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from the Caledonian Mercury, no. 5456 (Saturday 18 December 1756), [2–3]**

M. A. Box

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Crito's "impartial Observations on
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M. A. BOX

The following review by "Crito" was reproduced in shortened form in 1888 (Dibdin, *Annals*, 89–90) and is not now readily available. It is transcribed and edited here as illustrative of the events prompting David Hume's dedication to John Home of *Four Dissertations* in 1757. The possibility that Crito was in fact Hume deserves exploring, though the question remains speculative given the evidence available.

The review appeared as a letter in the *Caledonian Mercury* and the *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, both on 18 December 1756, on the day of the fourth performance of Home's *Douglas* at what was then openly called a theater. Until recently the theater had been carefully denominated the "Concert-hall, Canongate," wherein music was performed followed "*gratis*" by a play. Crito's review was reproduced in the *Edinburgh Weekly Journal* for 30 December. The transcription below reproduces the appearance in the *Caledonian Mercury* without regularizing its inconsistencies. Accordingly, duplicated without correction are the missing quotation mark at the front of paragraph 3 and the missing letter *k* from "dramatic" and "public" in paragraphs 4 and 5.

The language of the review is similar to that used by Hume concerning *Douglas*, but readers must judge for themselves the possibility that Hume was the author. With the remark below about the "charming Simplicity of Action, so long banish'd

the Stage” (§ 3), compare Hume’s compliment to the playwright that “The story is simple and natural; but what chiefly delights me, is to find the language so pure, correct, and moderate. . . . It is reserved to you . . . to redeem our stage from the reproach of barbarism.” To the printer William Strahan, Hume remarked on the “Simplicity both of Fable and Style” of the tragedy and, to the abbé Le Blanc, on its “Elegance, Simplicity, & Decorum” (*Letters* 1: 215, 247, 261). Although the simplicity that Crito praises is in West Digges’s acting and that praised in Hume’s letters is in Home’s writing, Crito praises the simplicity of action as consonant with the “the Author’s Idea” (§ 3), that is, with the literary qualities of the drama. The critical values behind the praise might reflect a certain consensus view rather than a peculiar judgment identifying Hume as the author. On the other hand, the tone of the letter is consistent with Hume’s extravagant way of promoting others’ works. As Crito’s letter promotes the first run of the play, Hume’s dedication of *Four Dissertations*, dated 3 January 1757, seems intended partly to promote the impending publication in March of *Douglas* in Edinburgh and London. Bringing up a future publication as Crito does would have the effect of promoting the book in advance. Hume’s dedication has topics in common with Crito’s letter: the partiality of friendship, the “tenderness and simplicity” of the play, the “unfeigned tears” of those in the audience (*Four Dissertations*, v–vi). Still, Crito’s letter could have been written by anyone concerned in the fate of the play who was old enough, like James Oswald of Dunnikier, to refer to Digges as “young” (§ 4). Crito could sound like Hume because Hume sounded like the coterie promoting the play or because Crito took his lead from Hume’s views.

The history of Home’s second play, from its composition to the subsequent controversy causing a small pamphlet war, is familiar from Alexander Carlyle’s memoirs (*Anecdotes*, 157–67, under AD 1756–1757) and Mossner’s account (*Forgotten Hume*, chap. 3). Hume himself tells the story in brief in a letter of 3 May 1757 that can serve present purposes with a little amplification. Drafted in 1754, the play

had been rejected by the Manager of the London Theatre, the best Actor, but the worst Critic in the World [David Garrick, in 1755]; so that it was oblig’d to be brought on at Edinburgh. I thought it proper for me to support my Friend under these Discouragements by all means in my Power; and accordingly, address’d to him this Dedication The Tragedy was afterwards brought on at London [Covent Garden, 14 March 1757, preceded by a revival in Edinburgh in February], and acted with great Applause of the best Judges.¹ You will find it, I hope, very pathetic, elegant, natural; entirely in the Taste of the Greek Tragedy, & very wide of the Fustian & Rant, which have so much prevail’d on our Theatre. (*New Letters*, 40–41)

In this account Hume has left out how the play had become a congeries of causes—critical, nationalist, and social. Upon the first run, controversy erupted over clerical involvement in theater that raised issues of the power of presbyteries over ministers and Scottish culture. That year the general assembly had entertained and put aside a proposal for an inquisition into Hume's writings. Amongst other ministers, Alexander Carlyle was arraigned in church proceedings in March 1757 for attending the third performance (the "author's night," the proceeds of which would go to the playwright). Home would evade proceedings himself by resigning his ministry in June, when the *Scots Magazine* reprinted the dedication to *Four Dissertations*. (See *Scots Magazine* 19: 158–60, 216–18, 263–64, 293–94.)

