# ‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’

## READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

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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

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Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

# 19. *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*

## Examples: Lines 27–32, 193–214, 317–22, 392–99

In July 1734, John Arbuthnot, one of Pope's closest friends, wrote to tell him that his own illness was terminal. Arbuthnot had been Queen Anne's physician, and a member of the Scriblerus group. Pope responded by addressing to him what has become probably his best-known verse epistle. In a letter to Arbuthnot in September 1734, Pope called the epistle 'the best memorial I can leave, both of my friendship to you, and of my character' (Sherburn 1956, III, p. 431). The poem was published on 2 January 1735 and was included in the second volume of Pope's *Works* published months later. Arbuthnot died on 27 February of that year.

As Pope acknowledged to Arbuthnot, the poem included some sections which had appeared in earlier versions. The most notable of these is the 'Atticus' passage, which Pope first wrote before Joseph Addison's death in 1719 (lines 192–214; see below). The substitute name used in the *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* is a reference to a patron and friend of Cicero's, T. Pomponius Atticus. But it is fair to say that the new material and the re-location of revised existing passages formed, together, a far more ambitious, moving, and complete poem. That it also contains some of his most harshly satirical passages may suggest how, for Pope, intense friendship was defined against its opposite. In his 1751 edition of Pope's works, William Warburton put the poem at the head of the *Imitations of Horace*, calling it a 'Prologue to the Satires'. However, there is no evidence that Pope authorized such a description or location.

Pope's 'Advertisement' to the *Epistle* calls it 'a sort of bill of complaint', that is, a written statement of a plaintiff's case in a judicial suit. This fits much of the poem, which amounts to a justification of his career as

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0372.20

a poet in the light of the animosity and opposition he had stirred up. But the word 'complaint', in the context, has another reverberation. The *OED*'s first citation for it in the sense of 'bodily ailment, indisposition' is Arbuthnot himself (1705); the second is Swift (1733; sb., sense 6). Linking illness to a judicial process not only evokes the origins of the poem; it also serves as a suggestive introduction to the epistle's central metaphor, that of a state of corruption within the cultural and political body of the country.

## Lines 27–32

> Friend to my life! (which did not you prolong,
> The world had wanted many an idle song)
> What *drop* or *nostrum* can this plague remove?
> Or which must end me, a fool's wrath or love?
> A dire dilemma! either way I'm sped,
> If foes, they write, if friends, they read me dead.

Pope has begun the epistle by complaining, in mock-exaggerated terms, about all the people who besiege his house looking for his endorsement of, or assistance with, their own poetical endeavours. It is as if Bedlam has opened its doors and released every madman in sight to 'fly to TWIT'NAM, and in humble strain / Apply to me, to keep them mad or vain' (lines 21–22). What medicine ('*drop* or *nostrum*'), dear doctor, can you prescribe to take this plague away? Alas, there is none. These are rhetorical questions. Pope is trapped, as line 32 demonstrates: its antitheses—foes/friends; write/read—all end up in the same deadly conclusion.

Well, all this is something of a joke, or at least a fancifully self-conscious essay in hyperbole. But the context for the epistle is serious: for both writer and addressee, death is no laughing matter, no jokey metaphor. Dr Arbuthnot has been a loyal and reliable friend to Pope's life, lengthening his days to allow the poet more time to compose more verses. 'Idle song' continues the self-depreciating manner, to be echoed in the 'rhymes and rattles of the man or boy' of Pope's *Epistle to Bolingbroke* (1738).

In the present poem, Pope goes on to begin his defence of his own poetic life and career with a further tribute to Arbuthnot's tender skills:

> The Muse but served to ease some friend, not wife,
> To help me through this long disease, my life,
> To second, ARBUTHNOT! thy art and care,
> And teach, the being you preserved, to bear.
>
> lines 131–34

Poetry has supported Arbuthnot's 'art and care' by teaching Pope to endure better the life he has protected. Now, the roles are reversed. Pope's genial, intimate, and kindly verse letter is his offering, his humble gift of words to help his friend to 'bear' the final days of his 'being'. 'Friend', indeed, is the word that resounds through to the epistle's final paragraph.

