be removed to Henry's court. In those deliberations Gavin Douglas took an active part, and for this reason stimulated the opposition which successfully thwarted his preferment.

Bishop of Dunkeld

In January 1515 on the death of George Brown, Bishop of Dunkeld, Douglas's hopes revived. The queen nominated him to the now vacant seat, which he ultimately obtained, though not without trouble. For John Stewart, 2nd Earl of Atholl had forced his brother, Andrew Stewart, prebendary of Craig, upon the chapter, and had put him in possession of the bishop's palace. The queen appealed to the pope and was seconded by her brother of England, with the result that the pope's sanction was obtained on 18 February 1515. Some of the correspondence of Douglas and his friends incident to this transaction was intercepted. When Albany came from France and assumed the regency, these documents and the "purchase" of the bishopric from Rome contrary to statute were made the basis of an attack on Douglas, who was imprisoned in Edinburgh Castle, thereafter in St Andrews Castle (under the charge of his old opponent, Prior Hepburn), and later in Dunbar Castle, and again in Edinburgh. The pope's intervention procured his release, after nearly a year's imprisonment. The queen meanwhile had retired to England. After July 1516 Douglas appears to have been in possession of his see, and to have patched up a diplomatic peace with Albany.

On 17 May 1517 the Bishop of Dunkeld proceeded with Albany to France to conduct the negotiations which ended in the Treaty of Rouen. He was back in Scotland towards the end of June. Albany's longer absence in France permitted the partyfaction of the nobles to come to a head in a plot by James Hamilton, 1st Earl of Arran to seize the Earl of Angus, the Queen's husband. The issue of this plot was the well-known fight of Cleanse the Causeway, in which Gavin Douglas's part stands out in picturesque relief. The triumph over the Hamiltons had an unsettling effect upon the Earl of Angus. He made free of the queen's rents and abducted Lord Traquair's daughter. The Queen set about to obtain a divorce, and used her influence for the return of Albany as a means of undoing her husband's power. Albany's arrival in November 1521, with a large body of French men-at-arms, compelled Angus, with the

bishop and others, to flee to the Borders. From this retreat Gavin Douglas was sent by the earl to the English court, to ask for aid against the French party and against the queen, who was reported to be the mistress of the regent. Meanwhile he was deprived of his bishopric, and forced, for safety, to remain in England, where he effected nothing in the interests of his nephew. The declaration of war by England against Scotland, in answer to the recent Franco-Scottish negotiations, prevented his return. His case was further complicated by the libellous animosity of James Beaton, Archbishop of Glasgow (whose life he had saved in the "Cleanse the Causeway" incident), who was anxious to put himself forward and thwart Douglas in the election to the archbishopric of St Andrews, left vacant by the death of Forman.

Death

In 1522 Douglas was stricken by the plague which raged in London, and died at the house of his friend Lord Dacre. During the closing years of exile he was on intimate terms with the historian Polydore Virgil, and one of his last acts was to arrange to give Polydore a corrected version of Major's account of Scottish affairs. Douglas was buried in the church of the Savoy, where a monumental brass (removed from its proper site after the fire in 1864) still records his death and interment.

For Douglas's career see, in addition to the public records and general histories, John Sage's *Life* in Thomas Ruddiman's edition, and that by John Small in the first volume of his edition *The Poetical Works of Gavin Douglas* (1874).

Works:

Gavin Douglas's *Translation of the Aeneid*, edited by Gordon Kendal, 2 volumes, London, MHRA, 2011
Virgil's *Aeneid* translated into Scottish Verse by Gavin Douglas, Bishop of Dunkeld, edited by David F.C. Coldwell, 4 Volumes, Edinburgh, Blackwood for The Scottish Text Society, 1957-64
Gavin Douglas: A selection from his Poetry, edited by Sydney Goodsir Smith, Edinburgh, Oliver & Boyd for The Saltire Society, 1959
Selections from Gavin Douglas, edited by David F. C. Coldwell, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964
The Shorter Poems of Gavin Douglas, edited by Priscilla J Bawcutt, Edinburgh, Blackwood for The Scottish Text Society, 1967 (reprint 2003)
The palis of honoure [by] Gawyne Dowglas, Amsterdam, Theatrum Orbis Terrarum; New York, Da Capo Press, 1969
The Makars: the poems of Henryson, Dunbar, and Douglas, edited, introduced, and annotated by J.A. Tasioulas, Edinburgh, Canongate Books, 1999

Conscience

QUHEN halie Kirk first flurist in □outhheid,
Prelatis wer chosin of all perfectioun;
For Conscience than the brydill had to leid,
And Conscience maid the hale electioun,
Syne eftir that come schrewit correctioun,
And thoct that Conscience had our large ane weid,
And of his habite out cuttit thay ane skreid.

And fra Conscience the Con thay clip away,
And maid of Conscience Science and na mair;
Bot □it the Kirk stude weill, full mony day, 10
For it wes rewlit be mene of wit and layre;
Syn eftir that Sciens began to payr,
And thoct at Sciens was our lang ane jaip,
The Sci away fast can thay rub and sraip;

And fra Sci of Science wes adew,
Than left thai nocht bot this sillab Ens,
Quhilk in our language singnifies that schrew
Riches and geir, that gart all grace go hens;
For Sciens baith and faythfull Consciens
Sa corruptit ar with this warldis gude,
That falset joukis in everie clerkis hude.

