



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

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10. *Epistle to Robert Earl of Oxford and Earl Mortimer; To Mr Addison; Epitaph on James Craggs, Esq*

Examples: *Epistle to Oxford*, lines 13–20; *To Mr Addison*, lines 45–52, 67–72

The Scriblerus Club was formed in the autumn of 1713 and was meeting pretty regularly by January 1714. As mentioned in the Introduction, the group's main members were Jonathan Swift, John Arbuthnot, John Gay, Thomas Parnell, and Alexander Pope. They were occasionally joined by Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, leader of the Tory ministry from 1710 to 1714. Previously, Pope had been an occasional visitor to a larger and Whiggish group centred on Joseph Addison, who met at Button's coffee house in Covent Garden. Pope's association with this group dated from the period during which he contributed to *The Guardian* and *The Spectator* (in which, with the assistance of Richard Steele, his *Messiah*, a fusion of passages from Isaiah and Virgil's fourth eclogue, appeared). Addison was 'warmly supportive' of Pope's project to translate Homer's *Iliad* when it was announced in October 1713 (Mack 1985, p. 275). But, 'as autumn wore into winter, Pope found himself drawn away from the Whig group at Button's to the magnetic Toryism of Swift' (Mack 1985, p. 235). A process of divergence was under way.

The aims of the Scriblerus Club were to mock the follies of pseudo-learning and, especially, to expose abuses of language in all forms of poor writing. The vehicle of this satire was to be a character called Martinus Scriblerus, a learned fool who had ranged widely, but shallowly and ineffectually, in the arts and sciences (see *Memoirs of the Extraordinary*

Life, Works, and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus, ed. by Charles Kerby-Miller 1966). The most significant effect of the project was to infuse later works with a Scriblerian spirit. Pope's *Peri Bathous* (1728) and *The Dunciad*, and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), are notable outcomes. For a more sceptical view of the extent and significance of the Scriblerus Club, see Marshall (2008), and Damrosch (2013, pp. 245–46).

Pope sent his *Epistle to Robert Earl of Oxford and Earl Mortimer* to Harley in October 1721. Harley replied in November, giving Pope permission to print it as a dedicatory introduction to an edition of the works of Thomas Parnell, who had died in 1718. The volume appeared in December 1721. Harley himself, following the fall of his ministry in 1714, had been impeached and imprisoned in the Tower of London, accused of treasonable activities during the negotiations leading to the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. While he was awaiting trial, charges were dropped and he was released. He retired to his Herefordshire estate until his death in 1724.

Epistle to Oxford, lines 13–20

Absent or dead, still let a friend be dear,
 (A sigh the absent claims, the dead a tear)
 Recall those nights that closed thy toilsome days,
 Still hear thy Parnell in his living lays,
 Who, careless now of interest, fame, or fate,
 Perhaps forgets that OXFORD e'er was great;
 Or deeming meanest what we greatest call,
 Beholds thee glorious only in thy fall.

This eight-line verse-paragraph faces in two directions. The first two couplets look back to what Harley, and Pope, have lost in order to celebrate what remains in the present. The principal markers of loss forcefully open the paragraph. 'Absent', with its reversed opening stress—in classical metrics a trochee not an iamb—refers to Swift, who had long been settled in Dublin as Dean of St Patrick's; and 'dead' refers to Parnell. The chiasmic second line repeats the words, enclosed in their sad effects: a 'sigh', a 'tear'. The second couplet returns Harley to those days when his 'toilsome' immersion in politics and government could be relieved by the club's enlivening activities. That memory is then placed against the second line of the couplet, which exults in the power

of poetry to revive the voice of the dead man. The double-stressed 'Still hear' (a spondee) places emphasis on the repetition of 'still' and extends the 'dear'/'tear' rhyme: publication of Parnell's poems, his 'living lays', gives voice to remembrance and transforms grief into pleasure. That final phrase, 'living lays', concludes a steady build-up of /l/ sounds through the two couplets, notably in the repeated 'still' and the name, Parnell, which appropriately lies at the heart of its line. 'Thy Parnell' answers 'thy toilsome days', the familiar form of address asserting the closeness of the friendship signalled in the paragraph's opening line.