However, that alliterative antithesis in line 32—'foes'/ 'friends'—has gently planted a less wholesome seed in the poem's growth. We might overlook it on a first reading, but its ominous note of apparently incongruous pairing at least in retrospect warns us of something much darker to come. Not the least devastating of the ironies in the *Epistle to Arbuthnot* is that it is, arguably, the poem which displays most starkly Pope's capacity for all that comes with the simple monosyllable 'foe'. Hardly just an 'idle song', it contains his most violent and shattering expressions of disgust at human malignity. The tone of these expressions exhibits a range amounting to an exploration of satiric possibilities. The most subtle of these is, appropriately enough, a 'character': a description of a particular 'type' of person, as exemplified in a fictional or, as here, non-fictional figure. This is the poem's first major set-piece, the 'Atticus' passage, in which, at its heart, lies the same 'friend'/ 'foe' antithesis.

## Lines 193–214: Atticus

> Peace to all such! but were there one whose fires
> True genius kindles, and fair fame inspires;
> Blessed with each talent and each art to please,
> And born to write, converse, and live with ease:
> Should such a man, too fond to rule alone,
> Bear, like the Turk, no brother near the throne,
> View him with scornful, yet with jealous eyes,
> And hate for arts that caused himself to rise;
> Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer,
> And without sneering, teach the rest to sneer;
> Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike,

> Just hint a fault, and hesitate dislike;
> Alike reserved to blame, or to commend,
> A timorous foe, and a suspicious friend;
> Dreading even fools, by flatterers besieged,
> And so obliging, that he ne'er obliged;
> Like Cato, give his little senate laws,
> And sit attentive to his own applause;
> While wits and templars every sentence raise,
> And wonder with a foolish face of praise—
> Who but must laugh, if such a man there be?
> Who would not weep, if ATTICUS were he!

The section in the Introduction about Pope's use of couplets showed how they could be formed into two types of semantic relationship. By manipulating language across a line and across the two lines, Pope is able to express a state of either balance or imbalance. In the former, words and phrases are complementary, 'two parts which mutually complete each other' (*OED,* 'complement' sb., sense 5). In the latter, they are antithetical, forming an 'opposition or contrast of ideas' (*OED*, 'antithesis', sb., sense 1). The Introduction also cited a couplet from the fourth epistle of *An Essay on Man*:

> Never elated, while one man's oppressed;
> Never dejected, while another's blessed.
>
> lines 323–24

This couplet demonstrates how both antithesis and complement can be present, so expressing a resolution of potential differences. Thus, the relationship between a couplet's constituent parts may be, in varying degrees, contradictory or equivalent. A couplet's energy and its challenge to the reader largely derive from the dynamic between these possibilities.

The Atticus passage illustrates how such a co-existence of likeness and unlikeness can be extended across a full paragraph. At one end of the character sketch lies concord:

> Blessed with each talent and each art to please,
> And born to write, converse, and live with ease.
>
> lines 195–96

The gifts of nature ('each talent') and the attainments of nurture ('each art') are set in the middle of line 195, with the simplest of all conjunctions, 'and', bringing them into a balanced phrase. Indeed, the very grammatical term itself embodies the action it expresses: 'union, connexion, combination' (*OED*, 'conjunction', sb., sense 1). At either end of the line, framing 'each talent and each art', are the complementary past participle and infinitive, 'Blessed' and 'to please'. The 'ease' (line 196) with which Atticus has acquired his blessings is reflected in the facility with which he pleases other people. The entire line 196 describes a man who uses his natural linguistic skills of communication, on paper and in speech, to shape a complete harmonious relationship with his society and his fellows within society. The rhymes of 'please' and 'ease' thus sound an aural note of unison, enacting and celebrating that harmony.

At the other end of the paragraph, we find a very different couplet. (In between, contraries hold sway, such as the oxymoronic 'Damn with faint praise', a trenchantly concise clause, which has entered the vocabulary of the English-speaking world. For a fuller examination of the middle part of the passage, see my *Living Poetry* (Hutchings 2012, pp. 33–39). In that analysis, no attempt is made to locate the extract in the context of the poem or in that of Pope's poetry as a whole.)

> Who but must laugh, if such a man there be?
> Who but must weep, if ATTICUS were he!
>
> lines 213–14

The verbs 'laugh' and 'weep' occupy the same position in each line, the fourth monosyllabic beat, emphasized by the two commas which constitute, in each case, a strong caesura. The meanings of the verbs, however, are clearly antithetical. On the other hand, the anaphora of 'Who' suggests a complement, confirmed by the second halves of the two lines. The simple repetition of the conditional 'if' introduces the subjunctive verbs, 'be' and 'were'. Indeed, the whole paragraph is framed in this mode. The first verb of the character sketch is 'were': 'were there one whose fires' (line 193). The syntax of the entire paragraph is resolved only in the final couplet; and this contradictory culmination rapidly changes our response from mockery to pity, the archetypal emotion of tragedy. Lines 213–14 thus exemplify, at its most forceful, a couplet which brings together complement and antithesis.