O hungrie Ens! cursit with cairis calde,
All kynd of folk constrenis thow to wirk;
For thé that thief Judas his Maister said;
For thé Symon infectit Halie Kirk;
To poyson Justice thow dois nevir irk;
Thow fals Ens, go hens, thou monsture peralous,
God send Defens with Conscience in till ws!

Gavin Douglas

The Aeneid (excerpts)

-0-
Laude, honor, prasingis, thankis infynite
-0-
To the, and thi dulce ornate fresch endite,
-0-
Mast reverend Virgill, of Latyne poetis prince,
-0-
Gemme of ingine and fluide of eloquence,
-0-
Thow peirles perle, patroun of poetrie,
-0-
Rois, register, palme, laurer, and glory,
-0-
Chosin cherbukle, cheif flour and cedir tree,
-0-
Lanterne, leidsterne, mirroure, and a per se,
-0-
Master of masteris, sweit sours and springand well,
-0-

Wyde quhar our all ringis thi hevinle bell:
-0-

I mene thi crafty werkis curious,
-0-

Sa quik, lusty, and mast sentencious,
-0-

Plesable, perfyte, and felable in all degre,
-0-

As quaha the mater held to foir thar ee;
-0-

In every volume quhilk the list do write,
-0-

Surmonting fer all uther maneir endite,
-0-

Lyk as the rois in June with hir sueit smell
-0-

The marygulde or dasy doith excell.
-0-

Quhy suld I than, with dull forhede and vane,
-0-

With ruide engine and barrand emptive brane,
-0-

With bad harsk speche and lewit barbour tong,
-0-

Presume to write quhar thi sueit bell is rong,
-0-

Or contirfait sa precious wourdis deir?
-0-

Na, na, nocht sua, bot knele quhen I thame heir.
-0-

For quhat compair betuix midday and nycht,
-0-

Or quhat compare betuix myrknes and lycht,
-0-

Or quhat compare is betuix blak and quhyte,
-0-

Far gretar diference betuix my blunt endyte
-0-

And thi scharp sugurat sang Virgiliane,
-0-

Sa wyslie wrocht with nevir ane word in vane;
-0-

My waverand wit, my cunnyng feble at all,
-0-

My mynd mysty, thir ma nocht myss ane fall.
-0-

Stra for this ignorant blabring imperfyte
-0-

Beside thi polyte termis redemyte;
-0-

And no the les with support and correctioun,
-0-

For naturall luife and freindfull affectioun
-0-

Quhilkis I beir to thi werkis and endyte,
-0-

Althocht, God wait, I knaw tharin full lyte,
-0-

And that thi facund sentence mycht be song
-0-

In our langage als weill as Latyne tong--
-0-

Alswewe, na, na, impossible war,per de,
-0-

Yit with your leif, Virgill, to follow the,
-0-

I wald into my rurale vulgar gros,
-0-

Write sum savoring of thi Eneados.
-0-

Bot sair I drede for to distene the quyte,
-0-

Throu my corruptit cadens imperfyte;
-0-

Distene the, na forsuith, that ma I nocht,
-0-

Weill ma I schaw my burell busteous thocht;
-0-

Bot thi work sall enduire in laude and glory,
-0-

Bot spot or falt, condong eterne memory.
-0-

Thocht I offend, onhermit is thine fame,
-0-

Thyne is the thank, and myne sal be the shame.

...

THE FIRST BUIK OF ENEADOSCAP. XII
Eneas first excusis him, and syne
Addressis to rehers Troys rwyne.

-12-

Thai ceissit all at anis incontinent,

-12-
With mowthis clois, and visage takand tent.
-12-
Prince Eneas, frome the hie bed, with that,
-12-
Into his seige riall quhar he sat,
-12-
Begouth and said: Thi desyir, lady, is
-12-
Renewing of ontellable sorow, I wis,
-12-
To schaw how Grekis did spuilye and destroy
-12-
The greit riches and lamentable realm of Troy,
-12-
And huge misery quhilk I thair beheld,
-12-

Quharof myself ane greit part bair and feld;
-12-

Quhat Marmidon, or Gregion Dolopes,
-12-

Or knycht wageor to cruell Ulixes,
-12-

Sic materes to rehers, or yit to heir,
-12-

Mycht thaime contene fra weping mony ane teir?
-12-

And now the hevin ourquhelmis the donk nycht,
-12-

Quhen the declining of the sternis brycht
-12-

To sleip and rest perswades our appetite;
-12-

But sen thou hes sic plesour and delite
-12-

To know our chance, and fall of Troy in weir,
-12-

And schortlie the last end thairof wald heir,
-12-

Albeit my spreit abhorris, and doth grise

-12-

Thairon for to ramembir, and oft sise
-12-

Murnand eschewis thairfra with greit diseis,
-12-

Yit than I sall begyne yow for to pleis.

Finis Libri Primi.

Gavin Douglas