

10-1-1964

Home's Douglas and Wully Shakespeare

MacDonald Emslie
University of London

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Emslie, MacDonald (1964) "Home's Douglas and Wully Shakespeare," *Studies in Scottish Literature*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, 128–129.
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol2/iss2/7>

This Notes/Documents is brought to you by the Scottish Literature Collections at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Studies in Scottish Literature by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

suggest that Douglas was unaware of the limitations of the vernacular. Like all medieval translators, he was only too acutely aware of this and his complaint is only one of many:

Sum tyme I follow the text als neir I may,
Sum tyme I am constrenyt ane other way.
Besyde Latyn our langage is imperfite
Quhilk in sum part is the causs and the wyte
Quhy that of Virgillis verss the ornate bewte
Intill our tung may nocht obseruyt be, (Prol. I 357 ff.)

But as usual such complaints are not to be taken all that seriously: certainly not in face of the prologues Douglas added to the separate books of the *Aeneid*. There the energy of language which is released only now and then in the course of translation is unfettered. Has anyone else described a Scottish winter quite like this? —

Thik drumly scuggis dyrknyt so the hevyn,
Dym skyis oft furth warpit feirfull levyn,
Flaggis of fire, and mony felloun flaw,
Scharpe soppys of sleit and of the snyband snaw. (Prol. VII)

ROBIN FULTON
THE EDINBURGH ACADEMY

Home's *Douglas* and Wully Shakspeare

Home's *Douglas* is now remembered chiefly for its coy periphrasis for pregnancy (I.i), "My name is Norval" etc. (II.i), and a remark from the audience at its first performance, which took place in Edinburgh on 14 December 1756. An example of the orthodox version of this last incident may be found in James C. Dibdin's *Annals of the Edinburgh Stage* (Edinburgh, 1888, p. 87):

At the first performance of *Douglas*, when Young Norval was busily employed giving out one of his rodomontading speeches, a canny Scot, who had been observed to grow more and more excited as the piece progressed, unable longer to contain his feelings, called out with evident pride, 'Whaur's yer Wully Shakspeare noo!'

It is difficult to establish when this story first came into being. David Hume's dedication of his *Four Dissertations* (London, 1757, pp. v-vi) to Home refers in general to the play and ends with a reference to its enthusiastic reception in the theatre:

But the unfeigned tears which flowed from every eye, in the numerous representations which were made of it on this theatre; the unparalleled com-

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

mand, which you appeared to have over every affection of the human breast: These are incontestible proofs, that you possess the true theatric genius of *Shakespear* and *Otway*, refined from the unhappy barbarism of the one, and the licentiousness of the other.

Burns's "Prologue spoken by Mr. Woods on his Benefit Night, Monday, 16th April, 1787" also invites the comparison with Shakespeare:

Here *Douglas* forms wild Shakespeare into plan,
And Harley rouses all the God in man.

The earliest reference traced so far has been the following:

During the representation of *Douglas*, a young and sanguine North Briton, in the pit, exclaimed on a sudden, with an air of triumph, "Weel, lads; what think you of Wully Shakspeare now?"

This comes from David Erskine Baker's *Biographia Dramatica* in its 1812 edition (vol. I, p. 360 n), which had been expanded by Isaac Reed. It is not found in the 1782 edition of the book, and so it must be taken as Reed's addition. Henley and Henderson probably knew of this source, for their note on the Burns couplet quoted above refers to the Wully Shakspeare remark being made by a "pittite"¹; however, they give Dibdin's 1888 version of the actual words used.

Home had certainly done something himself to encourage the comparison with Shakespeare. When his first play, *Agis*, had been turned down by Garrick he consoled himself in verses that contain the following:

Image of Shakespeare! To this place I come,
To ease my bursting bosom at thy tomb.

.
That day and night revolving still thy page,
I hope like thee to shake the British stage,

After the success of *Douglas* Garrick, apparently taking the point thus offered, said that there were acts in *Agis* that were more like Shakespeare than any other author had written.² Henry Mackenzie in his *Account of the Life and Writings of John Home, Esq.* (Edinburgh, 1822) was more cautious, feeling compelled (p. 75) to correct the impression Home's verses might have given a North British contemporary by the comment: "Shakespeare, of whose excellence he was an enthusiastic admirer, he did not think of imitating in manner or in style."

MacDONALD EMSLIE
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

¹ *The Poetry of Robert Burns*, ed. W. E. Henley and T. F. Henderson (Edinburgh, 1896), II, 383.

² Henry Grey Graham, *Scottish Men of Letters in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1908), pp. 62, 68.