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Fingal, An Ancient Epic Poem, In Six Books

Macpherson, James

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Lathmon: A Poem.

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L A T H M O N :

A P O E M*.

SELMA, thy halls are silent. There is no sound in the woods of Morven. The wave tumbles alone on the coast. The silent beam of the sun is on the field. The daughters of Morven come forth, like the bow of the shower; they look towards green Ullin for the white sails of the king. He had promised to return, but the winds of the north arose.

Who pours from the eastern hill, like a stream of darkness? It is the host of Lathmon. He has heard of the absence of Fingal. He trusts in the wind of the north. His soul brightens with joy. Why dost thou come, Lathmon? The mighty are not in Selma. Why comest thou with thy forward spear? Will the daughters of Morven fight? But stop, O mighty stream, in thy course! Does not Lathmon behold these sails? Why dost thou vanish, Lathmon,

* Lathmon a British prince, taking advantage of Fingal's absence in Ireland, made a descent on Morven, and advanced within sight of Selma the royal palace. Fingal arrived in the mean time, and Lathmon retreated to a hill, where his army was surprized by night, and himself taken prisoner by Ossian and Gaul the son of Morni. This exploit of Gaul and Ossian bears a near resemblance to the beautiful

episode of Nisus and Euryalus in Virgil's ninth Æneid. The poem opens, with the first appearance of Fingal on the coast of Morven, and ends, it may be supposed, about noon the next day. The first paragraph is in a lyric measure, and appears to have been sung, of old, to the harp, as a prelude to the narrative part of the poem, which is in heroic verse.

like



like the mist of the lake? But the squally storm is behind thee;
Fingal pursues thy steps!

THE king of Morven started from sleep, as we rolled on the dark-blue wave. He stretched his hand to his spear, and his heroes rose around. We knew that he had seen his fathers, for they often descended to his dreams, when the sword of the foe rose over the land; and the battle darkened before us.

WHITHER hast thou fled, O wind, said the king of Morven? Dost thou ruffle in the chambers of the south, and pursue the shower in other lands? Why dost thou not come to my sails? to the blue face of my seas? The foe is in the land of Morven, and the king is absent. But let each bind on his mail, and each assume his shield. Stretch every spear over the wave; let every sword be unsheathed. Lathmon* is before us with his host: he that fled † from Fingal on the plains of Lona. But he returns, like a collected stream, and his roar is between our hills.

SUCH were the words of Fingal. We rushed into Carmona's bay. Ossian ascended the hill; and thrice struck his bossy shield. The rock of Morven replied; and the bounding roes came forth. The foes were troubled in my presence: and collected their darkened host; for I stood, like a cloud on the hill, rejoicing in the arms of my youth.

* It is said, by tradition, that it was the intelligence of Lathmon's invasion, that occasioned Fingal's return from Ireland; though Ossian, more poetically, ascribes the cause of Fingal's knowledge to his dream. † He alludes to a battle wherein Fingal had defeated Lathmon. The occasion of this first war, between those heroes, is told by Ossian in another poem, which the translator has seen.

MORNY



MORNI * sat beneath a tree, at the roaring waters of Strumon †: his locks of age are gray: he leans forward on his staff; young Gaul is near the hero, hearing the battles of his youth. Often did he rise, in the fire of his soul, at the mighty deeds of Morni.

THE aged heard the sound of Ossian's shield: he knew the sign of battle. He started at once from his place. His gray hair parted on his back. He remembers the actions of other years. My son, he said to fair-haired Gaul, I hear the sound of battle. The king of Morven is returned, the sign of war is heard. Go to the halls of Strumon, and bring his arms to Morni. Bring the arms which my father wore in his age, for my arm begins to fail. Take thou thy armour, O Gaul; and rush to the first of thy battles. Let thine arm reach to the renown of thy fathers. Be thy course in the field, like the eagle's wing. Why shouldst thou fear death, my son! the valiant fall with fame; their shields turn the dark stream of danger away, and renown dwells on their gray hairs. Dost thou not see, O Gaul, how the steps of my age are honoured? Morni moves forth, and the young meet him, with reverence, and turn their eyes, with silent joy, on his course. But I never fled from danger, my son! my sword lightened through the darkness of battle. The stranger melted before me; the mighty were blasted in my presence.

