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Thorne Compton

Adam Ferguson and John Witherspoon in "Satan's Seminary":
Douglas, the Critics, and Moral Philosophy



The opening of John Home's tragedy *Douglas* in Edinburgh on December 14, 1756, set off a controversy which raged for years through Edinburgh, Scotland and the Scottish Presbyterian Church.

The argument over the morality and legality of the stage had sputtered sporadically in Scotland since the 16th century. On several occasions, most notably in the Anthony Aston case in 1727, it had been brought to court. The Aston case resulted in an airing of the issues of censorship and prior restraint as well as heated discussions on the historical development of drama and the theological and ethical problems raised by acted drama and the public theatre before the Lords of Sessions. The fascinating documents relating to this case are in the Maitland Collection at the National Library of Scotland.

An important sidelight on the Aston case was that one of Aston's strongest defenders was Allan Ramsay, whose attempts to improve the cultural atmosphere of Edinburgh by encouraging theatre were to fail time and again throughout his life. Ramsay, after seeing the failure of traveling companies, and trying to assist a local theatre group, tried to start his own theatre in 1736. Ramsay's theatre at Carrubers Close was the first regular theatre built in Scotland, but within a few months it was closed, a victim of the Licensing Act of 1737

which Ramsay's enemies invoked as a means of shutting down his theatre. Ironically, there is no record that the most popular native drama of the time, Ramsay's own *Gentle Shepherd*, was ever performed in this theatre.

The Presbyterian clergy, which had fought the stage since they had become a powerful force in Scotland, had long maintained the position that the stage was an immoral institution which should be banned. They had cited over the years numerous social and moral harms which accrued from the theatre and had zealously warned believers that attending a play could bring corruption at best, and at worst cause one to be instantly transported into Hell.

It is tempting to view the controversy as a war of dark, dour, superstitious Calvinists against the forces of enlightened reason and artistic liberty. While this is true to an extent, it obscures the intellectual and moral debate which was serious on both sides. This paper will concern itself with one battle of that war which engaged the most intelligent combatants on each side and indicated a basic philosophical breach between those who believed that man was locked into a choice between vain pleasure and moral obligation, and the moral optimists who saw a brighter vision of man's moral and artistic possibilities.

Prior to the opening of *Douglas* the church had seemed to stand more or less united in its opposition to the stage. By 1756, however, social and economic changes had combined with the intellectual forces of what was becoming the Scottish Enlightenment (led by men like David Hume, Adam Smith, Hugh Blair, Alexander Ferguson and others) to make inroads into the church itself. Split over the politics of patron's rights as well as doctrinal differences which had arisen between the orthodox and moderates within the clergy, the church's strict hold over the imagination of its pastors and their flocks had begun to weaken. Thus when John Home, a Presbyterian clergyman, actually wrote and had produced a play on the public stage, the orthodox clergy saw a challenge they could not afford to let pass.

Several ministers had been involved in the production of the play or had attended it, and shortly after *Douglas* opened, the Edinburgh Presbytery moved to have formal charges brought against these men in an ecclesiastical trial. Only John Home himself lost his pulpit, and he did so voluntarily. The rest escaped with warnings or "solemn prohibitions" or with no punishment at all.

The pamphlet war which ensued was intense and continued sporadically for years. The attack in print ranged from the patient condescending tone of the anonymous pamphlet entitled

Some Serious Remarks on a Late Pamphlet entitled 'The Morality of Stage Plays Seriously Considered' in a letter to a Lady to the fiery rhetoric of the Cameronian upholsterer John Haldane who claimed that the theatre was

Satan's school, the seminary of the devil, and a nursery for hell which Beelzebub hath ever claimed as his own chief residence and rendezvous in the world, over which the actions practised are by his special command and suggestion. In like manner it is agreed on by sober pagans themselves that the play-actors are the most profligate wretches, and the vilest vermin that hell ever vomited up; that they are the filth and garbage of the earth...the debauchers of men's minds and morals, unclean beasts, idolatrous rapists or atheists and the most horrid and abandoned villains that ever the sun shone upon.¹

Home's defenders ranged from David Hume, who first dedicated the *Four Dissertations* to him and then withdrew the dedication when it became an issue in the dispute, to Alexander Carlyle, whose satire on the conservative position, *An Argument to Prove that the Tragedy of Douglas Ought to be Publickly Burnt by the Hands of the Hangman* (Edinburgh 1757), was so deft and convincing that the pamphlet was embraced by the conservatives for weeks before the joke dawned on them.

The pamphlets which give the sanest view of each side of the controversy were written by two men who were to become moral philosophers of some note--John Witherspoon and Alexander Ferguson. It is instructive to examine their contributions in the context of their later writings in moral philosophy, for in both cases what may seem to be the passion of the moment became a part of an intellectual and philosophical system. Both pamphlets give an excellent general review of the controversy and their argumentation on the aesthetic and moral value of the theatre presents the best contrast of the opposing sides in this dispute.

