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Paula R. Backscheider

John Home's *Douglas* and the Theme of the Unfulfilled Life



John Home's *Douglas* was one of the most popular tragedies of the mid-eighteenth century. A number of explanations for the play's acclaim have been posed. In many ways, the play incorporates the elements known to have high audience appeal: pathos, "nature," poetry, and historical material.¹ In addition, the dialogue is studded with popular sentiments about military prowess, the Scottish Union, and war. The circumstances of the first production added to the play's fame. The Presbytery reacted strongly to Home's production and a lively pamphlet debate raged.² Finally, the stars of the Edinburgh production were respected professionally but notorious personally.³ Modern scholars have pointed out a certain "dark fascination" in the psychology of the play,⁴ but critics have ignored the theme which runs throughout the play and touches nearly every character.

The fulfillment of hope seems to be within a character's reach, then is cruelly and suddenly denied. Home has designed the play so that nearly every theatre-goer--wife, father, mother, youth--can be touched by the experiences of the characters.⁵ The playwright's use of irony sharpens the sense of the character's proximity to fulfillment and intensifies the awareness of how a chance word or action can result in years of misery. The major imagery of the play contributes considerably to the

exploration and seriousness of the theme.

The heroine, Lady Randolph, is one example.⁶ Born to be a hero's wife and bear brave children, she has brooded on the deaths of her husband, brother, and infant son for eighteen years. At the beginning of the play, she is frozen in grief and resentful because of her unwilling marriage to Lord Randolph. Her opening speech introduces the image clusters of forest, water, and time, all metaphors of herself. She is much like the gloomy, haunted Radcliffian wood,⁷ and she seems a fountain of grief, both arresting and defying time. Lord Randolph's complaint about her unbroken sorrow underscores her description of herself: "Time, that wears out the trace of deepest anguish,/As the sea smooths the prints made in the sand,/Has passed o'er thee in vain" (I, 39-41) These beautiful lines underscore Lady Randolph's immunity to the usual relief provided by time and foreshadow her suicide when the sea will erase her anguish.

Douglas's death has dried her beauty and capacity for romantic love, but her maternal instincts live and are central to the play's pathetic appeal.⁸ When she sees Norval, the long frustrated feelings overflow and she muses, "My boy with blooming Norval might have numbered" and she decides to protect him. Her hungry heart seizes on Norval and, ironically, leads her to arouse Glenalvon's jealousy and to provide him with the means to kill Norval. When she discovers that Norval is her son, her imagination generates two visions. First, he will be the image of his father and uncle, "The star and glory of his native land," and, second, he will father a race of children who will play at her feet. She combines the military glory of her family with her maternal softness. Only after Norval's death does the strength of her dreams break free, "My fond heart/O'er flowed this day with transport," and she is once more overwhelmed by her sense of time: "A little while/Was I a wife! a mother not so long!" and the years of grief now stretch from end to end of her life.

Norval, the young Douglas, shares a similar life. Reared as a shepherd, suddenly elevated to hope of honor and achievement, he dies stabbed in the back by a villain in a gloomy forest. The hermit and his character have made him ambitious for military fame. His mother's revelation brings the sparks of this ambition to a blaze:

Hear and record my soul's unaltered wish!
Dead or alive, let me but be renowned!
May heav'n inspire some fierce gigantic Dane,
To give bold defiance to our host!⁹

Norval gets his wish. Glenalvon calls himself a Dane and is enraged by Norval's proud taunts. More than anything else, Norval wants to be a Douglas. He wants to "prove his birth" and, ironically, he dies as young as his father, sharing the fate of the men in his family. His mother has too much time, he not enough: "Some noble spirits, judging by themselves,/ May yet conjecture what I might have proved,/ And think life only wanting to my fame... (V, 213-215). He has not had time to enter the race he wanted so desperately to run.