The second half of the quartet of couplets moves the perspective onwards. Pope has invited Harley to recall Parnell through the latter's poems. Now, Pope gives Parnell a voice to recall Harley. Parnell has moved beyond the human concerns of 'interest, fame, or fate'. For Harley, notably in his former prominence in the body politic, the adjective Pope chooses is 'great', the rhyme-word in the third couplet. Raised to a superlative in the fourth couplet, it is antithetically set against 'meanest'. Parnell is perhaps no longer conscious of mere worldly status (the name 'Oxford'—Harley's title—counters 'Parnell' earlier); or, perhaps, his superior vision can now review the whole of Harley's career, which came to an abrupt end, as does the verse-paragraph, with his final 'fall' from power. This is not, however, to spin a common morality tale about the fragility of ambition. The great paradox of the final line is that Harley's most 'glorious' moment was his fall.

What does this mean? Geoffrey Tillotson's essay 'Pope's "Epistle to Harley": an Introduction and Analysis' (*Augustan Studies*, 1961, pp. 162–83) draws attention to Pope's blunt and fearless review of Harley's chequered history. The concise 'fall' with which our paragraph ends is followed up in the remainder of the poem by 'disgrace' and 'cloud', and a reminder of Harley's perilous time in the Tower ('the scaffold, or the cell', lines 30–39). The vicissitudes of an ambitious life are indeed extreme. But the other side of the coin, and the poem's core message, is that a human being can show his true merit under such stress, as Harley has done. The quality of an individual is found 'in each hard instance tried' (line 23). The force of poetry, now elevated to 'The Muse' (line 28) as it was earlier raised in poetic register to 'living lays' with reference to Parnell's poems, lies in how it can trace 'the brave man's latest steps .../ Rejudge his acts, and dignify disgrace' (lines 29–30). The epistle's finale

resoundingly affirms that the Muse both 'shades thy evening-walk with bays' and declares Mortimer to be 'truly great' (lines 35–40). Pope's use of the word 'bays', the classical symbol of poetic prowess, aligns Harley with Parnell. The Muse's voice speaks clearly through Parnell's works and Pope's dedicatory poem. Harley, Parnell, and (discreetly, for the poem has no 'I', no first person) Pope are all reunited through the power of creative language, the medium of friendship.

Reunion of the parted in poetry features in Pope's contribution to another collected works of 1721, Thomas Tickell's edition of the writings of Joseph Addison, who had died in 1719—reunion to the extent, even, of reconciliation. According to his own note on the poem, Pope originally wrote *To Mr Addison* in 1715. By then, relations between Pope and Addison had begun to cool. The cause was literary rather than political, though a personality clash may have played a part: the older Addison gained something of a reputation for reticence or, to be harsher, stand-offishness. Devotees of the Muse are not, alas, always free from petty jealousies. Pope signed his contract for a translation of *The Iliad* with the printer Bernard Lintot in March 1714. Two months later, Tickell, who was a member of the Buttons group led by Addison, signed a contract with another publisher, Jacob Tonson, for his own translation. Although Addison did not publicly withdraw his initial encouragement of Pope's project, he transferred his support to Tickell and lent him assistance (Mack 1985, p. 276). He did not, it seems, inform Pope of this rival venture and his role in it.

Notwithstanding the state of relations between them—and the true details are inevitably unclear—Pope's epistle contains at its climax a generous tribute to Addison. The poem traces a brief history of 'medals', by which is meant coins from the classical period usually bearing an inscription or a head of the figure being celebrated (see *OED*, 'medal' *sb.* 2).