John Witherspoon is today perhaps better known in this country than in his native Scotland. Leaving Scotland ten years after the *Douglas* controversy, he became Principal and President of the College of New Jersey at Princeton, a teacher of James Madison, signer of the Declaration of Independence, a Congressman from New Jersey, and a moral philosopher of some note. At the time of the *Douglas* dispute he was a 33-year-old Presbyterian minister who was already gaining a reputation as a powerful preacher and an advocate of the conservative orthodox cause within the Church. His attack on the stage in the pamphlet *A Serious Enquiry into the Nature and Effects of the*

*Stage*² reveals an interesting sense of logic and a style which persuades by never seeming to deviate from sweet reason.

It is clear from the outset of *A Serious Enquiry* that Witherspoon is not the kind of ranting, superstitious clergyman who wishes to grind all pleasure out because of the "haunting feeling that someone, somewhere might be happy."³ It seems ironic that the man who wrote in his *Moral Lectures* that "Liberty is the nurse of riches, literature and heroism," could argue so powerfully against the stage.⁴ Witherspoon argues in his pamphlet that plays are immoral because they are fictions without a serious moral purpose. He denies that they have the necessary warrant from God, through scripture or revelation, to teach morals. If plays are assumed to be truths, then Witherspoon alleges that they are under a distinct disadvantage because if they reflect reality then they must show more evil than good, more sin than virtue, since this is the way the world presently is. The result of this is either to reassure the sinful, or cause despair to the virtuous. Unrealistic plays cannot have any good effect since the audience cannot understand them, and might have the bad effect of deceiving the audience into believing that fantasy is reality.

The degenerate nature of the stage Witherspoon demonstrates in an audaciously slippery argument which seems to cover all responses. He tells us that the present degenerate nature of the stage results from the interplay of four factors:

1. Actors are generally believed to be immoral, and their performances reflect this. Thus they exhibit plays which show their degenerate tastes.
2. Playwrights are immoral and they write immoral plays. Thus an honest actor (if there were one) would have no moral material to play.
3. Audiences are immoral; therefore playwrights and actors must pander to their tastes to survive. Therefore the moral play and actor would not get a hearing.
4. Even if good men attended the theatre, they would be in a minority and thus not help, and might hurt, since their presence might lead weaker men to attend.

If these arguments seem antiquated and absurd, consider that if one changes the terms "Theatre" to "television" and "immoral" to "banal," Witherspoon's argument seems contemporary indeed.

Witherspoon concedes that there are plays which are great and moving but these are the most dangerous of all since they have a greater power to persuade an audience and this power is

invested in a degenerate institution. The stage presents great moral and social harms, at least in Witherspoon's view. Since it is entertainment without moral purpose the stage wastes time and fortune while encouraging sloth, luxury and vice. Because of its content, it either distorts reality or encourages despair and sin by accepting a degenerate reality. The stage causes social harms by dividing one man from another, causing political and religious controversy, wasting time and labor and encouraging the hardworking bourgeoisie and proletariat to seek the luxury and vice of the rich. All in all the stage is a serious menace.

Witherspoon's arguments are illuminated when they are seen in the context of his *Lectures in Moral Philosophy* (1800). These lectures, collected after his death, reflect Witherspoon's most mature speculations on morals and society. While the lectures are founded on principles of social, civil and personal liberty, Witherspoon nevertheless retreats from his position on the theatre not one step. In the opening pages of his lectures he tells us:

The moral sense carries a good deal more in it than merely an approbation of a certain class of actions as beautiful, praiseworthy or delightful, and therefore finding out interest in them as the most noble gratification. The moral sense also implies a sense of obligation, that such and such things are right and others wrong: That we are bound in duty to do the one and that our conduct is hateful, blameable and deserving of punishment if we do the other.⁵

The center of Witherspoon's work seems to be the principle that the moral sense is above all others and that all sensations, actions and decisions must be filtered through it. He believes that the perception of beauty is an internal sense which is important, but which is inferior to the moral sense. Like the moral sense, the sense of beauty must be educated and improved. He shows the relationship of the moral sense to the perception of beauty by pointing out that the purest beauty exists in the act of moral obligation.

While seeming to approve of the other arts, Witherspoon discusses the drama in an explanation of that "phenomena in human nature nearly connected with the moral feeling...that there is such a disposition in the generality of men to crowd to see objects of distress as an extraordinary public execution."⁶ After reviewing the opinions of various philosophers of this phenomenon he comments:

another question is sometimes subjoined to the above, why men have pleasure in seeing tragedy which is a striking representation of a melancholy catastrophe. As far as the subject differs from comedy, it may be accounted for on the same principle as the desire to see objects in distress--but one powerful principle leads to both comedy and tragedy--a pleasure in the imitative arts, an exact portrait of any object whatever gives the highest pleasure even though the object itself were originally terrible or disgusting.