Lord Randolph, too, exemplifies the theme. His marriage has been empty and barren and finally shatters the honorable long life he's led. Although he married Lady Randolph against her desire, he has been protective and patient. He regrets their childlessness and her indifference: "Decent affection and complacent kindness/Were all I wished for; but I wished in vain" (I, 91-93). When he realizes that he contributed to Norval's death unjustly, he knows that his attempt to live a life of virtue and honor is vain. The world will think that he wanted Malcolm's heir dead, and he will be haunted by the two deaths as long as he lives.

The fate of fathers is particularly hard. Sir Malcolm lived to see his son killed and his daughter cold and spiritless. Old Norval described how grief changed him. The shepherd himself buried his own sons, had his hopes of rest and reward destroyed, and contributed to Norval's death.

The villain Glenalvon also dies frustrated. His plans to inherit the fortunes are dashed by the Randolphs and his plans seem spitefully opposed by some supernatural power to him:

Th' imperfect rape to Randolph gave a spouse;
And the intended murder introduced
A favorite to hide the sun from me;
And, worst of all, a rival (II, 254-257).

Other characters puzzle over the condition of life which thwarts their deepest hopes. Lord Randolph hears the hermit's tale of having accidentally killed his brother, ending the promising careers of both, and remarks, "There is a destiny in this strange world,/Which oft decrees an undeserved doom...." Lady Randolph's last words are, "Why am I forced to this?"¹⁰

It is in characterization, tone and worldview that Home was "Shakespearian" to his age. Home observed the Neo-classical rules strictly, but in using the play to "paint the passions" and in opposing his characters with incomprehensible Fate rather than with *hamartia*, he appeared Shakespearian. Most of his critics identified his debt to popular conceptions of Shakespeare's art. John Upton praised Shakespeare's characteristic tragedy as one painting the miseries of the great, in-

volving almost all of the characters in calamity. His discussion of Shakespeare's use of English history and the didactic value of his "strongly marked and manner'd characters" might apply to Home as well.¹¹ Goldsmith compares Glenalvon to Richard and, in his generally harsh review, praises Home's ability to match character and dialogue.¹² Hugh Blair, Charlotte Lennox, and Lord Kames all praised Shakespeare for his natural representation of the passions and his vivid characters.¹³ The reviewer for *The London Chronicle* described the "language of nature" and passion in praising *Douglas*, the common "Shakespearean" qualities. David Hume's famous lines of praise in the Dedication to *Four Dissertations* (1757) identifies the Shakespearean command of human "affections." Only a few critics felt it necessary to distinguish the ways Home did not try to imitate Shakespeare.¹⁴

Shakespeare's tragedies were considered models of arousing pity and terror. For the eighteenth century critic, pity ideally preceded terror and was superior in moral value.¹⁵ The situation of the characters, then the series of calamities, provide pathos and prepare for Lady Randolph's speech in which she describes her life as a spectacle to awe Omnipotence's "vassal, man." Home used the sequence most preferred by his contemporaries.

Much of the play is set in a melancholy mood. The characters, like many poets of the same period, feel akin to the forest in their most reflective moods. Lady Randolph especially identifies with it, noting that it "Accords with my soul's sadness." Norval fixes his attention to the oak, "monarch of the wood" and the shepherd on the gloom. Appropriately, the wood hides Glenalvon's treachery and violence.

Water is a more complex image. Associated with time and grief, it functions in three ways. First, it is the moving sea which erases footprints and memories, meets in tides and currents to smooth the firth, and cancels passion. Second, it is a relentless force and associated with death:

Can thy feeble pity
Roll back the flood of never-ebbing time?
Compel the earth and ocean to give up
Their dead alive? (I, 164-167)

the ebbs and flows
of fortune's tide cannot be calculated (III, 354-355).

Yet like broken waves,
They but retire more awful to return (IV, 14-15).

The sea brings the Danes and wave after wave of men to invade

the Scottish coast. Lady Randolph accepts the war and the inevitable slaughter, associating them habitually with the sea. Finally, the water is an endless fountain or spring of grief and tears. Because the imagery is associated with Lady Randolph's heart and wasted beauty rather than with her face, her weeping seems to be from her spirit and being rather than from more common, transient sorrow. "This fatal day stirs my time-settled sorrow--Troubles afresh the fountain of my heart," Lady Randolph reminds her husband in the opening scene. The three types of water imagery symbolizes the tragic life which Lady Randolph dramatizes.

