



‘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All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at 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

Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

8. *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*

Examples: Lines 55–68, 75–82

The *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady* was first published in Pope's collected *Works* of 1717, under the title of *Verses to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*. It is fair to say that it has, from that first publication to the present day, proved to have been among the most disconcerting of his poems. When reading many critics and commentators, one detects varying degrees of discomfort and uncertainty of response. Some, even if they do not openly declare it, are unhappy about its subject: a woman's suicide. Others have been more concerned with attempting to trace—fruitlessly—the identity of the woman than with honestly reading the poem. The generally held view nowadays that no specific individual is meant has not, on the whole, been accompanied by a rigorous reevaluation. Hence, its status within Pope's *oeuvre* has remained marginal, and its considerable emotional power insufficiently recognized.

Lines 55–68

The first half of the poem narrates the situation leading to the lady's suicide, but it does so in such an indirect and imprecise manner that many readers have been left frustrated and, therefore, unsympathetic. A consequence is that Pope's art in building from discretion of reference towards precision of emotion has been underestimated. From line 47, Pope's attention switches fully to the lady's present predicament: a dead woman who has lacked, and still does lack, her proper rites and the due

attention of those once dear to her. Instead, her fate has been consigned to 'foreign hands'—the phrase is emphatically repeated at the beginning of lines 51, 52, and 53—and to 'strangers' (line 54). To this desolating circumstance, the poem responds with indignant rhetoric:

What though no friends in sable weeds appear,
Grieve for an hour, perhaps, then mourn a year,
And bear about the mockery of woe
To midnight dances, and the public show?
What though no weeping loves thy ashes grace,
Nor polished marble emulate thy face?
What though no sacred earth allow thee room,
Nor hallowed dirge be muttered o'er thy tomb?

lines 55–62

The trio of 'What though?' openings reflects the preceding trio of 'foreign hands', answering it with bitterness rising to outrage. The lady has been deprived of 'friendly' mourners. Yes, but what commonly constitutes such mourning? Is it short-lived grief and the 'trappings and the suits of woe', as a reproachful Hamlet puts it to a court and to a mother celebrating a new marriage undertaken with unseemly haste (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II. 2)? Hamlet's sardonic notes may be heard in the 'mockery' of 'midnight dances and the public show'. She has been deprived of a tomb. Yes, but what genuine feeling is symbolized in graven 'weepers' or a shiny image? Most daringly of all, what price the rites of a funeral dirge and 'sacred earth'? The poem's tone here rises to a challenging, even outrageous, level of sarcasm: the grudging 'allow thee room' is, one might say, close to the bone.

All this sets up the poem's emotionally charged and committed rejoinder:

Yet shall thy grave with rising flowers be dressed,
And the green turf lie lightly on thy breast:
There shall the morn her earliest tears bestow,
There the first roses of the year shall blow;
While angels with their silver wings o'er shade
The ground, now sacred by thy relics made.

lines 63–68

This response, with its total change of mood, is morally greater than the appurtenances of conventional religious rituals because it is authentic, the grace of nature adorned by the elegance of art. Pastoral here rises to the level of elegy. Nature supplies the simple but delicate respect due to the victim of human impropriety and malignance. Nature itself will produce the flowers with which the lady's grave may properly be 'dressed'. The 'first roses of the year' will delicately acknowledge her youth, her untimely death in the morning of her life. Early dew will be the natural tears denied by human agency. In place of the artificiality of stately monument, 'green turf' will be her respectful and sensitive covering. Lying behind this line is the Roman epitaphic inscription 'sit tibi terra levis' (sttl), elaborated in Martial's epigram book 5, 34: 'mollia non rigidus caespes tegat ossa nec illi, / terra, gravis fueris: non fuit illa tibi' [may no hard turf cover her gentle bones; nor, earth, lie heavily on her: she was no heavy weight on thee]. Ben Jonson's tender epitaph *On My First Daughter* (1616) memorably translates these sentiments into the light octosyllabic couplet of its conclusion: 'This grave partakes the fleshly birth, / Which cover lightly, gentle earth'.

