‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’

READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

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18. *The Second Satire of the First Book of Horace. Imitated in the Manner of Mr Pope*

Examples: Lines 39–44, 71–72

This poem has often been a source of embarrassment for solemn and humourless critics. It was published anonymously as *Sober Advice from Horace* in December 1734, between Pope's 'Bethel' *Imitation* and *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*. That original title gives the game away. Anyone familiar with the Horace *Satire* would have known that 'sober' it is not, and the 'advice' it gives is equivocal, to put it gently. In other words, the title is ironic and the poem itself is going to be a joke. Jokes are what strait-laced critics do not get. Warburton omitted it from his 1751 edition of Pope's *Works*, as did Whitwell Elwin and William John Courthope from their ten-volume edition (1871–89), which was the standard later edition until the authoritative Twickenham edition of the mid-twentieth century.

Horace's satire presents itself as being about the dangers of adultery, its recommendation being that it is altogether safer to have affairs with prostitutes and women of doubtful morality than with respectable married women of rank. This allows Horace to have great fun exposing the wild sexual goings-on in Roman society, with lots of examples and frank language. Pope's imitation also does not hold back, relishing its satirical portrait of the lustful dissipation of all and sundry. One remembers how unrestrained eighteenth-century satirical prints could be.

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Lines 39–44

My Lord of London, chancing to remark
A noted dean much busied in the Park,
'Proceed', he cried, 'proceed, my reverend brother,
'Tis *fornicatio simplex*, and no other:
Better than lust for boys, with Pope and Turk,
Or others' spouses, like my Lord of York'.

'My Lord of London' (that is, the Bishop of London) is Edmund Gibson. His biographer, Norman Sykes, sums him up: Gibson's 'solid scholarship, his untiring industry, his practical sagacity, his sober piety, represent the best qualities of eighteenth-century churchmanship' (cited in Butt, ed., *TE*, 1939, VI, p. 362). So, he is just the man to provide official and reliable approval for the vigorous, if somewhat unconventional, outdoors activity of a fellow ecclesiastic, the 'noted dean'. Thomas Sawbridge, Dean of Ferns and Leighlin, who had been indicted for rape in 1730, is identified by the Twickenham edition as the target here. And why the approval? Well, at least it is legally sanctioned sex, rather than pederasty or adultery. 'My Lord of York', that is, the Archbishop of York, was at the time Lancelot Blackburne. The Twickenham Edition, sedulous as ever, quotes a letter of Horace Walpole's: 'I often dined with him—his mistress (Mrs. Cruwys) sat at the head of table, and Hayter [later Bishop of Norwich], his natural son by another woman, and very like him, at the bottom, as chaplain' (cited in Butt, ed., *TE*, 1939, IV, pp. 78, 347).

Pope's lines follow all this with a vigour of their own, taking their cue from Horace's quoting the great statesman Cato as commending a famous man ('notus homo') seen leaving a brothel, on the grounds that it is better that way than 'screwing other men's wives' ('alienas / Permolere uxores'). St James's Park had something of a reputation for providing erotic opportunities, as exemplified by the Earl of Rochester's lively poem, *A Ramble in Saint James's Park* (1680). Pope's lines surely cannot be accused of being lurid or explicit? On the contrary, consider the euphemism of 'much busied' and the prudent cloak of decent Latin for the actual activity. And he cannot be accused of naming names: he leaves it to others to supply the identifications. In its original version, indeed, London and York were just dashes ('L___n', in the former case), so adding a further level of mock concealment. The only name that appears is 'Pope'; unless he means...? Surely not?

Lines 71–72

> To Palmer's bed no actress comes amiss,
> He courts the whole *personae dramatis*.

A contemporary annotator, so the Twickenham edition tells us, identifies this chap as Sir Thomas Palmer, a politician whose second wife (of three), Susanna Cox, was an actress (*TE*, 1939, 2nd edn, 1953, IV, pp. 81, 376). But he died in 1723. So, no proof. Anyway, is there not something rather generous in Palmer's attitude? Again, we note Pope's polite and elegant euphemism: 'courts'. The rhyme is flamboyantly witty, as if anticipating Byron's mode in *Don Juan* (1819).

In short, Pope is having fun, as Horace did before him. He is teasing his readers by shamming prudence and caution, leaving it to them to expose their hypocritically puritanical prurience and relishing the opportunity to indulge in linguistic ingenuity and vivacity. He is also enjoying a game with his readers about authorship. The first printing as *Sober Advice from Horace* declared that the poem was 'imitated in the manner of Mr. Pope'. Well, Mr Pope's manner has been—and will again be—guided by a flexible, thoughtful, and serious inquiry into the nature of moral actions and the operation of an ethical vision in society. To 'imitate' Horace, and 'Pope' himself, by donning a comic mask in an ebullient demonstration of how *really* immoral are society and—especially—its most 'honourable' members, is both joyfully letting one's wig down and (seriously) posing intriguing questions. Does moral 'satire' actually have any effect? Is society too endemically immoral for reform to be a genuine possibility? And that includes us inquisitive readers, too.