In general it is easier to defend a position if you accept it than if you think it plain wrong. Students in the medieval schools were trained to defend positions they thought wrong. The acquisition of such a skill was bound to be an important weapon in their armoury. John Mair (c. 1467-1550) was a logician trained in the scholastic way and at the University of Paris during the first decades of the sixteenth century, and during these decades there were few arguers tougher than he.\(^1\) Some of the logical skills he had honed are in evidence in the *Dialogue* that he published as a preface to his 1510 *Commentary* on Book One of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (hereinafter *In 1um Sent*). In a sense there are three *dramatis personae* in the *Dialogue*: Gavin Douglas (c. 1476-1522), David Cranston (c. 1479-1512) and John Mair. Mair does not actually say anything but he is there throughout since (apart from the trivial fact that he wrote every word) Douglas and Cranston are in dispute about Mair, one of them in favour of the kind of theology that Mair writes in his *In 1um Sent* and the other against it. In effect therefore, the piece is a picture of Mair both attacking and defending himself. As a preface to my edition-with-translation of the *Dialogue*\(^2\) I offer here some background information and comments that have a bearing on the role of the *dramatis personae*.

Mair was born into a farming family in the village of Gleghornie in southeast Scotland. He possibly attended first a school in that village but certainly went in due course to the grammar school in the nearby town of Haddington. He was later to write with affection of the “sweet milk of grammar” that he imbibed there. Subsequently he stayed in Cambridge for one year, at God’s

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House, a community noted for its literary studies, where he was taught by John Thorn and must have got a grounding in Priscian’s grammar and the Latin poets. Thereafter Mair went to Paris. He entered the Collège de Ste Barbe and studied under Jean Bolu, through whom he probably learned something of the Italian humanists, including Angelo Poliziano, whom Mair quotes. He also studied Lorenzo Valla and deeply disapproved of his anti-scholastic message. Mair subsequently transferred to the Collège de Montaigu where he associated with a number of Scots including John Annand, who later became principal of St Leonard’s College in St Andrews, Robert Walterson, who later founded an altar to St Fiacre in his native town of Haddington, George Lokert, who was to become in due course rector of St Andrews University and then dean of Glasgow, Ninian Hume and David Cranston.

David Cranston (c. 1479-1512), a priest of the Glasgow diocese, arrived in Paris in 1495, enrolled at the Collège de Montaigu, studied under Mair, and began teaching at Montaigu in 1499. He edited two works by Mair, the *Termini* (Paris, 1502) and the *Quartus Sententiarum* (Paris 1509), and also wrote several philosophical works. One of these was his *Insolubilia*, two editions of which appeared in 1512. The second of them, edited by William Manderston and Antoine Sylvestre, contains an elegy *De immatura magistri nostri Davidis Cranston Scoti morte* [On the premature death of our master David Cranston]. Cranston was in many ways close to Mair, particularly in respect of their deep commitment to the scholastic tradition in logic and theology. Despite this commitment they were both sufficiently open-minded about the encroachment of humanist values to be willing to benefit from the presence in Paris of the great Italian humanist scholar Jerome Aleandro. It was Aleandro who introduced the teaching of Greek into Paris. He records: “There are many Scottish scholars to be found in France who are earnest students in various of the sciences and some were my most faithful auditors, the Scot John Mair, doctor of theology, and David Cranston, my illustrious friends”.

The first edition of Mair’s *Quartus Sententiarum* (1509), which had been edited by Cranston, was dedicated to Alexander Stewart, a son of James IV, who died, alongside his father, at Flodden. A subsequent edition, published in 1516, and therefore four years after Cranston’s untimely death, was dedicated to two people, one of who was Robert Cockburn, Bishop of Ross. The other was Gavin Douglas (c. 1476-1522), son of Archibald Douglas, fifth earl of Angus. If, as is likely, he was born in Tantallon Castle, a seat of the Douglases,

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3 God’s House (in 1505 re-established as Christ’s College) was in St Andrew Street in the parish of St Andrew. It is not known why Mair chose to attend God’s House but it cannot be ruled out that the nominal connection with Scotland’s patron saint may have played some part in the decision.

4 See A. Broadie, *George Lokert: Late-Scholastic Logician* (Edinburgh, 1983).