What is the cause that transforms a man blessed with such natural gifts for harmony into the divided creature he becomes? Pope gives us the answer in the third and fourth couplets of the paragraph. 'Should such a man, too fond to rule alone' (line 197) regard any other person of similar talents and arts not as a colleague, but as a rival, he will

> View him with scornful yet with jealous eyes,
> And hate for arts that caused himself to rise.
>
> lines 199–200

The *OED* has a full definition of 'jealous': 'Troubled by the belief, suspicion, or fear that the good which one desires to gain or keep for oneself has been or may be diverted to another; resentful towards another on account of known or suspected rivalry' (*OED* 'jealous', a., sense 4). Pope's character sketch echoes words in this definition: 'rise' (line 200), 'suspicious' (line 206). The whole paragraph embeds Atticus's moral failing within Pope's rigorous description. It therefore constitutes perhaps the most convincing treatment and presentation of a ruling passion, the theory proposed in the epistle to Lord Cobham (see Chapter 14).

The *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* is explicitly a poem of deep and reciprocated friendship. However, the friends/foes antithesis we saw in the first passage discussed ('If foes they write, if friends, they read me dead', line 32) is deeply inscribed into its structure. It is as if Pope cannot have one set without the other, a tension animating his satire at one end, and, at the other, his recurrent theme and cherishing of friendship. This uneasiness spreads throughout the poem, most explicitly in the dark, not to say vicious, treatment of Sporus (see the following extract, lines 317–22). The Atticus portrait occupies more ambiguous territory. Chapter 10 referred to the sense of betrayal Pope may have felt as a result of Joseph Addison's transference of his support for Pope's project to translate Homer's *Iliad* to that for a rival version by Thomas Tickell. The name of Addison lying behind Atticus shows how personally Pope took this slight (Mack 1985, pp. 279–82). The Atticus paragraph profoundly expresses the contradictions Pope felt in his relationship with Addison and in the heart of the man he sees as embodying such inconsistencies. It is in his deployment of couplets' potential for diverse structures and meanings, and in the paragraph energized by a series of such couplets,

that Pope's art maintains both a clear dissection of the man, and a longing, lingering love for the friendship contaminated by Addison's ultimate moral failure. We all, perhaps, have the capacity to waste our potential: this consciousness simply reinforces the reader's feeling for Addison and the poet so affected.

## Lines317–22: Sporus

> Whether in florid impotence he speaks,
> And, as the prompter breathes, the puppet squeaks;
> Or at the ear of Eve, familiar toad,
> Half froth, half venom, spits himself abroad,
> In puns, or politics, or tales, or lies,
> Or spite, or smut, or rhymes, or blasphemies.

If Atticus is the most elevated of Pope's portraits in the *Epistle to Arbuthnot*, there is little doubt that the 'meanest' is Sporus, to use Samuel Johnson's adjective (Johnson, II, 1925, p. 228). The whole passage (lines 305–33) consists of a sustained and unrelenting attack on Lord Hervey, son of the Earl of Bristol and a prominent courtier to George II. He was particularly associated with the powerful Prime Minister, Robert Walpole ('the prompter') and Queen Caroline ('Eve'). Today, we would celebrate or demonize him as a 'Special Adviser'.

Pope's animosity was personal as well as political. Hervey joined forces with Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, another of Pope's former friends-turned-enemy. As noted in Chapter 16, Pope's *Imitation* of Horace's first satire of book 2 ('To Fortescue') of 1733 had viciously attacked her as 'Sappho': 'From furious Sappho scarce a milder fate, / Poxed by her love, or libelled by her hate' (lines 83–84). Pope employs Lady Mary's work on encouraging inoculation against the killer disease of smallpox to insinuate another variety of pox lying in wait for anyone who gets too intimate with her. The line entraps her in appropriately destructive consequences from whichever of the extreme emotions such people will encounter. Her response, *Verses Addressed to the Imitator of Horace* (1733), was co-authored with Hervey, and did not hold back in its attack on Pope's mind and body. There seems to have been something about perceptions of sexuality that brought out the worst in Pope. He borrowed the name Sporus from Suetonius's account of the emperor Nero's lover. The outcome for the character in the *Epistle to Arbuthnot* is

a relentless obsession with Lord Hervey's probable bisexuality ('Now trips a lady, and now struts a lord', line 329). It is all, we may say, not entirely edifying.

