John Home's The Siege of Aquileia: A Reevaluation

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A Reevaluation

Of John Home's six tragedies, only *Douglas* (1756) was highly successful on the eighteenth-century stage. *Agis* (1758), *The Siege of Aquileia* (1760), *The Fatal Discovery* (1769), and *Almonzo* (1773) were moderately well-received, while Home's last play, *Alfred* (1778), ran for only three nights.¹ In the twentieth century, *Douglas* has been anthologized frequently, whereas the other five plays are not often read or given critical attention. Although it would be unreasonable to claim that *The Siege of Aquileia* is of major importance in the history of British tragedy, the play merits greater notice than it has received, particularly since Home's reputation as a tragedian has been based almost entirely on *Douglas*. This paper attempts to (1) demonstrate that *The Siege of Aquileia* differs fundamentally from and is superior to Home's other plays in terms of plot conception and primary tragic effects; and (2) illustrate the nature of Home's achievement with respect to plot execution by comparing *The Siege of Aquileia* with a later eighteenth-century tragedy, Edward Jerningham's *The Siege of Berwick* (1794), which is based on the same historical material and whose plot conception is nearly identical to that of Home's play.²

*The Siege of Aquileia* has been dismissed as carrying on the "outworn tradition" of "pseudo-classic drama" and as "much inferior to the *Douglas*, of the same author."³ On the other hand, Alice Edna Gipson, *John Home: A Study of His Life and Works* (Caldwell, Ida.: Caxton Printers, 1916).


2. In discussing *The Siege of Aquileia* and *The Siege of Berwick*, I have not hesitated to summarize parts of the action since copies of these plays are scarce. I have used the first edition of *The Siege of Berwick* (London, 1794) and the first edition of *The Siege of Aquileia*, found in *The Dramatic Works of John Home* (London, 1760), which contains his first three plays. A more readily accessible edition of Home's play is in *The Works of John Home*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh, 1822), the so-called "Mackenzie edition."

comments that "it strikes one that the play has been rather underestimated," and Hubert J. Tunney remarks that "so far as interest is concerned, this drama shows much improvement over Agis." Those qualities which distinguish The Siege of Aquileia from Home's other plays, particularly Douglas, perhaps account for its initial lack of popularity; it is not surprising that audiences applauding Douglas, which was standard theatrical fare in 1760, would be disappointed by The Siege of Aquileia since the two plays strive for dissimilar effects.

Douglas' initial popularity rested primarily on Home's successful evocation of pity for frustrated maternal affection and for the premature death of youthful valor. In addition to Home's emphasis on sentimental tears, other factors accounting for Douglas' unusual popularity undoubtedly were its melancholy setting and heroine, its appeal to Scottish national pride, and its declamatory language. But if we assume that tragedy involves action predicated on the choice between two worthy sets of conflicting values, Douglas is not tragic since neither Lady Randolph nor Douglas is placed in a situation necessitating moral choice. Instead, Home merely exploits the situations of Lady Randolph and Douglas for the pathos inherent in suffering innocence.

The Siege of Aquileia does not seek to evoke pity as its primary audience response. Instead, the protagonist, Aemilius, a Roman consul and governor of Aquileia, must choose between paternal love and honor; he must either sacrifice his sons or betray his country and personal honor. The two conflicting sets of values are made to appear equally worthy early in the play, and the essential action consists of Aemilius' weighing of possible courses of action, none of which can satisfactorily resolve the conflict. Unlike Douglas, Aemilius does not simply struggle against malignant external forces over which he has no control, nor is his dilemma one for which he bears no responsibility.

Of Home's six plays, The Siege of Aquileia is the only one in which the protagonist weighs alternative, conflicting sets of values; hence, the potential for tragic action is greater in this play than in the others. Agis is not a tragedy. In it, the political hero, Agis, is assassinated; but Agis is a wholly good man whose only flaw is his failure to recog-

4. John Home, p. 141, and "Introduction" to Home's Douglas (Lawrence, Kan.: Univ. of Kansas Press, 1924), p. 11, respectively. One questions Tunney's familiarity with the play, however, since he also states that "the events are striking and the action is vigorous" (p. 11), an odd statement since there are virtually no "events" represented on stage, and the essential action of the play, though well-executed, can hardly be described as "vigorous."

