



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

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15. *Epistle to Miss Blount with the Works of Voiture; Epistle to Miss Blount, on her Leaving the Town after the Coronation; An Epistle to a Lady*

Examples: *Epistle to Miss Blount with the Works of Voiture*, lines 49–56, 37–48; *Epistle to Miss Blount, on her Leaving the Town after the Coronation*, lines 13–18, 41–50; *An Epistle to a Lady*, lines 249–56, 235–42, 115–26

An Epistle to a Lady was the last of the four *Epistles to Several Persons* to be published. It appeared on 8 February 1735, three weeks before the death of John Arbuthnot. It is not clear exactly when Pope wrote the poem or over what length of time he kept and revised it. Estimated dates run from February/March 1733 when he may have begun it, or a preliminary version of it, to August/September 1734, when he may have completed it, or nearly so, while staying at Bevis Mount at the home of Charles Mordaunt, Earl of Peterborough (Mack 1985, pp. 590, 626). These dates suggest that Pope's *Epistles* to Dr Arbuthnot and to Martha Blount (the 'Lady') shared a period of composition, revision, addition, and publication during which the strength and fragility of friendship, and the vulnerability of friendship to events, were at the forefront of his mind.

Pope became acquainted with the sisters Teresa and Martha Blount as a young man, possibly as early as 1707 (Ibid., p. 242). He and Teresa were born in the same year, 1688; Martha was two years younger. They were part of the Catholic set living in various locations to the west and

south-west of London. Martha was god-daughter to John Caryll, the instigator of the first, two-canto version of *The Rape of the Lock*, published in 1712, the same year as the *Epistle to Miss Blount with the Works of Voiture* appeared, also in Lintot's *Miscellany*. Charles Jervas painted a double portrait of the Blount sisters around 1716, the year in which Pope's *Epistle to Jervas* was published (Ibid., p. 246). Pope's *Epistle to Miss Blount, on her Leaving the Town after the Coronation* was first published in the 1717 *Works*, which included the final version of *The Rape of the Lock*, with the crucial addition of Clarissa's fifth-canto speech. By the time of *An Epistle to a Lady*, Martha Blount had been Pope's closest female friend for many years, and she would be his principal legatee.

The title of the *Works of Voiture* epistle in Lintot's *Miscellany* was *To a Young Lady*. The name 'Miss Blount' did not appear until its publication in the 1735 volume of Pope's *Works*. Uncertainty over which sister was intended as the addressee has concerned some editors and biographers (Rumbold 1989, pp. 52–53). Like many writers, Pope pondered and debated the question of whether satire's effectiveness is enhanced or diminished by the use of actual names rather than generic types. The problem is less pressing in the case of affectionate poetry, such as this, where friendship, whether intimate or more distant, provides the theme and the tone. Where tactfully presented, naming will probably be greeted sympathetically and even warmly by most general readers, contemporary and future. This epistle responds so to the 'charm' Pope attributes to the French seventeenth-century poet Vincent de Voiture and the object of his devotion, the Duchesse de Montausier. 'Charm' is a key linguistic thread holding the poem together, running through it from line 5 ('Sure to charm all was his peculiar fate') to the final couplet ('And dead, as living, 'tis our author's pride / Still to charm those who charm the world beside'). For a contrasting example of an unhappy woman, Pope adopts a representative figure.

Epistle to Miss Blount with the Works of Voiture, lines 49–56

The gods, to curse Pamela with her prayers,
 Gave the gilt coach and dappled Flanders mares,
 The shining robes, rich jewels, beds of state,
 And, to complete her bliss, a fool for mate.
 She glares in balls, front boxes, and the Ring,

A vain, unquiet, glittering, wretched thing!
 Pride, pomp, and state but reach her outward part;
 She sighs, and is no Duchess at her heart.

In both sets of four lines, appurtenances of wished-for wealth and social status are set up in order to fail at the end. The clue is right there at the beginning, in the apparent paradox of 'curse'/'prayers'. The gods have indeed accommodated Pamela's desires (the name was then stressed on the second syllable): be careful what you wish for. The material accompaniments and signs of a wealthy match pile up in list form, each item spectacular in its ostentatious display. They build towards an anticipated climax: 'And, to complete her bliss'. The double pause created by this interpolated infinitive phrase, which defers the caesura until after the sixth syllable of the line, maintains anticipation just long enough for the brutally monosyllabic final phrase, 'fool for mate', to work its disabling bathos. Top of the pile, Pamela, goes the fool you married, and all comes tumbling down. The fool and the preceding splendours are intimately linked: you can't have the others without the one; and who, in the end, is the real fool? Checkmate; or, rather, 'fool's mate'.

