

University of Windsor

## Scholarship at UWindor

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Theses, Dissertations, and Major Papers

---

1992

### Alexander Pope's response to eighteenth century constructions of female character.

Chris-Anne. Stumpf  
*University of Windsor*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Stumpf, Chris-Anne., "Alexander Pope's response to eighteenth century constructions of female character." (1992). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 924.  
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/924>

This online database contains the full-text of PhD dissertations and Masters' theses of University of Windsor students from 1954 forward. These documents are made available for personal study and research purposes only, in accordance with the Canadian Copyright Act and the Creative Commons license—CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution, Non-Commercial, No Derivative Works). Under this license, works must always be attributed to the copyright holder (original author), cannot be used for any commercial purposes, and may not be altered. Any other use would require the permission of the copyright holder. Students may inquire about withdrawing their dissertation and/or thesis from this database. For additional inquiries, please contact the repository administrator via email ([scholarship@uwindsor.ca](mailto:scholarship@uwindsor.ca)) or by telephone at 519-253-3000ext. 3208.



National Library  
of Canada

Acquisitions and  
Bibliographic Services Branch

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0N4

Bibliothèque nationale  
du Canada

Direction des acquisitions et  
des services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa (Ontario)  
K1A 0N4

*Your file - Votre référence*

*Our file - Notre référence*

## NOTICE

The quality of this microform is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original thesis submitted for microfilming. Every effort has been made to ensure the highest quality of reproduction possible.

If pages are missing, contact the university which granted the degree.

Some pages may have indistinct print especially if the original pages were typed with a poor typewriter ribbon or if the university sent us an inferior photocopy.

Reproduction in full or in part of this microform is governed by the Canadian Copyright Act, R.S.C. 1970, c. C-30, and subsequent amendments.

## AVIS

La qualité de cette microforme dépend grandement de la qualité de la thèse soumise au microfilmage. Nous avons tout fait pour assurer une qualité supérieure de reproduction.

S'il manque des pages, veuillez communiquer avec l'université qui a conféré le grade.

La qualité d'impression de certaines pages peut laisser à désirer, surtout si les pages originales ont été dactylographiées à l'aide d'un ruban usé ou si l'université nous a fait parvenir une photocopie de qualité inférieure.

La reproduction, même partielle, de cette microforme est soumise à la Loi canadienne sur le droit d'auteur, SRC 1970, c. C-30, et ses amendements subséquents.

Alexander Pope's Response to  
Eighteenth Century Constructions of Female Character

by

Chris-Anne Stumpf

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
through the Department of English in  
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

1992

c 1992



National Library  
of Canada

Acquisitions and  
Bibliographic Services Branch

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1A 0N4

Bibliothèque nationale  
du Canada

Direction des acquisitions et  
des services bibliographiques

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa (Ontario)  
K1A 0N4

*Your file* *Votre référence*

*Our file* *Notre référence*

The author has granted an irrevocable non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of his/her thesis by any means and in any form or format, making this thesis available to interested persons.

L'auteur a accordé une licence irrévocable et non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de sa thèse de quelque manière et sous quelque forme que ce soit pour mettre des exemplaires de cette thèse à la disposition des personnes intéressées.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in his/her thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without his/her permission.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège sa thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