5. See Gipson, pp. 36-57.
nize the treachery of his enemies in time to avoid being murdered. Agis makes no decisions of consequence, and has no control over his destiny. In *The Fatal Discovery*, there is potential for tragic effects since Rivine must choose between personal honor and love, but the decision, based on the antagonist's deception of the heroine, is made before the present action of the play. Interest focuses on the results of Rivine's bad judgment, culminating in her suicide; since Home is able to make Rivine appear the innocent victim of deception, emphasis falls on the increasing pathos of her situation as the play develops. Home's fifth play, *Alonzo*, is almost identical to *Douglas* in plot conception, and emphasis again falls on distressed maternal affection. But in *Douglas*, Lady Randolph's suicide is both moving and adequately motivated; in *Alonzo*, Ormísinda stabs herself for no apparent reason at the moment when mistaken identities could easily be untangled and disaster averted. *Alfred*, deservedly the most obscure of Home's plays, is a melodrama; the action of the play is taken up with Alfred's various schemes to save his betrothed from the Danish king, Hinguar. The only decisions made by Alfred and Hinguar are those of timing in outwitting one another.

Although he changed the setting and the names of characters to avoid straining Scottish-English relations, Home apparently derived the central situation for *The Siege of Aquileia*, as did Jerningham for *The Siege of Berwick*, from accounts of Edward III's siege of the Scottish border town of Berwick in 1333. In that siege, Sir Alexander Seton agreed to yield Berwick in a certain time unless help arrived, and gave, among others, one of his sons to Edward's forces as a hostage. Seton's son was executed when Berwick was not surrendered, negotiations were resumed, and the Scots again agreed to surrender Berwick if Scottish reinforcements did not arrive within a few days. When the Scottish army attempted to relieve Berwick, it suffered a disastrous defeat at the hands of Edward's army at Halidon Hill. Gipson mentions that a 1798 edition of Home's plays states that Home originally intended to call *The Siege of Aquileia* *The Siege of Berwick*; moreover, the *Critical Review* for March, 1760, and *Biographica Dramatica* draw attention to the similarity between the siege of Berwick and the siege in Home's play. Although neither playwright follows historical accounts closely, it is not surprising that both Home and Jerningham turned to the siege of Berwick for dramatic material since the choice faced by Seton contains ample potential for tragedy.

If the central situations in *The Siege of Aquileia* and *The Siege of Berwick* are similar, the two plays differ markedly with respect to plot execution. In criticizing *The Siege of Aquileia*, *Biographica Dramatica*
Home's *The Siege of Aquileia* charges that "the incidents are too few" and "the distress is too much the same from beginning to end" (III, 270). In both plays, there are few incidents, and virtually all of them are reported after occurring off-stage; hence, both plays tend toward closer rather than acting drama. The second criticism — that the "distress is too much the same" throughout — indicates what is perhaps the greatest problem in plot execution faced by each playwright. A comparison of the manners in which Home and Jenningham attempt to resolve this problem, which is inherent in the plot conceptions of the two plays, provides some notion of Home's achievement in *The Siege of Aquileia*.

Though not without shortcomings, Home's development of the complication in *The Siege of Aquileia* is far superior to Jenningham's in *The Siege of Berwick*. The first four of the five acts of *The Siege of Aquileia* are almost entirely concerned with the necessity for Aemilius' choice between honor and paternal love. Home's handling of Aemilius' dilemma is highly effective in defining its various implications, developing a number of apparently satisfactory but ultimately unsatisfactory solutions, and making the dilemma gradually more difficult. The nature of the "distress" is constant from beginning to end, but the process of defining the central conflict is sufficiently varied and complex to prevent a static audience response. In Jenningham's four-act play, Seton faces a similar initial dilemma, but its implications and alternative solutions are not developed; instead, the dilemma is merely transferred from Seton to his wife, Ethelberta, in the third act. The initial choice is viewed in the same conceptual terms throughout the play.