Pope's adjectives 'gilt' and 'shining', each implying or at least threatening, an ominous superficiality, provide the link to the second quartet. Here, the first three lines present, in turn, three places for fashionable display, four adjectives ranging over Pamela's physical and emotional state, and three abstract nouns summing up her achievement. Each line has its signifier of emptiness: the glaring of a ball's unforgiving luminescence, the glittering of momentary radiance, the pomp of showy display. At their heart lies the adjective 'vain', with its etymological force of 'empty'. Again, these lists build up; only this time the game is up as early as the end of the third line, leaving the last line to bring a note of sadness in. The early caesura (this time) puts emphasis on Pamela's sigh of acknowledged inner grief, leaving the rest of the line to decline into a simple negative and emotional poverty. All that superficiality is bought at a vital and supreme cost: 'at her heart'.

Society and its vacuous core, thus described, are unmistakably reflected in the artificial attractiveness of the world in which the unfortunate events of *The Rape of the Lock* take place. Details reflect from art to art. For example, the 'Ring' here (line 53) is a circular route in Hyde Park for parading 'gilt' coaches and their 'glittering' owners. A

simple metathesis (transposition of sounds or letters, here 'il' to 'li') in the adjectives connects Pamela's superficiality with her means of display. It reappears in the 1712 *Rape of the Lock* as 'Hide-Park Circus' (canto 2, line 35), and, in the 1714 expanded version, figures in the sylph Ariel's account of Belinda's guardian spirits: 'These, though unseen, are ever on the wing, / Hang o'er the box, and hover round the ring' (canto 1, lines 43–44). Juxtaposition of clauses picks up the epistle's listing of 'front boxes' alongside 'the Ring'. Both poems imply, through the circular form of the course, the emptiness of a round of movement with no progress, only eternal repetition.

And what is the cause of Pamela's ironic loss of her heart to heartless display? The paragraph tells us, of course: 'Pride, pomp and state', a vanity in the truly moral sense. But, in the immediately preceding lines, Pope projects a searchingly social cause to add to, or perhaps impel, its falsely glittering result. 'Marriage', he writes, may indeed be entered into in an endeavour to secure the pleasures which 'your sex' envisages as worthwhile goals. But such pleasures can prove 'tyrants', controlling lives.

Epistle to Miss Blount with the Works of Voiture, lines 37–48

Marriage may all those petty tyrants chase,
 But sets up one, a greater in their place;
 Well might you wish for change by those accursed,
 But the last tyrant ever proves the worst.
 Still in constraint your suffering sex remains,
 Or bound in formal, or in real chains:
 Whole years neglected, for some months adored,
 The fawning servant turns a haughty lord.
 Ah quit not the free innocence of life,
 For the dull glory of a virtuous wife;
 Nor let false shows, or empty titles please:
 Aim not at joy, but rest content with ease.

This presents another, and darker, version of a list building up to its inevitable, but unlooked-for, trap of a conclusion. If you chase pleasures, you end up with the last pleasure that each wish for something costlier eventually necessitates: a rich catch, which in fact catches you; a loveless union in which all your power is ceded by the rules of marriage as

defined by social edicts. The writer's moral is that it is better to avoid such 'dull glory' and 'false shows'. But does this sound a little glib, all too 'easy'? If so, then perhaps Pope will recall this epistle when writing the crowning passage to the evolving *Rape of the Lock*, Clarissa's speech. There, motifs from the present poem are brought into supremely powerful expression: for example, Clarissa's recommendation of 'good humour' (canto 5, line 30) echoes line 61 of this epistle: 'Good humour only teaches charms to last'. Pope's study of women's moral, emotional, and social chains (formal or real) is only just beginning.