GAUL brought the arms to Morni: the aged warrior covered himself with steel. He took the spear in his hand, which was often

* Morni was chief of a numerous tribe, two heroes perfectly reconciled in this poem.
 † Stru'-moné, *stream of the hill*. Here the proper name of rivulet in the neighbourhood of Selma.



stained with the blood of the valiant. He came towards Fingal, his son attended his steps. The son of Comhal rejoiced over the warrior, when he came in the locks of his age.

KING of the roaring Strumon! said the rising joy of Fingal; do I behold thee in arms, after thy strength has failed? Often has Morni shone in battles, like the beam of the rising sun; when he disperses the storms of the hill, and brings peace to the glittering fields. But why didst thou not rest in thine age? Thy renown is in the song. The people behold thee, and bless the departure of mighty Morni. Why didst thou not rest in thine age? For the foe will vanish before Fingal.

SON of Comhal, replied the chief, the strength of Morni's arm has failed. I attempt to draw the sword of my youth, but it remains in its place. I throw the spear, but it falls short of the mark; and I feel the weight of my shield. We decay, like the grass of the mountain, and our strength returns no more. I have a son, O Fingal, his soul has delighted in the actions of Morni's youth; but his sword has not been lifted against the foe, neither has his fame begun. I come with him to battle; to direct his arm. His renown will be a sun to my soul, in the dark hour of my departure. O that the name of Morni were forgot among the people! that the heroes would only say, "Behold the father of Gaul!"

KING of Strumon, Fingal replied, Gaul shall lift the sword in battle. But he shall lift it before Fingal; my arm shall defend his youth. But rest thou in the halls of Selma; and hear of our renown. Bid the harp be strung; and the voice of the bard arise, that those who fall may rejoice in their fame; and the soul of Morni brighten with gladness.—Offian! thou hast fought in
battles:



battles: the blood of strangers is on thy spear: let thy course be with Gaul in the strife; but depart not from the side of Fingal; lest the foe find you alone, and your fame fail at once.

I SAW * Gaul in his arms, and my soul was mixed with his: for the fire of the battle was in his eyes! he looked to the foe with joy. We spoke the words of friendship in secret; and the lightning of our swords poured together; for we drew them behind the wood, and tried the strength of our arms on the empty air.

NIGHT came down on Morven. Fingal sat at the beam of the oak. Morni sat by his side with all his gray waving locks. Their discourse is of other times, and the actions of their fathers. Three bards, at times, touched the harp; and Ullin was near with his song. He sung of the mighty Comhal; but darkness gathered † on Morni's brow. He rolled his red eye on Ullin; and the song of the bard ceased. Fingal observed the aged hero, and he mildly spoke.

CHIEF of Strumon, why that darkness? Let the days of other years be forgot. Our fathers contended in battle; but we meet together, at the feast. Our swords are turned on the foes, and they melt before us on the field. Let the days of our fathers be forgot, king of mossy Strumon.

* Ossian speaks. The contrast between the old and young heroes is strongly marked. The circumstance of the latter's drawing their swords is well imagined, and agrees with the impatience of young soldiers, just entered upon action.

† Ullin had chosen ill the subject of his song. The darkness which gathered on Morni's brow, did not proceed from any dislike he had to Comhal's name, though they were foes, but from his fear that the song would awaken Fingal to remembrance of the feuds which had subsisted of old between the families. Fingal's speech on this occasion abounds with generosity and good sense.



KING of Morven, replied the chief, I remember thy father with joy. He was terrible in battle; the rage * of the chief was deadly. My eyes were full of tears, when the king of heroes fell. The valiant fall, O Fingal, and the feeble remain on the hills. How many heroes have passed away, in the days of Morni! And I did not shun the battle; neither did I fly from the strife of the valiant.

Now let the friends of Fingal rest; for the night is around; that they may rise, with strength, to battle against car-borne Lathmon. I hear the sound of his host, like thunder heard on a distant heath. Ossian! and fair-haired Gaul! ye are swift in the race. Observe the foes of Fingal from that woody hill. But approach them not, your fathers are not near to shield you. Let not your fame fall at once. The valour of youth may fail.