Doubtless the controversy both helped and hurt the reception of the play. In 1770–1776, however, long after its initial publicity, *Douglas* enjoyed at least fifteen performances in London (*London Stage 1660–1800*). In his tabulation of significant publications in the Scottish Enlightenment, Sher classifies *Douglas* neither as a "good seller" nor a "strong seller," but as a "best seller" (*Enlightenment & the Book*, 626–27). To Hume and the like-minded, it did not appear inevitable that verse tragedy in English would atrophy, and the way forward after the achievements of Thomas Otway's generation, they thought, was to incorporate the neoclassical refinements of French drama.

1 SIR,

Your inserting the subsequent impartial Observations on a late dramattick Work will, I hope, oblige all your Readers as well as your humble Servant.

2 "If the Merit of a dramattick Work could be ascertained by the general Approbation it receives during the Representation, and the Ardour with which all Ranks crowd to the Theatre, or the irresistible Power it has of drawing Tears from every Spectator, we might safely pronounce the Tragedy of DOUGLAS to be one of the most perfect Works of Genius, any Age has produced.—Experience, however, teaches us to be more reserv'd in our Decisions; and an ingenious Critick has justly asserted, that the Hour of Publication is the Hour that decides the Reputation of a Dramattick Performance. But tho' we must defer our final Judgment of the Piece, till it can be calmly and deliberately scann'd in the Closet, now is the Time to pronounce on the Merit and Ability of the Actors, who, during the Run of this Play, have given so much Pleasure to the Publick.

3 The Genius of the Author, and the Abilities of the chief Performers seem, by good Fortune, to have been formed to illustrate each other in the highest Degree: For we will venture to affirm, that as there is no other Part that could have so fully shewn Mrs. WARD's amazing Powers in Tragedy, so there is but one Actress in Britain who could have performed the Part of Lady Barnet, as well as she has done; and we are far from being certain, that there is any Actor at all who could have equalled Mr. DIGGS, in the

Character of Young DOUGLAS; other Actors there are, perhaps, who can express violent Passions with more Execution than that Gentleman, and oftner raise Pity and Horror, than he; but in copying Nature with Judgment, throughout a whole Piece, in preserving the Attention to Recital, and in that charming Simplicity of Action, so long banish'd the Stage, we think him inferior to no Actor in Britain. In the Part of Young DOUGLAS, his excellent Taste and Judgment, peculiarly appear. Other Actors would have endeavoured to dazzle an Audience by the most splendid Action, and have shewn in a Scotch Theatre, that DOUGLAS was at least of as good Blood, and of as fiery Composition as Piercy. But this judicious Actor has taken no Liberties of this kind; for he has carefully followed what seems to be the Author's Idea. When Young DOUGLAS first appears as a Peasant's Son, his native Spirit struggling under the Disadvantages of his Condition and supposed Birth, produces a Bashfulness and Modesty in his Manners, which recommend him still more to the noble Patron, whose Life he had saved by his Valour. And when he is afterwards instructed in the Story of his Birth, tho' he naturally assumes a nobler Part, and gives freer vent to his Spirit, yet he has still respect to the Injunction of his Mother, to bear himself in Publick, as the Son of Randolph. In short, this excellent Actor seems to have copied exactly, that beautiful Picture Lady Barnet draws of her Husband and Son, near the End of the third Act, when she says, to Anna, of Young DOUGLAS,

As he looks now, so look'd his noble Father,
 Aray'd in Nature's Ease, his Mien, his Speech,
 Were sweetly simple, and full oft deceiv'd
 Those trivial Mortals who seem always wise,
 But when the Matter match'd his mighty Mind,
 Up rose the Hero; on his piercing Eye
 Sat Observation; on each Glance of Thought
 Decision follow'd; as the Thunderbolt
 Pursues the Flash——

- 4 “While I am warmed by this young Gentleman's Theatrick Excellence into so Publick a Praise of it, I cannot avoid adjoining this Testimony of the great Satisfaction he has given to all Ranks of People, by the apparent good Effect of these indefatigable Labours he hourly bestows on the Improvement and Regulation of the Drama. When I assert that I never desire to view the Action of any dramatic Work more perfectly or properly conducted than the DOUGLAS was, I do but common Justice in saying, That every Lover of elegant Decency in theatrical Entertainments, is indebted to this Gentleman for the Propriety and strict Regulation, with which this, as well as every other Piece, has been represented since his direction of our Theatre.

- 5 “Letters of this kind are, I know, generally conjectured as the Productions of partial Friendship, and often imputed to mean and sordid Motives. But

neither the one nor the other influence the honest Commendations I make use of. Applause cannot be too public, where Merit is conspicuous. As a Lover of Truth, and an Admirer of the most instructive Entertainment the Mind of Man ever invented, I write this Letter, which, I enjoy the additional Satisfaction of believing, is the concurrent Sense of every Lover of polite Literature and Taste in this Country. I am, Sir, Yours, &c.

"CRITO."

Annotations

2. **an ingenious Critick.** Doubtless this critic was John Dryden, who in his dedication to his play the *Spanish Fryar* (1681) said that "a judicious Reader will discover in his Closset that trashy stuffe, whose glittering deceiv'd him in the action." Elaborating, he said that "the propriety of thoughts and words, which are the hidden beauties of a Play, are but confus'dly judg'd in the vehemence of Action" (*Works* 14: 99, 102) and reiterated the point in his dedication to his translation of the *Aeneid* (5: 272). Thomas Rymer had made the same point *en passant* at the beginning of his *Tragedies of the Last Age* ("1678" [177], *Critical Works*, 19), and John Dennis upheld it against Richard Steele in 1723 (*Critical Works* 2: 258). Hume wrote to Strahan on 15 February 1757 that *Douglas* was acted in Edinburgh "with vast Success. And it reads as well as it acts" (*Letters* 1: 245).

2. **the Hour of Publication.** *Douglas* had separate editions in Edinburgh and London in March 1757, appearing in London during the week of the 14th–20th (*London Chronicle* 1 [17–19 March 1757]: 271). In Edinburgh it was advertized in *Caledonian Mercury*, no. 5499 (29 March 1757), [4]. Without attempting to distinguish between genuine editions and reissues, one sees from the *English Short-Title Catalogue* and the catalogue of the British Library that the play was available in print more or less continually into the 1830s. There was an edition in Philadelphia in 1790.

3. **the chief Performers.** Sarah (Mrs. Henry) Ward (1727?–1771) was amongst the players who, flouting the law (10 George II, c. 28), started up the troupe in the Canongate in 1746. She and West Digges (1720?–1786) were veteran performers highly regarded outside of Scotland. Digges took over the management of the theater by October 1756 and staged *Douglas* on 14 December. He lost control of the theater in 1758, and after he and Mrs. Ward left Edinburgh she took the name of Mrs. Digges. (See Highfill et al., *Biographical Dictionary*, s.v. both performers.) The praise of Digges's good taste in ¶ 4 is echoed in an encomium appearing in *Caledonian Mercury*, no. 5848 (20 June 1759), [3]: under Digges's management "shall the stage be *virtue's* school, | No scene of jarring *ridicule*" (¶ 4). Both compliments reflect the hostile scrutiny under which the theater existed in Scotland and possibly disapproval of the cynical comedy associated with the Restoration age. It might indicate something of the

actor's appeal that in 1762 James Boswell's ideal of male character was a composite of Addison, Steele, and Digges (*Boswell's London Journal*, 62–63, 94).

3. of as fiery Composition as Piercy. Putting aside Home's horse named Piercy (Carlyle, *Anecdotes*, 153–54), the reference is simultaneously to Shakespeare's Hotspur in *1 Henry IV* and to the historical Henry Percy (1364–1403). The border hostilities of 1388 “proceeded more from a rivalry between the two martial families of Piercy and Douglas, than from any national quarrel,” wrote Hume in his *History*; “A fierce battle or skirmish was fought at Otterborne, in which young Piercy, sirnamed *Hotspur*, from his impetuous valour, was taken prisoner, and Douglas slain” (2: 304–305). The slain hero was James, 2nd earl of Douglas (ca. 1358–1388). The family rivalry and the two heroes' part in the battle was commemorated in the famous ballad of “Chevy Chase.” In his 1748 *True Account* (§ 20), Hume quotes from *1 Henry IV* by memory and in “Of Avarice” (§ 1) alludes to a specific scene.

3. As he looks now. In the version performed at Covent Garden and published in London and Edinburgh in March 1757, Lady Barnet was named Lady Randolph. Crito quotes at length from a play that would not be published for nearly fifteen months. The quotation is accurate except for the first line, which in the published versions reads “As he does now” (*Douglas*, 32). Hume was among those who made suggestions for improving the script before the performances (*Letters* 1: 196, 215–16).

4. this young Gentleman's Theatrick excellence. A natural reading of this phrase is that Crito was old enough to see Digges as comparatively young. In 1756 Digges was about thirty-six, Hume forty-five. On 22 July 1757, Hume called John Home (aet. 35) “a very ingenious, young Gentleman” (*Letters* 1: 261). Carlyle names Hume and Patrick Murray, Lord Elibank (1703–1778), as foremost amongst promoters of the first run who were “Running about and Crying it up as the first performance the World had seen for half a Century” (*Anecdotes*, 158–59 at 159). Among those whom Carlyle names as attending rehearsals, only Hume and Elibank seem candidates to call Digges young.

NOTES

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1 Hume reported on 30 April 1757 that the play was doing "as well as cou'd be suppos'd, considering the very bad Actors, by whom it is represented at London" (Mossner, "New Hume Letters to Lord Elibank," 440).

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