Pope's commentary on the medals themselves is not lacking in satirical touches. These focus on the ironies of greatness and the absurdities of collectors. A personified figure of Ambition is represented as sighing over the inadequacy of larger-scale monuments to preserve the glories of those whose vanity raised them: 'she found it vain to trust / The faithless column and the crumbling bust'. Instead, she 'contracts her vast design' into the form of a medal that can be held in the palm of

a hand, small being not just more beautiful but more resistant to time: 'And all her triumphs shrink into a coin' (lines 19–24). 'Shrink' here wittily and tellingly both celebrates the power of the artificer to devise something that might last and wryly observes the reductive scale of the product. Then Pope turns his attention to the 'pale antiquaries' who pore over their collections and the 'sacred rust of twice ten hundred years' (line 38). Here, the oxymoron 'sacred rust' brings the collectors' obsession into comic alignment with the fame sought by emperors and heroes inscribed on the coins. The past and the present share human foibles, which the satirist is compelled to expose by ridicule.

At this point, Pope changes the tone of the epistle as he turns to address Addison and his book in another four-couplet paragraph:

Theirs is the vanity, the learning thine:
Touched by thy hand, again Rome's glories shine;
Her gods, and godlike heroes rise to view,
And all her faded garlands bloom anew.
Nor blush, these studies thy regard engage;
These pleased the fathers of poetic rage;
The verse and sculpture bore an equal part,
And art reflected images to art.

To Mr Addison, lines 45–52

These lines have rhythmic balance and grace, and they contain a eulogistic register of language. For example, the first couplet is metrically balanced to form a reflective pattern of a six/four division of syllables in the first line and a four/six division in the second. That rhythmic chiasmus itself reflects the semantic chiasmus in line 1, where 'Theirs' is answered by 'thine' at either end and the key antithetical terms are held in between, swinging on either side of the comma. By this means, Pope emphasizes his distinction between the irrational mania of collectors ('Theirs') and the sober knowledge and scholarship contained in Addison's book on the subject ('thine'). Pope's heavy satire of collectors, such as poor Vadius (meaning Dr John Woodward, an antiquarian and regular victim of Scriblerian ridicule) who is 'long with learned spleen devoured' (line 41), is answered by praise for Addison as a true scholar whose lightness of 'touch' (line 46) adds lustre to the medals as products of Roman splendour. To 'shine' is, thus, both literal and metaphorical: the coins

are restored to their original brightness and reflect the good qualities of the classical civilization which produced them.

Smooth lines of verse render their assertions attractive and engaging. Thus 'And all her faded garlands bloom anew' uses the positive language of pastoral, graced with a lyric impetus of /l/ sounds: 'all', 'garlands', 'bloom'. The final couplet neatly encapsulates these qualities of the poetry. 'Verse and sculpture' (that is, the inscriptions and representations on the coins) are brought into a state of equality, an assertion exemplified in the balanced phrasing of 'And art reflected images to art'. Pope here virtually quotes his own earlier *Epistle to Mr Jervas* (1716; see Chapter 6): 'While images reflect from art to art' (line 20). That poem was written to accompany Dryden's translation of Dufresnoy's verse treatise on painting. By means of this self-allusion, Pope imports the most laudable of literary precedents into his praise for Addison's book. Like its subject, the medals of the classical period, Addison matches in his words the attractiveness of the coins as visual objects.

This paragraph paves the way for the poem's noblest and most generous compliment to Addison. Pope concludes with a call for contemporary Britain to emulate the creative splendours of the classical periods by producing representations of its intellectual heroes, so that its 'laurelled bards' may take their place alongside those of Greece and Rome: 'A Virgil there, and here an Addison' (line 62). Joseph Addison and the great Roman epic writer share space in the line, 'here an Addison' reflecting 'A Virgil there'. This is praise indeed, but parallels between the past and the present do not end there. Poets need patrons. Virgil had his in G. Asinius Pollio, whose memory also deserved preservation on a coin. As for the present age, Pope proffers the name of James Craggs (lines 63–64) and ends the poem by actually writing a six-line inscription to accompany the head of Craggs on this proposed, virtual, medal:

Statesman, yet friend to truth! of soul sincere,
 In action faithful, and in honour clear;
 Who broke no promise, served no private end,
 Who gained no title, and who lost no friend;
 Ennobled by himself, by all approved,
 And praised, unenvied, by the Muse he loved.