Some of the most beautiful poetry in the play explores the characters' experiences with time. Lady Randolph's story is framed by the gathering armies and by the passing hours of a single day. She sees that young Norval has his father's war-like spirit and says that he could die the next day in battle. Anna wishes that noon would become midnight so the ominous day would be over. Morning in the dark grove begins the play under the shadow of the battle which killed Lady Randolph's first husband and midnight in the same grove, her second husband hoping for death in battle after the murder, ends it. The day of the invasion, which should have been coincidence, and the darkening of the passing day, which should have been ordinary, become instead two particular instances of time's participation in evil and pain.

The contrasts between momentary joy and transporting prospects, on one hand, and, years of grief and despair on the other enhance the theme of the tragic nature of life. Lady Randolph muses over her hours of marriage, three weeks in measurable time, and the years of grief; she describes war as early graves for men and "grief-embittered years" for mothers. Randolph compares his hopes with his seven years of marriage; Glenalvon muses that he is not what he should be. Long, wasted lives contrast with truncated, promising ones.

Time comes to be measured out in sorrow. Lady Randolph's "time-settled" grief cannot be worn away by years. Anna says, "The hand that spin th' uneven thread of life/May smooth the length that's yet to come of yours," but Lady Randolph answers, "Not in this word." Goodness and affection in her experience bring but sharper grief. Moments of joy but prepare for years of sorrow. So conscious are the characters of this fact that no moment of happiness is unmarked by anxiety. Fate and time act together. The friendship between Malcolm and Douglas opens the way for Lady Randolph's double sorrow; Norval enters at the moment to save Randolph's life and enrage Glenalvon; the brothers on board ship quarrel under unusual circumstances, one dies and one lives out his wasted life in regret. The moment,

the innocent action of one, and fate combine until a pattern is firmly established in the play. This pattern colors the brief relationship of Norval and Lady Randolph. Even as they seem to be moving toward happiness, the prospect retreats before them. Glenalvon's anger, Randolph's insecurity, the coming battle, Norval's hunger for glory, and Lady Randolph's fears all overshadow the promise of reunion.

The play shows a world gone wrong, a world in all of its aspects shot through with tragedy. In the relationships between people, in the character's simple hopes, and in their attempts to act, lie the seeds of perpetual regret. Even the forms of the physical world, time and space, seem to conspire and threaten. Ordinary roles--mother, father, son, wife, soldier--and ordinary dreams destroy promising lives, and the result is expressed in images of natural phenomena blasted. Echoing Shakespeare's Sonnet LXXIII, Lady Randolph says, "In me thou dost behold/The poor remains of beauty once admired:/ The autumn of my days is come already;/For sorrow made my summer haste away" (IV, 188-191). The natural pattern of her life has been blasted and possibility and expectation shrivel. Only in her suicide does Lady Randolph defeat time and destiny. Her last speech mingles past, present, and future, her roles and her dreams, until she says, "What am I now?--I know.--But I shall be/That only whilst I please." She cannot fulfill her life, but she can end it. For an audience which wanted to give itself up to emotion, the play must have had considerable impact and may even have ended with a terrifying prospect of man's helplessness in such a world. Suicide, so shocking an event for the eighteenth century, partakes more of the appropriate ending of tragedy, terror, than of pity. The echo of Shakespeare's sonnet recalls once again the contrast between a life closing appropriately and one stifled and abbreviated.

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NOTES

¹ For explanations of the play's popularity, see St. Vincent Troubridge, "Norval," *N&Q*, 181 (1941), 148; William Jaggard, *N&Q*, 181 (1941), 148-149; L. R. M. Strachan, "Norval," *N&Q*, 181 (1941), 163; F. S. Boas, "John Home's First Two Plays," *Fortnightly Review*, 174 (1950), 336; Bertrand Evans, *Gothic Drama from Walpole to Shelley* (Berkeley, 1947), p. 19; James

S. Malek, "John Home's *Seige of Aquileia*," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 10 (1973-4), 232-233.

² See Alice E. Gipson, "John Home. A Study of His Life and Works," Diss. Yale 1916, pp. 21-22, 43-47, and 71-126; Alexander Carlyle, *Anecdotes and Characters of the Times* (London, 1973), pp. 158-165.