In terms of plot execution, the first act of *The Siege of Aquileia* is perhaps as effective as anything Home wrote. He quickly establishes the characters of the protagonist, his wife, and his sons; prepares the audience for the significance of the ensuing conflict; and provides sufficient background material to make the remaining action intelligible. As the play opens, the audience is informed that Aquileia, an important Roman outpost in northern Italy, is besieged by the deposed tyrannical emperor, Maximin. Titus, one of Aemilius' sons, asks permission of

6. Home apparently profited from earlier mistakes. One of the crippling weaknesses of *Agis* is the lack of intelligibility in the central situation. An average audience, without benefit of specialized knowledge of Spartan history, can hardly be expected to comprehend the issues involved in the conflict between the dual Spartan kings in time to make sense of *Agis*’ assassination.

7. Home does not date the action of the play, but it would have to be set in 238, the year that Maximinus I (Gaius Julius Verus), a Thracian peasant, was replaced as emperor by Gordian I (Marcus Antonius Gordianus).
his father to venture outside the walls to burn a tower which Maximin
has constructed during the siege; Aemilius first refuses and then, against
his better judgment, grants permission. Home quickly alters circum-
cstances so that Aemilius' initial judgment is justified; Gordianus, the
Roman senate's choice to succeed Maximin, sends a message command-
ing Aemilius to prolong the siege and spare his troops because Gordianus'
troops will arrive in three days. Aemilius sends his other son, Paulus,
to stop Titus, but the brothers are captured. Maximin offers to release
Aemilius' sons if Aemilius surrenders Aquileia by the end of the day;
if he refuses, his sons will be executed. The stage is thus set for the
conflict between duty and paternal love which is the focus of Acts II,
III, and IV. Each event occurring in these three acts contributes to the
central conflict by suggesting solutions or intensifying the difficulty
of Aemilius' choice.8

The first act of Jerningham's play is also primarily concerned with
Seton granting his sons, Archibald and Valentine, permission to attack
the enemy forces directly outside the walls of the city. However, the
political background is not clarified sufficiently in The Siege of Ber-
wick. Since both sides are apparently anticipating a truce the next day,
there is no reason for Seton to grant his sons' request, particularly since
they ask to attack Edward's forces chiefly because each had a "vision"
in which they did so. In Home's play, differences in Titus' and Paulus'
characters are carefully defined in Act I. Both are courageous, but
Titus' valor partakes of rashness, in contrast to Paulus' relative maturity
and prudence; since Aemilius' reluctance to grant Titus' request is
based on his recognition of Titus' foolhardiness, and since it is that
overly enthusiastic valor which leads to his sons' capture, Aemilius
must bear responsibility for the dilemma he faces in Act II. But in
Jerningham's play, there are no significant differences between Archi-
bald and his younger brother, Valentine, nor is there any suggestion that
Seton's decision may be unwise (except insofar as there is always danger
in military exploits).

8. By selecting a single source of interest in The Siege of Aquileia, Home
avoids the debilitating error of his first play. In Agis, the sub-plot involving
the romance of Lysander and Euanthe does not form an integral part of the
main political plot involving Agis; indeed, the two plots vie for supremacy
and evoke conflicting emotions.

In the siege of Aquileia, there is no record of Aemilius having to choose be-
tween sacrificing his sons or his country, but Maximinus I was murdered by
his own troops. The siege was as important as Home makes it, but the outcome
did not assure Roman stability. It is important for Home's purposes, however,
that Gordian be associated with stability, respect for law, and administrative
justice.
A more significant difference in the two plays involves the nature of the dilemma faced by the protagonists. After Archibald and Valentine are captured and Edward's general orders Seton to surrender "or else your sons shall rue your stubbornness," the sons are sent back to Berwick with the understanding that one of the two must return to captivity. Seton's initial choice, like that of Aemilius, appears to be between duty and paternal love, but that dilemma is weakened and finally overshadowed by the difficulty of deciding which son to save. Choosing duty necessitates sacrificing one son at the expense of the other, and since that course of action is unthinkable to Seton and all other members of his family, the original dilemma disappears almost immediately after it is introduced. The two conflicting sets of values are far from equal in Act II, nor does Jerningham attempt to restore the worthiness of duty in the rest of the play. At the end of Act II, Archibald and Valentine decide that both will return to captivity, which takes even the secondary choice (which son to save) out of Seton's hands. This secondary choice remains uppermost in the remainder of the play even though it is no longer Seton's; in Act III, Ethelberta goes to Edward's camp, is given the same choice of which son to save, and, like her husband, finds the choice impossible. Consequently, Act III does not develop either the central or secondary dilemma in *The Siege of Berwick*; instead, it is taken up with Ethelberta's frantic expressions of woe, which are substantially the same as those expressed by Seton in Act II.