WE heard the words of the chief with joy, and moved in the clang of our arms. Our steps are on the woody hill. Heaven burns with all its stars. The meteors of death fly over the field. The distant noise of the foe reached our ears. It was then Gaul spoke, in his valour; his hand half-unsheathed the sword.

SON of Fingal, he said, why burns the soul of Gaul? My heart beats high. My steps are disordered; and my hand trembles on my sword. When I look towards the foe, my soul lightens before me, and I see their sleeping host. Tremble thus the souls of the valiant in battles of the spear?—How would the soul of Morni rise if we

* This expression is ambiguous in the original. It either signifies that Comhal has endeavoured to preserve the same ambiguity in the version; as it was probably designed by the poet. It either signifies that Comhal killed many in battle, or that he was implacable in his resentment. The transla-

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should



should rush on the foe! Our renown would grow in the song; and our steps be stately in the eyes of the brave.

SON of Morni, I replied, my soul delights in battle. I delight to shine in battle alone, and to give my name to the bards. But what if the foe should prevail; shall I behold the eyes of the king? They are terrible in his displeasure, and like the flames of death.—But I will not behold them in his wrath. Offian shall prevail or fall. But shall the fame of the vanquished rise?—They pass away like a shadow. But the fame of Offian shall rise. His deeds shall be like his fathers. Let us rush in our arms; son of Morni, let us rush to battle. Gaul! if thou shalt return, go to Selma's lofty wall. Tell to Evirallin * that I fell with fame; carry this sword to Branno's daughter. Let her give it to Oscar, when the years of his youth shall arise.

SON of Fingal, Gaul replied with a sigh; will I return after Offian is low!—What would my father say, and Fingal king of men? The feeble would turn their eyes and say, “Behold the mighty Gaul who left his friend in his blood!” Ye shall not behold me, ye feeble, but in the midst of my renown. Offian! I have heard from my father the mighty deeds of heroes; their mighty deeds when alone; for the soul increases in danger.

SON of Morni, I replied and strode before him on the heath, our fathers shall praise our valour, when they mourn our fall. A beam of gladness shall rise on their souls, when their eyes are full of tears. They will say, “Our sons have not fallen like the grass of the field, for they spread death around them.”—But why

* Offian had married her a little time before. The story of his courtship of this lady is introduced, as an episode, in the fourth book of Fingal.



should we think of the narrow house? The sword defends the valiant. But death pursues the flight of the feeble; and their renown is not heard.

WE rushed forward through night; and came to the roar of a stream which bent its blue course round the foe, through trees that echoed to its noise; we came to the bank of the stream, and saw the sleeping host. Their fires were decayed on the plain; and the lonely steps of their scouts were distant far. I stretched my spear before me to support my steps over the stream. But Gaul took my hand, and spoke the words of the valiant.

SHALL * the son of Fingal rush on a sleeping foe? Shall he come like a blast by night when it overturns the young trees in secret? Fingal did not thus receive his fame, nor dwells renown on the gray hairs of Morni, for actions like these. Strike, Ossian, strike the shield of battle, and let their thousands rise. Let them meet Gaul in his first battle, that he may try the strength of his arm.

MY soul rejoiced over the warrior, and my bursting tears descended. And the foe shall meet Gaul, I said: the fame of Morni's son shall arise. But rush not too far, my hero: let the gleam of thy steel be near to Ossian. Let our hands join in slaughter.—Gaul! dost thou not behold that rock? Its gray side dimly gleams to the stars. If the foe shall prevail, let our back be towards the

* This proposal of Gaul is much more noble, and more agreeable to true heroism, than the behaviour of Ulysses and Diomed in the Iliad, or that of Nisus and Euryalus in the Æneid. What his valour and generosity suggested became the foundation of his success. For the enemy being dismayed with the sound of Ossian's shield, which was the common signal of battle, thought that Fingal's whole army came to attack them; so that they fly in reality from an army, not from two heroes; which reconciles the story to probability.



rock. Then shall they fear to approach our spears; for death is in our hands.