Epistle to Miss Blount, On her Leaving the Town after the Coronation,
lines 13–18

The coronation of George I took place on 20 October 1714. Martha Blount had caught the dreaded smallpox and missed the ceremony itself, and the whole family had to leave London straight afterwards. This epistle, first published in Pope's 1717 *Works*, is addressed to Teresa Blount, under the romanticized name of Zephalinda. The poem imagines the plight of a young lady dragged off to the country:

She went from opera, park, assembly, play,
To morning-walks, and prayers three hours a day;
To part her time 'twixt reading and bohea,
To muse, and spill her solitary tea,
Or o'er cold coffee trifle with the spoon,
Count the slow clock, and dine exact at noon;

The principal joke here is Pope's reversal of the convention of rural idyll, as enshrined in myriad poems from classical times to the present day. His own early *Pastorals* have at least one foot on this ground; though they also serve, as we have seen, as poetic exercises in an easily accessed existing genre. These spirited lines scintillate with comic tricks: bathos in the first couplet; hyperbole (though the time spent praying may feel like three hours a day); in the second couplet, tautology of 'bohea'/'tea' ('bohea' being a variety of tea—or 'tay' as the word was then pronounced) to express tedious routine; comic transferred epithets of the P. G. Wodehouse kind ('solitary tea', 'slow clock'); in the third

couplet, unmelodious ('Or o'er') and jarring ('cold coffee') phrasing; hopelessly unfashionable habits. Noon is the time when fashionable ladies, such as Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock*, would normally be just waking: 'sleepless lovers, just at twelve, awake' (canto 1, line 16). Later lines add to the pleasures of retirement to the country. A neighbouring squire, for example, who 'visits with a gun, presents you birds', makes love with 'knees beneath a table', and 'loves you best of all things—but his horse' (lines 23–30). Poor Teresa is beached up in the midst of vulgarity and intellectual inadequates. Isolation is the keynote.

Epistle to Miss Blount, On her Leaving the Town after the Coronation,
lines 41–50

So where is the poet who is sending this comic letter?

So when your slave, at some dear idle time,
(Not plagued with head-aches, or the want of rhyme)
Stands in the streets, abstracted from the crew,
And while he seems to study, thinks of you;
Just when his fancy points your sprightly eyes,
Or sees the blush of soft Parthenia rise,
Gay pats my shoulder, and you vanish quite,
Streets, chairs, and coxcombs rush upon my sight;
Vexed to be still in town, I knit my brow,
Look sour, and hum a tune, as you may now.

He is back in town, but, no less isolated, 'Stands in the streets, abstracted from the crew'. The derogatory noun here—'crew', denoting a rabble, a mob—shows that you do not have to be in the country to feel apart. London can be a lonely place, too. Why? The answer completes the couplet: 'And while he seems to study, thinks of you' (lines 43–44). The rhyme-words 'crew' and 'you' are opposites—a miscellaneous and anonymous plurality and a specified, named and loved individual. The poet's abstraction and detachment from company are both the cause and the result of his own musing. Like Zephalinda/Teresa's, his mind is elsewhere. But whereas the poet imagines Miss Blount's 'pensive thought' (line 33) to be with the elevated social world she has been obliged to leave, that of 'coronations ... lords, and earls, and dukes, and gartered knights' (lines 34, 36), his own has a single focus.

In its graceful propriety, the poet's self-depiction represents another ethos, behaviour far distant from the boorish squire's clumsy demeanour. He suggests, through a process of decorous placing of himself in a situation reflective of hers, and yet humbly different, that their characters may share, if not duplicate, aspects of temperament. She will also, Pope implies, be entertained by the same love of humour that has gone into the poem's composition. The tenderness may be (and often has been) taken by readers as implying a form of affection. It certainly conveys something at its heart which is there to counter isolation: friendship. Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) defines 'friend' as 'one joined to another in mutual benevolence and intimacy'. Sending an epistle, a letter, is an act of mutual affinity.

An Epistle to a Lady, lines 249–56

Ah! friend! to dazzle let the vain design;
To raise the thought, and touch the heart be thine!
That charm shall grow, while what fatigues the ring
Flaunts and goes down, an unregarded thing:
So when the sun's broad beam has tired the sight,
All mild ascends the moon's more sober light,
Serene in virgin modesty she shines,
And unobserved the glaring orb declines.

The final movements of Pope's *Epistles* to Martha Blount and John Arbuthnot begin in the same way: with an exclamatory address to a friend he has known for well over twenty years. In the case of Arbuthnot, the poem's last paragraph is both a farewell and a vision of Pope's own love and duty of care for his aging mother ('Me, let the tender office long engage / To rock the cradle of reposing age', lines 408–09). By turning the closing notes of the epistle to private matters, Pope drains the poison engendered by the public world. In the case of Martha Blount, who has many years of prosperous life ahead of her—she lived until 1763, nearly twenty years longer than Pope himself—the finale to her *Epistle*'s can be more extensive (forty-four lines) and joyfully adopt a tone of respectfully tranquil celebration.