To Mr Addison, lines 67–72

James Craggs was a politician who became Secretary of State in 1718. He and Pope were near neighbours at Chiswick, then at Twickenham, and 'held each other in high esteem' (*TE*, IV, 1939, ed. by Butt, p. 356). Craggs gave Pope some shares in the South Sea Company at a time when they were highly sought after. That action soon became compromised by what gained notoriety as the South Sea Bubble, the prototype of all future capitalist scandals, and, for many people thereafter in the eighteenth century, a defining moment in the growth and morally ambiguous status of a financial economy. Both Craggs and his father (also James) were inevitably implicated in the affair. The scandal was still at its height when Craggs junior died suddenly of smallpox in 1721 at the age of thirty-five. A month later Craggs senior committed suicide.

These distressing events should cast a dreadful retrospective shadow over Pope's adulatory lines. But Pope remained as faithful to Craggs and his memory as his poem describes Craggs's actions to be. 'There never', he wrote in a letter to John Caryll, 'lived a more worthy nature, a more disinterested mind, a more open and friendly temper than Mr. Craggs' (Elwin and Courthope, VI, 1871-79, p. 276). Pope was prepared, also, to make such fidelity public. The six lines proposed as the inscription to a medal were turned (with only the touching emendation of 'And praised, unenvied' to 'Praised, wept, and honoured') into an epitaph for Craggs in Westminster Abbey and published in the Pope-Swift *Miscellanies* in 1727. That same volume also contained an initial version of the celebrated portrait of 'Atticus' in Pope's *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*. Significantly, Pope omitted from that epistle a couplet which, all too strongly, alluded to the questionable behaviour of Addison in the matter of the contending versions of Homer's *Iliad*: 'Who, if two Wits on rival Themes contest, / Approves of each, but likes the worst the best' (*Fragment of a Satire*, lines 59-60; Butt 1963, p. 492)

The key word in the eulogistic lines on Craggs that close the *Epistle to Addison* and formed his epitaph is 'friend'. In the first line, it is used to define the moral imperative of truthfulness which should underlie the public role of the politician and statesman; 'should' because Pope's wry conjunction 'yet' nods at the (all too common?) alternative. In the fourth line, 'lost no friend' is a tribute to Craggs's own admirable constancy toward those dear to him. Thus, public life and private life are effortlessly conjoined in the great man's nature and actions. This

unbroken continuity is itself a definition of integrity, a virtue opposite to the hypocrisy which so frequently occupies satirists. Pope in satiric mode often fittingly employs forms of antithesis to expose and represent such double-dealing. The *Epistle to Addison* does not do this. Instead, Pope's highly personal feelings of resentment towards Addison hang ironically over his formal encomium of Craggs: 'in action faithful', 'broke no promise', 'lost no friend'. 'In honour clear' also casts reflection on an earlier line in praise of Addison: 'Touched by thy hand, again Rome's glories shine' (line 46). 'Clear' derives from the Latin 'clarus', meaning in the first instance 'bright, shining', but very commonly used of the character of a person or an act in the sense of 'distinguished, renowned, famous'—deservedly, clearly, famous, that is. Does Pope recall an earlier, highly striking use of 'clear' in a first line of another classically aware poet, Ben Jonson? 'Brave infant of Saguntum, clear', the poet apostrophizes in allusion to a story told by Pliny. A child who, in the year in which Hannibal captured the city of Saguntum and so began the second Punic War, having been born and 'looking then about', as Jonson puts it, immediately returned to the womb. The Ben Jonson poem so beginning is one of the great poems of loss and friendship, 'To the Immortal Memory and Friendship of that Noble Pair, Sir Lucius Cary and Sir H. Morison' (1640), inspired by the early death of the latter and devoted to consoling the former by arguing for the greater value of ethical integrity over mere length of life. Pope's epitaph to Craggs is his public demonstration of fidelity to the memory of a man who died too young and whose memory shines with full ethical clarity. Placed at the end of an epistle to Addison, the same lines exert retrospective irony on Pope's relationship with Addison. Fidelity and infidelity: two sides of the same coin?