In developing the central conflict of his play, one of the most effective devices Home uses is the contrast between Aemilius and his wife, Cornelia, with respect to the role of emotion as a determinant of action. Cornelia is willing to sacrifice long-range objectives to immediate desires since she is swayed by passion; for example, in Act II she urges acceptance of Maximin's offer regardless of the consequences. When Aemilius refuses, action is at a standstill since it appears that the conflict between "nature and duty" is irreconcilable, and that Aemilius has chosen duty. A third alternative is introduced at the end of the act, however, when a priest suggests to Cornelia that Aemilius may promise to yield in four days, thus preserving his sons' lives until Gordianus arrives.

Home places both sides of the conflict before the audience in rapid succession and redefines the emotional bases of the conflict at the beginning of Act III. By doing so, he chooses not to exploit a static emotional response as he had done in *Douglas*; instead, he focuses on the complexity of the tragic dilemma. Pathos reinforces tragedy rather than replacing it. Cornelia broaches the priest's plan to Aemilius,
grounding her argument in the strongest possible emotional appeal by forcing Aemilius to assume sole responsibility for their sons’ deaths if he rejects the plan. She also attempts to minimize Aemilius’ responsibility to Rome by deemphasizing Aquileia’s importance in relation to Rome and family. Up to this point in the play, arguments have rested on a rather simple and mutually exclusive distinction between emotion and reason. If Cornelia’s arguments were wholly acceptable, Aemilius could not reject her plan and retain the audience’s sympathy. However, the audience has come to accept the importance of the defense of Aquileia since all other sympathetically-portrayed characters equate its defense with the preservation of Roman liberty. After Cornelia’s plea, Varus skillfully counteracts her arguments by combining emotion with reason in support of Aemilius’ responsibility to Aquileia.

Varus, Aemilius’ former friend who now commands the British legions under Maximin, announces that Maximin has resolved to raze Rome if Aquileia falls. Varus’ report emphasizes again the importance of Aquileia and brings Aemilius’ emotional ties to Rome to the aid of his disciplined sense of duty. Varus’ report also alters circumstances relating to Aemilius’ tactics in dealing with Maximin since Varus switches his allegiance to Aemilius, promising that his troops will rebel if he has assurance of help. Hence, Aemilius agrees to promise to yield Aquileia in four days, but the apparent resolution of Aemilius’ dilemma is short-lived because Maximin discovers Aemilius’ trickery and demands immediate surrender. Aemilius refuses, and for the second time in the play, it appears that the dilemma has ended with the sacrifice of Aemilius’ sons.

Aemilius’ dilemma is not resolved until there are two additional possible solutions introduced in Act IV. Aemilius will not surrender unless it appears that Rome is so morally weak that it no longer engenders virtue in its patrician families. When Titus is granted permission to confer with his father, Aemilius fears that Titus has come to beg for compassion; if this were so, the dilemma would be resolved since one set of conflicting values (Roman virtue) would no longer deserve Aemilius’ support. Home quickly reverses this apparent probability by affirming the counter-probability, which in turn reaffirms the worthiness of one set of conflicting values: Titus has come to announce that the brothers will commit suicide if Aemilius seeks to free them at the price of dishonor. Home thus takes the decision out of Aemilius’ hands. If Aemilius yields to Maximin, nothing will be gained and honor lost; if he refuses, his sons will still die, but honor will be preserved. It might be argued that this is a weak resolution since it precludes responsibility for action based on the protagonist’s moral decl-
sion. On the other hand, such a conclusion reaffirms the irresolvable nature of the tragic dilemma.