This tasteful tribute rises to its climax in its final couplet. The 'ground'—Martial's 'terra', Jonson's 'earth'—will itself be sanctified by the lady's presence. Pope's bitter reflection on the conventionally conceived 'sacred earth' (line 61) is transformed into its proper equivalent. Nature's holiness is the source of the truly angelic. All this lies in the future, in the triadic repetition of 'shall' (lines 63, 65, 66); but the last line sets it in the present: 'now'. And where is this present? In the poem itself. The lines that we read are the poetic epitaph for one meriting the angelic presence. The lady lives not only in some foreign field, but in the poem.

Lines 75–82

Pope takes a further emotional and graceful step to conclude the poem:

Poets themselves must fall, like those they sung;
 Deaf the praised ear, and mute the tuneful tongue.
 Even he, whose soul now melts in mournful lays,
 Shall shortly want the generous tear he pays;
 Then from his closing eyes thy form shall part,
 And the last pang shall tear thee from his heart,
 Life's idle business at one gasp be o'er,
 The Muse forgot, and thou beloved no more!

The paragraph begins with the kind of structurally significant couplet characteristic of Pope's mature style. The caesuras fall at the sixth and then fourth syllables. Six-syllable half-lines thus begin and end the couplet, and these define the fate of poets: they 'must fall', leaving 'mute' their 'tuneful tongue'. The shorter half-lines are enclosed within, and these refer to their subjects whose praise they sung. Metrically and semantically, then, we have the gentler sort of chiasmus, in which the loved subject is metaphorically embraced by poets' voices. But each line as a totality is complementary in its meaning. Poets and those they sing are alike in their mortality, and in their consequent deprivation ('deaf', 'mute'). Strong opening trochees further link the lines ('Póets', 'Déaf the') to provide counterweight to the rhymes at the end.

This generalized couplet then 'melts' into the personal tones of the second: 'Even he'. At this point firm structure gives way to lyrical elegance, the rhythm merging with the mood conveyed and phonically expressed in the predominantly long vowels and liquid consonants ('soul', 'melts', 'mournful', 'lays'). These melancholy tones, however, make way in their turn for the painful third couplet. Intensely personal feeling is rendered by the familiar form of address ('thy', 'thee') and the violent verb, 'tear', which, cruelly and almost mockingly, re-voices the 'generous tear', turning sympathetic weeping to anguish. This is the ultimate act of enforced loss of memory: 'thou beloved no more' brings the language of intimacy ('thou') up against resonant emptiness. The bleakness of this finale is deeply personal and comes close to a refutation of the poem's title. Memory is lost at the very moment the poet joins the lady in death.

However, the poem itself still remains, and we need to balance the desolation of its final paragraph with the beauty and transfiguration of the lines examined above. Pope has already demonstrated, in his translation of Ovid's *Sappho to Phaon*, his knowledge of classical elegiacs. His epistolary *Eloisa to Abelard*, which also was published for the first time in the 1717 *Works* and shows every sign of having been written at a time near to the *Unfortunate Lady*, is an imaginative *tour de force* deriving from the same source as *Sappho to Phaon*: that is, Ovid's *Heroides*, letters written by heroines to their lovers.

The change in title of our present poem, from *Verses* to *Elegy*, points in the same direction. Pope is using the tradition of classical elegy to give

voice both to female speakers and to a profoundly personal sympathy with female victims of desertion or the intensity of their own emotions. In classical elegy, the absence of a theological solution to the stark reality of human mortality means that resolution can be achieved only in a form which expresses and sets in equipoise both particular grief and universal resignation. Classical elegy is, in this way, profoundly humanist and vitally poetic. (See Williamson 1993, pp. 39–72 [esp. pp. 54–55].) Pope's conclusion to his *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady* writes of the poet's 'closing eyes' from which the lady's form 'shall part'. As Roger Lonsdale notes in his edition of *The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith* (1969, p. 133n), English poetry's outstanding elegy, Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751), picks this phrase up in a stanza at the core of its meaning:

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
Even from the tomb the voice of nature cries,
Even in our ashes live their wonted fires.

lines 89–92

Pope's *Elegy* is his own sympathetic poetic response to, and expression of, that human requirement, which is given its supreme form in Gray's great poem.