I STRUCK thrice my ecchoing shield. The starting foe arose. We rushed on in the sound of our arms. Their crouded steps fly over the heath; for they thought that the mighty Fingal came; and the strength of their arms withered away. The sound of their flight was like that of flame, when it rushes thro' the blasted groves.

IT was then the spear of Gaul flew in its strength; it was then his sword arose. Cremor fell; and mighty Leth. Dunthormo struggled in his blood. The steel rushed through Crotho's side, as bent, he rose on his spear; the black stream poured from the wound, and hissed on the half-extinguished oak. Cathmin saw the steps of the hero behind him, and ascended a blasted tree; but the spear pierced him from behind. Shrieking, panting, he fell; moss and withered branches pursue his fall; and strew the blue arms of Gaul.

SUCH were thy deeds, son of Morni, in the first of thy battles. Nor slept the sword by thy side, thou last of Fingal's race! Offian rushed forward in his strength, and the people fell before him; as the grass by the staff of the boy, when he whistles along the field, and the gray beard of the thistle falls. But careless the youth moves on; his steps are towards the desert.

GRAY morning rose around us, the winding streams are bright along the heath. The foe gathered on a hill; and the rage of Lathmon rose. He bent the red eye of his wrath: he is silent in his rising grief. He often struck his bossy shield; and his steps are unequal on the heath. I saw the distant darkness of the hero, and I spoke to Morni's son.

CAR-



CAR-BORNE* chief of Strumon, dost thou behold the foe? They gather on the hill in their wrath. Let our steps be towards the king †. He shall rise in his strength, and the host of Lathmon vanish. Our fame is around us, warrior, the eyes of the aged ‡ will rejoice. But let us fly, son of Morni, Lathmon descends the hill.

THEN let our steps || be slow, replied the fair-haired Gaul; left the foe say, with a smile, "Behold the warriors of night, they are, like ghosts, terrible in darkness, but they melt away before the beam of the east." Ossian, take the shield of Gormar who fell beneath thy spear, that the aged heroes may rejoice, when they shall behold the actions of their sons.

SUCH were our words on the plain, when Sulmath † came to car-borne Lathmon: Sulmath chief of Dutha at the dark-rolling stream of Duvranna §. Why dost thou not rush, son of Nuäth, with a thousand of thy heroes? Why dost thou not descend with thy host, before the warriors fly? Their blue arms are beaming to the rising light, and their steps are before us on the heath.

SON

* Car-borne is a title of honour bestowed, by Ossian, indiscriminately on every hero; as every chief, in his time, kept a chariot or litter by way of state.

† Fingal.

‡ Fingal and Morni.

|| The behaviour of Gaul, throughout this poem, is that of a hero in the most exalted sense. The modesty of Ossian, concerning his own actions, is not less remarkable than his impartiality with regard to Gaul, for it is well known that Gaul

afterwards rebelled against Fingal, which might be supposed to have bred prejudices against him in the breast of Ossian. But as Gaul, from an enemy, became Fingal's firmest friend and greatest hero, the poet passes over one slip in his conduct, on account of his many virtues.

† Suil-mhath, a man of good eye-sight.

§ Dubh-bhranna, dark mountain-stream.

What river went by this name, in the days of Ossian, is not easily ascertained, at this distance of time. A river in Scotland, which



SON of the feeble hand, said Lathmon, shall my host descend !
They* are but two, son of Dutha, and shall a thousand lift their
steel ! Nuäth would mourn, in his hall, for the departure of his
fame. His eyes would turn from Lathmon, when the tread of his
feet approached.

Go thou to the heroes, chief of Dutha, for I behold the stately
steps of Ossian. His fame is worthy of my steel ; let him fight
with Lathmon.

THE noble Sulmath came. I rejoiced in the words of the king.
I raised the shield on my arm ; and Gaul placed in my hand the
sword of Morni. We returned to the murmuring stream ; Lath-
mon came in his strength. His dark host rolled, like the clouds, be-
hind him : but the son of Nuäth was bright in his steel.