³ Carlyle, pp. 157-158; G. H. Bushnell, "The Original Lady Randolph," *Theatre Notebook*, 13 (1959), 119-123.

⁴ Robertson Davies discusses the "dark fascination" in *The Revels History of Drama in English* (London, 1975), VI, 154-155.

⁵ The theme seems to have had special appeal to Home. His friends and biographers refer to him as the "poet" and frequently describe his military and literary aspirations. See Gipson, pp. 2-3, 5, 8-9, 31; Henry MacKenzie, ed., *The Works of John Home* [3 vols.] (Edinburgh, 1822), I, 5-7, 31; Carlyle, pp. 62ff., and 118-119. MacKenzie wrote that Adam Ferguson had told him in a letter:

Mr. Home's favorite model of a character, on which, indeed, his own was formed, was that of Young *Norval*, in his tragedy of *Douglas*, one endowed with chivalrous valour and romantic generosity, eager for glory beyond every other object, and in the contemplation of future fame, entirely regardless of the present objects of interest or ambition (pp. 6-7).

⁶ Davies has a brief but provocative character study, pp. 154-155.

⁷ Evans, pp. 20-25; Robert Gale Noyes, *The Neglected Muse* (Providence, 1958), p. 167; Gerald D. Parker, "Critical Introduction" to *Douglas* (Edinburgh, 1972), p. 9; Hubert J. Tunney, "Home's *Douglas*," *Bulletin of the University of Kansas Humanistic Studies*, 3 (1924), 13-15.

⁸ Parker, "Critical Introduction."

⁹ *Douglas*, V, 86-89. Thackeray's General laments that the fight did not take place on stage in Chapter LX of *The Virginians*.

¹⁰ For reactions to this line, see Noyes, pp. 171-172, and Parker, p. 7.

¹¹ John Upton, *Critical Observations on Shakespeare* (London, 1746), pp. 41-54, 57, 60-65, 91.

¹² Oliver Goldsmith, *The Monthly Review*, 16 (May 1757) in *The Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. Arthur Friedman (Oxford, 1966), I, 12.

¹³ Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (Carbondale, 1965), II, 511, 524; Charlotte Lennox, *Shakespeare Illustrated* (London, 1754), I, ix and xi; Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism* (New York, 1830), pp. 206, 225-226, 375, 402. See also Dennis's *Essays on the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare* (1712); William Warburton's preface to *The Works of Shakespeare, Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare*, ed. David Nichol Smith (Oxford, 1963):

Now, in this Science, our *Shakespear* is confessed to occupy the foremost place; whether we consider the amazing sagacity with which he investigates every hidden spring and wheel of human Action; or his happy manner of communicating this knowledge, in the just and living paintings he has given us all our Passions, Appetites, and Pursuits (100).

Johnson's Preface to his edition of Shakespeare in *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson, Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Sherbo, VII (New Haven, 1968), especially p. 71. Cf. Arthur Sherbo, "Johnson's *Shakespeare* and the Dramatic Criticism in the *Lives of the English Poets*" in *Shakespeare: Aspects of Influence*, ed. G. B. Evans (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 58-59; David Nichol Smith, *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1928), pp. 62-63, 78-80.

¹⁴ MacKenzie, pp. 73, 75.

¹⁵ For studies of popular taste, see MacKenzie, pp. 73-74; Robert D. Stock, *Samuel Johnson and Neoclassical Dramatic Theory* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1973), pp. 118-126; A. Owen Aldridge, "The Pleasures of Pity," *ELH*, 14 (1947), 283-307; Parker, pp. 1-2, 5; Robert D. Hume, *The Development of English Drama in the Late Seventeenth Century* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 179-185, 216-220.