And yet, at another level, the Sporus passage does fit, artistically, in an integrated study of a culture and a society perceived, rightly or wrongly, as fatally divided between extremes (friends and foes) and in desperate need of the healing that comes literally from good medicine (Arbuthnot) and metaphorically from good poetry (Pope)—the body and the mind.

The present extract is centred on poison ('venom'), as channelled through both physical and cultural forms. The latter operates by the lines' allusion to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). In his destructive pursuit of the innocent Eve in the Garden of Eden, Satan is discovered by cherubs guarding her (like the sylphs guarding Belinda in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*) 'Squat like a toad, close at the ear of Eve' (book 4, line 800). The allusion posits that Lord Hervey's malign influence on national governance is a specific political manifestation of a corruption endemic to divine creation. It is culturally significant myth brought into the here and now of historical reality.

Its physical actuality, as imaged in animal forms, connects it with an observable set of phenomena. These begin with the little scribblers whose imperviousness to mockery Pope likens to spiders who, if one web is broken, will spin 'the slight, self-pleasing thread anew' (line 90). They pass through the insignificant, small-minded critics whose pedantic misconceptions are preserved like grubs in amber in editorial versions of great works ('in Milton's or in Shakespeare's name', line 168); and most absurdly present themselves in the puffed-up pride of a literary patron, satirised in the character of Bufo, the Latin word for 'toad': 'Proud as Apollo on his forked hill, / Sat full-blown Bufo, puffed by every quill' (lines 231–32). In the 1729 *Dunciad*, Pope had made use of the same allusion in his depiction of the anti-hero at the beginning of book 2: 'Great Tibbald sat'. Tibbald, Pope's belittling name for Lewis Theobald, author of *Shakespeare Restored* (1725), in which he criticized Pope's own edition of the plays of Shakespeare, is one of those grubs in amber in *Arbuthnot*. Behind both is the opening of book 2 of *Paradise Lost*, where 'High on a throne of royal state ... Satan exalted sat'.

So, when the Sporus lines proceed to locate 'politics' in a bald list of demeaning manifestations of literary culture, ranging from the relatively harmless 'puns' to serious 'blasphemies' via the outright inversions of truth that are 'lies', the political becomes the cultural; and the cultural becomes the political. All order disappears in a web of miscellaneous, random expressions. Discrimination is lost in the world of 'Grub Street' (line 378).

## Lines 392–99

Born to no pride, inheriting no strife,
Nor marrying discord in a noble wife,
Stranger to civil and religious rage,
The good man walked innoxious through his age.
No courts he saw, no suits would ever try,
Nor dared an oath, nor hazarded a lie:
Unlearned, he knew no schoolman's subtle art,
No language, but the language of the heart.

What, then, is the antidote to all this poison? 'What *drop* or *nostrum* can this plague remove?' (see above, line 29). The finale of the *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* proposes that, since the body politic is seemingly infected beyond cure, private life has to be the resource of health and purity. The last paragraph is devoted to Pope's mother, who died in 1733, and 'my friend', John Arbuthnot, whose character and presence have been the poem's unifying factor. These lines are from Pope's idealized account of his father, which occupies the penultimate paragraph. Its language is a direct rebuttal of much of what has gone before. For example, 'nor hazarded a lie' counters the 'lies' at the heart of Sporus's list of cultural confusion (lines 321–22). Pope's linguistic technique is an orderly succession of negatives. Each line contains one or more negatives: 'no pride ... no strife', 'Nor', 'Stranger', 'innoxious', 'No courts ... no suits', 'Nor ... nor', 'Unlearned ... no', culminating in the line 'No language, but the language of the heart'. There, the early caesura (after only three syllables) moves the weight and emphasis to its second part. Public language, in political and more widely cultural spaces, has become corrupt. But Pope's father's very lack of learning preserves him from contamination. Instead, he possesses natural, authentic knowledge: 'the language of the heart'. 'The' good man is a phrasing that allows, in its

objectivity, Pope's father to become representative as well as personal. That he 'walked innoxious through his age' converts a negative to a positive action. 'Innoxious' here carries particular force. Its usual meaning is simply the opposite of 'noxious': not poisonous. Using it to attribute to a person the quality of being blameless is rare, as rare as a man like him. Its meaning is a single, powerful, semantic rebuttal of the poison that infects and kills.