Our extract, the first paragraph of the finale, again displays the satisfying balance so agreeably produced by two linked quartets. The

first contrasts Martha's intellectual nobility and emotional grace to 'the vain', echoing his description of Pamela in the *Epistle to Miss Blount with the Works of Voiture* he had written years earlier. Vanity, a moral blemish so endemic in the social world, reflects the word's own inherent statement of vacuity thanks to its Latin root of 'vanus' ('empty'). Also, as in the earlier epistle, Pope connects morally hollow behaviour with the 'ring', the Hyde Park setting that appropriately defines its own tedious and pointless circularity.

The second quartet adds an analogy whose elemental force directly and simply endorses the moral value Pope is attributing to his friend. The glare of untempered exposure to unrelieved sun (cf. *Epistle to Miss Blount with the Works of Voiture*, line 53, in Chapter 15) echoes the excessive, self-defeating endeavours of the vain to shine ('dazzle', 'fatigues'). By contrast, Martha Blount's more discreetly attractive 'charm'—the theme word of the *Epistle to Miss Blount with the Works of Voiture*—of person and behaviour still 'shines' but does so in the form of the moon, whose purer light is given the force of the adjectival phrase, 'Serene in virgin modesty'. The cultural familiarity of the analogy does, indeed, imbue it with the strength of uncomplicated value. And, if it has been often thought, then it surely has been 'ne'er so well expressed' (*An Essay on Criticism*, line 298):

So when the sun's broad beam has tired the sight,
All mild ascends the moon's more sober light.

The absence of caesura, the chiming liquidity of 'All mild ... light' encompassing the harmonious alliteration in 'the moon's more sober', the stately succession of long vowels in 'All mild ... moon's more ... light'—these all combine to radiate euphony. There is an effortless equanimity here, defined in the adjective 'serene' and also concisely summed up in the phrase that opens Pope's following paragraph: 'blessed with temper'—with, that is, 'due or proportionate mixture or combination of elements or qualities', 'mental balance or composure' (*OED*, 'temper', n. 1, 3). Balance is there in the antithesis of the sun/moon couplet, as it is in the first quartet's 'To raise the thought, and touch the heart be thine!', where intellectual elevation and pleasing sympathy effortlessly occupy the same syllabic and rhythmic space.

An Epistle to a Lady, lines 235–42

The context provided by Pope's full-scale epistle serves to enhance, by contrast, the values enshrined in Martha Blount. When describing the future which awaits all those women who devote their youth to thoughtless pursuit of unobtainable pleasures, Pope writes with both a sharp pen and a comic imagination:

At last, to follies youth could scarce defend,
It grows their age's prudence to pretend;
Ashamed to own they gave delight before,
Reduced to feign it, when they give no more:
As hags hold sabbaths, less for joy than spite,
So these their merry, miserable night;
Still round and round the ghosts of beauty glide,
And haunt the places where their honour died.

In age, women prudently pretend to follies that are scarcely defensible in youth. Being ashamed to admit that they once gave pleasure at all, they are reduced to feigning pleasure when they now give none. As witches hold sabbaths out of spite rather than pleasure, so women when older keep up a pretence of enjoying the pleasures of the night when they really supply only misery. They drift round and round, like ghosts haunting the places where they lost their virtue. Pope's lines are acutely observed. For example, the manner in which prudence declines into shame exemplifies perfectly the thin divisions which their bounds divide, so demonstrating his deft connection of youthful and elderly behaviour with a touch whose precision is matched by delicacy. The ingredients of the verse combine to render moral specificity and hard, cool observation with a sheer beauty of expression, while maintaining the grossness of the picture he paints. The final couplet is the climax of this procedure. The choreography is exquisite, the moral point mortally wounding. Obsessed in youth with the 'Ring' and all its ethical lumber, they are condemned in age to an eternity that parodies and mocks their former world. And yet how beautifully their movements are described and how memorably the sheer grace of 'glide' shares its space between ease and aimlessness before sinking into the finality and judgement of 'died'.