In the final act, Varus is executed by Maximin, and the British troops revolt; in the ensuing melee, Titus kills Maximin, but is also killed, ending the play on a double note of sorrow and triumph.

The events in the last acts of *The Siege of Aquileia* and *The Siege of Berwick* present similar problems of probability; again, a comparison of the two can provide some measure of Home's accomplishment. In each play, the dilemma has disappeared by the beginning of the final act, but the action is incomplete. Every event in Act V of *The Siege of Aquileia* is probable in terms of preceding action and character delineation; motivation for the revolt of Maximin's troops has been established, and it is consistent with what we have learned of Titus' character earlier in the play that Titus rather than Paulus be killed in a final gesture of heroism. But in Jerningham's play, there is no preparation for the events in the last act; Seron kills Edward's general in battle, and Archibald and Valentine return safely and surprisingly. They were chained to pillars outside the walls of the city so that they would be hit by arrows during the battle; they now explain that no arrows hit them, and Ethelberta comments that they must have had a "guardian angel," an explanation which is as probable as any other that Jerningham could have provided without rewriting the first three acts.

It should be evident from the preceding discussion that although Home's resolution of the conflict is not wholly satisfactory, his handling of the complication is adroit, particularly in comparison with Jerningham's treatment of the same material. The two plays bear comparison not only because they are similar in plot conception, but because *The Siege of Aquileia*, despite its marked superiority to *The Siege of Berwick*, was only slightly more successful than the latter play on the eighteenth-century stage.9 Eighteenth-century stage success was seldom an accurate index of a play's worth, but Home's play does not deserve the same obscurity as Jerningham's, nor should Home's reputation be allowed to rest on his only stage success, nor should we assume that Home's five less successful plays are roughly equal in merit because their comparatively short runs were approximately equal.

*The Siege of Aquileia* is fundamentally unlike Home's other plays insofar as Home focuses on a single action which is essentially tragic

9. Home's play was performed nine times, Jerningham's five. The D.N.B. mentions that on the first night, Jerningham's "heroine died, but on the succeeding representations her life was spared." The printed version follows that of "succeeding representations."
in conception. Pathos is not the primary effect for which Home strives in this play, nor is it often exploited for its own sake. The pathos of Cornelia's situation is perhaps overemphasized in the fourth act and early in the fifth, but her distress contributes to the principal action of the play insofar as it dictates the nature of her appeals to Aemilius. All of Home's plays suffer from his propensity to overemphasize essentially unreal tender female distress. If Cornelia's character is less offensive than those of Rivine or Ormisinda, for example, it is because her role is smaller and her grief of secondary interest. Moreover, by focusing on a single action, Home avoids problems inherent in the plot conceptions of his two earlier plays, problems which he was not able to overcome. It is never clear whether Douglas is intended to be Douglas' tragedy or Lady Randolph's, or whether Agis is meant to be a political or love tragedy, but there is no question that The Siege of Aquileia is Aemilius' tragedy. Consequently, this play is more unified than the earlier plays; there is little extraneous matter since each scene contributes to the essential action of the play.

Another difference between The Siege of Aquileia and Home's other plays is one which may have legislated against its early success but which ought to enable it better to withstand the test of time. In his "Account of the Life of Mr. John Home," Henry Mackenzie makes the following remark about The Siege of Aquileia: "There are not those bursts of real and overpowering passion with which the audience sympathizes and is moved." Mackenzie's disapproval is perhaps an indication of Home's achievement in the play with respect to language; indeed, though many of the speeches are tiresomely long, they are surprisingly free of the florid excesses characteristic of all of Home's other plays. The play is not without what Mackenzie refers to as "passion," but it is expressed in relatively simple, unaffected terms.

Although Home's reputation as a dramatist has rested, almost from the beginning, on Douglas, the preceding discussion indicates that Home was capable of composing an entirely different kind of serious drama of literary merit. If The Siege of Aquileia is not particularly well-suited to the stage without alteration, it is entertaining fare for the closet in its present form. It ought to be read in conjunction with Douglas if we are to do justice to the reputation of the first important Scottish playwright.

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