SON of Fingal, said the hero, thy fame has grown on our fall.
How many lie there of my people by thy hand, thou king of men !
Lift now thy spear against Lathmon ; and lay the son of Nuäth
low. Lay him low among his people, or thou thyself must fall.

which falls into the sea at Banff, still re-
tains the name of Duvran. If that is meant,
by Ossian, in this passage, Lathmon must
have been a prince of the Pictish nation, or
those Caledonians who inhabited of old the
eastern coast of Scotland.

* Ossian seldom fails to give his heroes,
though enemies, that generosity of temper
which, it appears from his poems, was a
conspicuous part of his own character.
Those who too much despise their enemies
do not reflect, that the more they take
from the valour of their foes, the less me-

rit they have themselves in conquering
them. The custom of depreciating ene-
mies is not altogether one of the refine-
ments of modern heroism. This railing
disposition is one of the capital faults in
Homer's characters, which, by the bye,
cannot be imputed to the poet, who kept
to the manners of the times of which he
wrote. Milton has followed Homer in this
respect ; but railing is less shocking in in-
fernal spirits, who are the objects of horror,
than in heroes, who are set up as patterns
of imitation.

It

It shall never be told in my halls that my warriors fell in my presence; that they fell in the presence of Lathmon when his sword rested by his side: the blue eyes of Cutha* would roll in tears, and her steps be lonely in the vales of Dunlathmon.

NEITHER shall it be told, I replied, that the son of Fingal fled. Were his steps covered with darkness, yet would not Offian fly; his soul would meet him and say, "Does the bard of Selma fear the foe?" No: he does not fear the foe. His joy is in the midst of battle.

LATHMON came on with his spear, and pierced the shield of Offian. I felt the cold steel at my side; and drew the sword of Morni; I cut the spear in twain; the bright point fell glittering on the ground. The son of Nuäth burnt in his wrath, and lifted high his sounding shield. His dark eyes rolled above it, as bending forward, it shone like a gate of brass. But Offian's spear pierced the brightness of its boss, and sunk in a tree that rose behind. The shield hung on the quivering lance! but Lathmon still advanced. Gaul foresaw the fall of the chief, and stretched his buckler before my sword; when it descended, in a stream of light over the king of Dunlathmon.

LATHMON beheld the son of Morni, and the tear started from his eye. He threw the sword of his fathers on the ground, and spoke the words of the valiant. Why should Lathmon fight against the first of mortal men? Your souls are beams from heaven; your swords the flames of death. Who can equal the renown of the heroes, whose actions are so great in youth! O that ye were in the halls of Nuäth, in the green dwelling of Lathmon! then would my father say, that his son did not yield to the feeble.—But who comes, a

* Cutha appears to have been Lathmon's wife or mistress.

mighty



mighty stream, along the echoing heath? the little hills are troubled before him, and a thousand ghosts are on the beams of his steel; the ghosts* of those who are to fall by the arm of the king of re-founding Morven.—Happy art thou, O Fingal, thy sons shall fight thy battles; they go forth before thee; and they return with the steps of their renown.

FINGAL came, in his mildness, rejoicing in secret over the actions of his son. Morni's face brightened with gladness, and his aged eyes look faintly through the tears of joy. We came to the halls of Selma, and sat round the feast of shells. The maids of the song came into our presence, and the mildly blushing Evirallin. Her dark hair spreads on her neck of snow, her eye rolled in secret on Ossian; she touched the harp of music, and we blessed the daughter of Branno.

FINGAL rose in his place, and spoke to Dunlathmon's battling king. The sword of Trenmor trembled by his side, as he lifted up his mighty arm. Son of Nuäth, he said, why dost thou search for fame in Morven? We are not of the race of the feeble; nor do our swords gleam over the weak. When did we come to Dunlathmon, with the sound of war? Fingal does not delight in battle, though his arm is strong. My renown grows on the fall of the haughty. The lightning of my steel pours on the proud in arms. The battle comes; and the tombs of the valiant rise; the tombs of my people rise, O my fathers! and I at last must remain alone. But I will remain renowned, and the departure of my soul shall be one stream of light. Lathmon! retire to thy place. Turn thy battles to other lands. The race of Morven are renowned, and their foes are the sons of the unhappy.

* It was thought, in Ossian's time, that traditions concerning this opinion are dark each person had his attending spirit. The and unsatisfactory.

OITHONA:

