



‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’  
READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

WILLIAM HUTCHINGS



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

©2023 William Hutchings



This work is licensed under an Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text for non-commercial purposes of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

William Hutchings, *‘Wit’s Wild Dancing Light’: Reading the Poems of Alexander Pope*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0372>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of this image is provided in the caption and in the list of illustrations. Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

Further details about the CC BY-NC license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0372#resources>

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-300-0

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-301-7

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-413-7

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-80064-414-4

ISBN XML: 978-1-80064-415-1

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-673-5

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0372

Cover image: Michael Dahl, ‘Alexander Pope’ (ca. 1727), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander\\_Pope\\_by\\_Michael\\_Dahl.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexander_Pope_by_Michael_Dahl.jpg)

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

## 2. *Sappho to Phaon*

---

Examples: Lines 143–48; 179–84

Pope's earliest venture into the erotically charged world of the Ovidian verse epistle is *Sappho to Phaon*, a translation of the fifteenth poem in the Latin poet's *Heroides*, a series of letters from legendary heroines to their lovers. In a surviving manuscript, Pope states that it was written in 1707 (Mack 1984, pp. 72–89). The poetic world it inhabits is that of his other early work, the *Pastorals*. *Sappho to Phaon* was published in March 1712, in the eighth edition of a collective translation of Ovid's *Epistles*, which had first appeared in 1680.

The legend was that Sappho, a sixth-century BCE Greek lyricist from the Aegean island of Lesbos, fell in love with Phaon, a boatman of Mytilene who had been granted beauty and youth by Aphrodite. Sappho's only extant complete poem is a hymn to Aphrodite, which may have suggested linking together the historical and the legendary. Phaon is said to have rejected Sappho's love and fled to Sicily, leaving her distraught: 'Phaon to Etna's scorching fields retires, / While I consume with more than Etna's fires' (lines 11–12). The somewhat frantic and over-heated tones of these early lines happily soon give way to something altogether richer and more moving. Or, it may be that Sappho is being depicted as gradually settling into elegiacs: broadly speaking, alternating lines of dactylic hexameters and pentameters (respectively six- and five-stress lines)—an unaccustomed form for a poet whose natural home is the stanzaic lyric. Sappho herself draws attention to this change: the 'lute neglected, and the lyric muse', she writes, love has taught her tears 'in sadder notes to flow' and tuned her heart 'to elegies of woe' (lines 6–8). Elegiac metre is distinctly different from the regular hexameters familiar from epic poetry. Indeed, Ovid devoted the first poem in his *Amores* to a playful demonstration of Cupid's ownership

of the six-five form's alternating rhythms. However, Pope has in mind a longer-term goal than an attempt at specific metrical imitation. Dryden's Virgil translation, which appeared in 1697, had shown how a flexible and resourceful deployment of heroic couplets, occasionally diversified with triplets, could render epic hexameters successfully. Pope's aspirations, even at this stage, are targeted on finding a kind of heroic couplet suitable for his own serious aims. In this early Ovidian work, Pope manages his couplets in such a way as to express an intense empathy with the original, an immersion of the poet's voice within the emotions and situation of the epistle writer.

### Lines 143–48

'Tis thou art all my care and my delight,  
 My daily longing, and my dream by night:  
 Oh night more pleasing than the brightest day,  
 When fancy gives what absence takes away,  
 And, dressed in all its visionary charms,  
 Restores my fair deserter to my arms!

These lines set up at the outset a tone of intimacy and simplicity: 'Tis thou'. There is no affectation of language or syntax in the largely monosyllabic line 143, so that the 'all' comes across as lacking any hyperbole. The smooth metrics produce a line of directness and flowing grace, making 'delight' an agreeably appropriate concluding word. The frank and ungarnished repetition of 'my' into the second line of the couplet continues these notes, but now with rhythmic variation so as to form a line metrically balanced to give weight to the totality of the speaker's commitment. The satisfying completion of 'daily' by 'night' is phonically effected by the alliteration of 'daily ... dream', set up in the last word of the first line ('delight'), leading naturally into 'dream by night'. Every part of Sappho's life is filled with 'thou'.

The next line reverses the day/night sequence to form a gentle chiasmus: 'My *daily* longing, and my dream by *night*: / Oh *night* more pleasing than the brightest *day*'. Night glides smoothly back to day, with only the slightest breath after 'pleasing' to dwell on an echo of the falling rhythm of 'longing'. The remaining lines explain why night is more pleasing than day: its release of the imagination in dream can restore the image of Phaon. Night supplies what day has removed. What might,

in other contexts, have been a harsh oxymoron, 'fair deserter', is here accommodated into Pope's rhythmic and syntactic gentleness. 'Fancy' is not only Sappho's nocturnal dream: it is Pope's poetic imagination. Both are palliative, Pope's poetry merging with the comforting ease of her dream.

### Lines 179–84

A spring there is, whose silver waters show,  
Clear as a glass, the shining sands below:  
A flowery lotus spreads its arms above,  
Shades all the banks, and seems itself a grove;  
Eternal greens the mossy margin grace,  
Watched by the sylvan genius of the place.

The lamenting Sappho now situates herself within the world of Pope's *Pastorals*. 'Summer', for example, contains a 'crystal spring' that serves as a mirror, a 'watery glass' (lines 27–28). In particular, the lamenting songs of Hylas and Aegon in 'Autumn', one mourning an absent love, the other a faithless love, share similar moods. The voice of Sappho is thus subsumed into a pastoral world, but with a new intensity of the actual. She is, after all, a historical figure, even if one remote in time and, in this epistle, given a legendary role. Sappho's real presence derives from her foundational status within the love monody, the amorous lyric. Hers is the original voice of love poetry.

Other details reflect from *Sappho to Phaon* to the *Pastorals*. For example, Aegon's regret for his lost love prompts him to propose as a solution to his pains 'one leap from yonder cliff' ('Autumn', line 95). Sappho is called by a 'watery virgin' to throw herself off a cliff into the sea (lines 186ff). For the moment, though, the mood is softer, as becomes a pastoral. Honeyed indulgence extends over the scene, symbolized by Pope's Lotus tree whose fruit brings the forgetfulness that overwhelms Odysseus's men in book 9 of Homer's *Odyssey*. The green world stretches beyond the reach of time, and the whole scene is guarded by a 'sylvan genius of the place', a protective and nourishing spirit of the woods.

All this is rendered in rhythms that remain undisturbed and in euphonious diction that casts a graceful air over the landscape. For example, the rhyme word 'grove' echoes the long vowel in 'lotus', and varied long vowels ('greens ... genius', 'grace ... place') protract

the third couplet, adding an element of dreaminess, counterpointed by not-too-intrusive consonantal chiming: 'mossy margin', 'greens ... grace'. The poetic voice is one of ease, easefully achieved. *Sappho to Phaon* re-appeared in the 1717 *Works*, but there it is accompanied by later poems where Pope's capacity to immerse his poetic voice with a female protagonist's is set a sterner test. In the pastoral tones of this translation, he is only warming up.