We see plainly that an indulgence of the pleasure given by a fine performance is what crowds the theatre. Unhappily, to give greater pleasure to a corrupt mind they often invent scenes and conduct the matter so as to make the stage the greatest enemy to virtue and good morals.⁷

Here we see a neat summation of the *Serious Enquiry*. Man takes pleasure in the imitative arts, which he defines as giving an "exact copy" of nature no matter how disgusting the original might be. This presents enough problems when the original is an immoral world, but it is made worse by invention which distorts truth for the sake of sensation and the pleasure of the corrupt mind. It is the "performance" which fills the theatre, not the knowledge gained from the play, and it is the sensation of imitation which gives pleasure of the mind. Sensation in the theatre becomes an end, not a means of moral or intellectual contemplation.

It is true that Witherspoon seems to have been well read in non-dramatic literature, and he speaks with great satisfaction about his reading of classical poetry, despite the fact that many of his complaints about the theatre could be as well raised against any art form. That he singled out the stage for his censure not only here, but in his other writings as well, seems interesting. Perhaps he never fully recovered from the *Douglas* dispute. It should be pointed out that for all of his passion against the theatre, Witherspoon does not suggest that it should be legislated out of existence. His *Moral Lectures* are filled with warnings against the dangers of political or judicial tyranny, and they contain a truly stirring defense of the principle of passive resistance. He seems to believe deeply enough in liberty late in his career to lament the immorality of the stage without limiting the liberty of men to be foolish enough to attend a play.

Witherspoon's belief in the first importance of the moral sense, and in the supreme beauties of moral obligation does give some grounding for the claim that sensation which serves

itself rather than a higher aim is deficient if not immoral. While Witherspoon's opposition to the stage is certainly understandable during the political and theological storm of the *Douglas* controversy, it seems somewhat less consistent in the pattern of his whole work.

Still, Witherspoon does give us the most rational attack on the stage to come out of the pamphlet war. One can certainly question Witherspoon's premises, his understanding of the stage, and his logic. What is beyond question is his seriousness, his belief and his high purpose.

Adam Ferguson presents a quite different approach. Ferguson was one of the luminaries of the Scottish Enlightenment, and while his social and political philosophy is now less studied than that of his friends David Hume and Adam Smith, he had in his time, and throughout most of the 19th century, an international reputation as a teacher and philosopher. He is recognized today as a pioneer in modern sociology, a representative of the common sense school of ethical philosophy and a conservative constitutionalist political philosopher of some note.

At the time of the *Douglas* controversy he was not a famous teacher and philosopher. He was an unemployed former minister who was waiting for David Hume to give up a position at the Advocates Library so that he could get the place and make ends meet. As a friend of John Home and David Hume, Alexander Carlyle and others who had supported the production of *Douglas*, Ferguson was anxious to enter the fray. His contribution, *The Morality of Stage Plays Seriously Considered* (Edinburgh, 1757), is an answer to Witherspoon's attack and is a highly literate logical discussion of the issues. It is also consistent with the views he expresses in his *Principles of Moral and Political Sciences* (Edinburgh, 1792).

Ferguson begins his essay defending the stage by reaffirming its teaching function. He reminds us that comedy exposes the follies of man to ridicule while tragedy is:

serious, grave and majestic. It represents the action of great men...the struggles in difficult, distressing situations, and where the sentiment they express raises admiration or pity and where the very faults they commit become so many warnings to the spectator.⁸

He disposes of Witherspoon's objection that no scriptural warrant has been given the stage by pointing out that plays were never banned in scripture, and compares plays to the parables of Christ in that they use stories to teach moral lessons.

In discussing the degeneration of the stage, Ferguson ad-

mits that there are bad and corrupt plays, but, he contends, "The manners of the peoples have so far prevailed, as in some degree to have informed the stage."⁹ His evidence for this was that *Douglas* was less licentious than Restoration comedy. As a believer in moral progress he felt that this tendency would continue until bad plays disappeared from the stage.

Witherspoon's list of moral harms were dismissed by Ferguson with the argument that if corruption were a ground for the banning of an institution why had not food been banned because of gluttony, or wine because of drunkenness. The real moral harm came from the division of the church in adversary groups over political and artistic issues which should not concern them. The theatre, by elevating the minds of men and leading them to moral contemplation, led to great moral good.