An Epistle to a Lady, lines 115–26

The principal parts of the *Epistle*, leading up to the unremitting image of the hags' midnight dance of death and the contrasting elegance of Martha Blount's quiet ascent to moral elevation, are formed by a succession of female types, all exemplifying the self-destructive divisions with which Pope characterizes them and by which he satirizes them. He produces a linguistic gallery of portraits, after the manner of some seventeenth-century poems, notably Andrew Marvell's *The Gallery*. In the memorable phrasing of Pope's own earlier *Epistle to Mr Jervas*, 'images reflect from art to art' (line 20). Three of these portraits were omitted from the 1735 text: the characters of Philomela (lines 69–86), Atossa (lines 115–50) and Cloe (lines 157–98). These were first included in the so-called 'deathbed' edition, which Pope distributed to friends but which was suppressed until 1748, after his death. The reasons behind these omissions have long been mulled over by critics, the usual cause being located as sensitivity to, or fear of, the harms and dangers of readers' possible identification of the portraits with actual contemporaries rather than acceptance of them as types only. (See Bateson, ed. *TE*, III, part 2, pp. 155–64 (1951); Rogers (2006), pp. 667–68). The sheer power of the poem is clearly enhanced by their inclusion, especially that of Atossa from which our extract is taken:

But what are these to great Atossa's mind?
 Scarce once herself, by turns all womankind!
 Who, with herself, or others, from her birth
 Finds all her life one warfare upon earth:
 Shines, in exposing knaves, and painting fools,
 Yet is, whate'er she hates and ridicules.
 No thought advances, but her eddy brain
 Whisks it about, and down it goes again.
 Full sixty years the world has been her trade,
 The wisest fool much time has ever made.
 From loveless youth to unrespected age,
 No passion gratified except her rage.

Two stylistic and structural features dominate these lines and others in the extensive, indeed exhaustive, description (thirty-six lines in total): continuing images and motifs proposing coherence, and chopped-up couplets shattering the portrait into biting hurtful pieces. These qualities are themselves at odds, so manifesting the divisiveness Pope

is ruthlessly exposing within his own text. The result is a passage that is thoroughly exhausting to read: we share in, experience something like, the self-destructive life Atossa lives.

The centre of the imagery is the metaphor 'one warfare upon earth'. From this emerge words such as 'hates', 'rage' and, as the full passage proceeds, 'fury', 'hit', 'revenge', 'hell', 'violence', 'storm'. Related to this ever-shifting but paradoxically unchanging succession is that of harsh movement, without progression: 'her eddy brain / Whisks it about, and down it goes again'; and, later, 'outran', 'turn' and—again—'storm'. Pope's syntax frequently supports and represents rhythmically this cycle seemingly without end. Thus, line 117, 'Who, with herself, or others, from her birth', keeps starting and stopping. The segments, like broken shards, penetrate the line's search for continuity and coherence, enforcing self-contradiction. The repeated prepositional phrasing ('with herself', 'or [with] others', 'from her birth') exacerbates the grating, like exposed bones rubbing against each other. Paradoxes, oxymorons, or plain self-contradictions add to the mix: 'wisest fool', 'loveless youth', 'unrespected age'. These are later expanded from phrases into lines, such as 'Nor more a storm her hate than gratitude' (line 132). Line 135 brings the jagged syntax, shattered rhythm, and contradictions together in an exclamatory burst of gunfire: 'Superiors? death! and equals? what a curse!' We end up with reactions which themselves invite a condign expression such as, perhaps, 'consistent inconsistency', or 'ever-moving immobility'.

The sources of such a portrait have been present from the outset in our linking of extracts from the Blount sisters' poems. For example, Pamela in *Epistle to Miss Blount with the Works of Voiture* is cursed by the gods insofar as they give her what she prays for. Atossa is 'cursed with every granted prayer' (line 147). The huge difference lies in the Atossa portrait's dreadful intensity, massive reduplications, and persistent, obsessive pitch.

The three epistles this chapter has been looking at form a growing concern, over a number of years, with the nature and the social positioning of women. Taking them as a continuing, evolving narrative, and thinking about how they are related to other highly significant sections of Pope's impressively increasing *oeuvre*, notably *The Rape of the Lock* and Clarissa's speech within that poem's final version, can sharpen

our vision of Pope's broad and deep analysis of his society. The progress of *An Epistle to a Lady*—by far the longest of the three poems—is, after a brief, conversational acknowledgement of its addressee ('Nothing so true as what you once let fall'), a journey through a gallery of satirical portraits to the final paragraphs in which Martha Blount takes centre stage ('Ah! Friend!'). Our examination of this epistle actually began at the end, with Martha Blount herself, in order to set forward her central significance as an ideal, as a true representative of female autonomy, and as a friend. She and what she represents are the true fount, the cause, the destination, and the resolution of the poem.