The social harms Ferguson dismissed as irrelevant to the stage, although he did suggest that the church could better fight poverty, vice and sloth if its ministers were not spending all of their time attacking the theatre. The social good accruing from the theatre in the evolution of the mind, the intellectual achievement and the raising of the cultural level Ferguson considered to outweigh any alleged harms. *Douglas* was especially important in this regard because it symbolized the end of English domination of the stage and began Scotland's assertion of its national identity within the theatre. Ferguson emerges from this pamphlet as a reformer who sees corruption being purified, and the benefits flowing from an active stage far outweighing any harms which might accrue.

In his *Principles of Moral and Political Science* Ferguson's moral optimism which is the basis for his belief in reform is made clear when he points out: "Man is formed with a general disposition to affect what he conceives to be good. If his conception be just, his affection will be proper and free from caprice and unaccountable passions."¹⁰ Because man has an innate disposition to affect what is good, his exposure to art which is "immoral" is not so dangerous, and in selecting what is good, men will eliminate the corrupt.

His conception of the "imitative arts" is not radically different from Witherspoon's though his conclusion certainly is. Ferguson believes that invention is the hallmark of the arts and:

all that we would preserve of nature is a true copy of the part we select; and vie with her in the interesting scenes which take place in the world, rather than produce a mere likeness or servile copy.¹¹

While he agrees that invention can be done merely for "entertainment" and can even profess wickedness, this does not disturb Ferguson because:

In such application of the human mind, indeed, either vice or virtue may predominate; and it is the object of wisdom to give virtue to the ascendent, not as stifle ingenuity merely because it may be abused. Its attainments make a part in the progress of intelligence and must finally tend to its best direction as well as to the enlargement of its force.¹²

Finally, art is an indispensable element of man which is essential for his development and spiritual integrity. He says:

Man is formed for an artist; and he must be allowed, even when he mistakes the purpose of his work, to practice his calling, in order to find out for himself what it is best for him to perform.¹³

Ferguson and Witherspoon have a disagreement which goes beyond a play; their pamphlets and later writings show a basic difference over moral sense. Witherspoon adheres to the principle that man is perfectible only through education, rigorous application of moral principles and a constant struggle to move beyond immediate sensation to the higher pleasure of moral obligation. Ferguson believes that man has an inborn moral sense which makes the choice of virtue easier, and that this active moral sense contributes to and interacts with intellectual artistic development to bring man nearer perfection.

The real beneficiary of the controversy over *Douglas* was the play itself. Controversy, as it always does, sold tickets, and after a remarkably successful run of seven days in Edinburgh, the play, already famous because of the pamphlet war, opened in London.¹⁴ It had a successful stage life for a hundred years and more, though today it seems creaky and overblown. After the *Douglas* controversy the stage was never in serious danger in Edinburgh, and within recent years the Presbyterian Church opened its own theatre company in Edinburgh.

The controversy does illustrate an important breach in the Scottish Presbyterian Church and a good part of the intellectual life of Scotland in the eighteenth century. It gave the forces of enlightenment and moral optimism a public forum from which to preach a new and brighter vision of man.

NOTES

¹John Haldane, *The Player's Scourge: or a detection of the ranting prophanities and regnant impiety of stage plays and their wicked encouragers and frequenters; and especially against the nine prophane priests, falsely called ministers of the gospel who countenance the thrice cursed tragedy called Douglas* (Edinburgh, 1757), p. 2.

²John Witherspoon, *A Serious Enquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Stage* (Edinburgh, 1757). Other editions appeared in Glasgow, 1757; Utrecht, 1772; New York, 1812.

³H.L. Mencken, *The Vintage Mencken*, ed. Alistair Cooke (New York, 1955), p. 233.

⁴John Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* (Princeton, N.J., 1912), p. 99. These lectures first appeared in print in 1800 (in the *Works*, published by Woodward of Philadelphia) although there are transcript copies dated 1772, 1782, and 1795 in the Library of Princeton University. Other editions of Witherspoon's *Works* are: Philadelphia, 1802, 1810, 1822; Edinburgh, 1804-5 and 1815.

⁵Witherspoon, p. 21.

⁶Witherspoon, p. 65.

⁷Witherspoon, pp. 66-7.

⁸Adam Ferguson, *The Morality of Stage Plays Seriously Considered* (Edinburgh, 1757), p. 7.

⁹Ferguson, p. 3.

¹⁰Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (Edinburgh, 1757), p. 14.

¹¹Ferguson, *Principles*, p. 289.

¹²Ferguson, *Principles*, p. 296.

¹³Ferguson, *Principles*, p. 299.

¹⁴*Douglas* opened in London on March 14, and played nine times during the season. This was not exceptional, but it was a profitable run. While the critical reception in London was

fair, it is doubtful that many agreed with the Scotsman who reportedly stood up after final curtain and exclaimed, "Whaur's your Willie Shakespeare noo?" See *Studies in Scottish Literature* 2 (1964), pp. 128-9.