ISBN 0-315-78906-9

Canada

## ABSTRACT

Examination of the connections between Alexander Pope's marginalization within his society, his relationships with women, and his choice of genre helps the modern reader to interpret Pope's major poems about women. Although in his major poems about women Pope appears to be reinforcing both his society's attitudes towards women and the conventions that males in his society used to construct female character, in actuality he is not. Rather, Pope critiques his society's acceptance of conventions, such as those that make up the rhetoric of courtship, which result in the subordination of women and the trivializing of their worth. Pope does this by reiterating and then subverting the accepted cliches and conventions that surround women in order to critique them. In order to understand the role of women in Pope's society and what Pope's attitudes towards women were this study examines Pope's place within his society, the role of upper and middle-class women in his society, his relationships with women and his correspondence to and about them. Then, through the study of four poems: *Epistle to Miss Blount, With the Works of Voiture*; *The Rape of the Lock*; *To Richard Temple, Viscount Cobham. Of the Characters of Men*, and *Epistle II. To a Lady. Of the Characters of Women*, I will illustrate how Pope used conventions and forms such as the rhetoric of courtship, the epistle, and the mock-epic to challenge his society's views about women and women's views about themselves.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The opportunity for me to attempt a thesis would not have occurred but for two people: Dr. Lois Smedick and Dr. Katherine Quinsey. Dr. Smedick was responsible for asserting that I had the right to attempt a thesis and that I had the right to ask Dr. Quinsey to be my advisor. Dr. Quinsey agreed to be my advisor and I will always be thankful to her for this. Without these two professionals I would not have had the opportunity to experience this enjoyable project.

There was sometimes discouragement in the preparation of this work (two computer disasters); there was also help and encouragement offered when it was most needed. I especially want to thank Amanda and Ray Boggs. Without their computer, computer expertise, and time this thesis would never have been completed.

#### DEDICATION

This is for my parents. Without their support and encouragement, I would not have learned as much as I have. I am who I am because of their example. Thank-you Norma for your patience and encouragement. Thank-you Jack for your knowledge and support.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
DEDICATION	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter	
I      Alexander Pope's Place and Role in his Society	5
The Role of Upper and Middle-Class Women in Pope's Society	12
II     Alexander Pope and Women	23
Conclusion	40
III    General Introduction to the Poems	42
<i>Epistle to Miss Blount, With the Works          of Voiture</i>	44
IV <i>The Rape of the Lock</i>	52
Critical Background	53
Exegesis	54
V      "EPISTLES TO SEVERAL PERSONS"	
Critical Background	72
Exegesis	75
CONCLUSION	105
BIBLIOGRAPHY	109
VITA AUCTORIS	112



## Introduction

Traditional criticism of Alexander Pope's works suggests that his views of women conform to those of his time. For the most part, recent critics seem to reflect this view. Ellen Pollak, a feminist critic, contends that Pope "ratifies the premise that women are objects."<sup>1</sup> The failure to examine Pope's works beyond this limiting view has even affected such Pope specialists as Pat Rogers and Yasmine Gooneratne. Although Rogers notes that Pope "was that most dangerous critic of society, who can ape its fashionable chat and fall in with its pointless conventions,"<sup>2</sup> he fails to utilize fully this awareness when he analyzes Pope's poems with reference to women. While Gooneratne seems able to recognize the sympathy Pope feels for women, acknowledging Pope's recognition in *Epistle II. To a Lady* that women's lot is "a result of men's oppression,"<sup>3</sup> she also fails to go beyond the accepted

---

<sup>1</sup>Ellen Pollak, *Poetics of Sexual Myth* (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 1985) 12.

<sup>2</sup>Pat Rogers, *An Introduction to Alexander Pope* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1975) 4.

<sup>3</sup>Alexander Pope, "Epistle II. To a Lady. Of the Characters of Women" *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope* ed. John Butt (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1963) 1.213. All quotations from Alexander Pope's poetry will be from this text.

critical view of Pope and women when she interprets this sympathy to mean that women should "cultivate the pleasant disposition, generosity of mind, tact and patience that illuminate private relationships, and especially that of marriage."<sup>4</sup>

One critic who does not accept this conventional view of Pope and women is Valerie Rumbold. In her recent study, *Women's Place in Pope's World*, Rumbold argues that Pope sought to challenge or evade his time's prevailing assumptions about gender.<sup>5</sup> However, although Rumbold recognizes the empathy Pope had for women and is able to illustrate this through historical study, the methodology of her book prevents her from examining the relevant poems closely, thus precluding her from validating this recognition by further critical study. Indeed, a close examination of Pope's poems about women shows that he not only refused to accept his society's perceptions of women, he challenged them. Pope challenged or contradicted the accepted beliefs about women by reiterating then critiquing and finally subverting the accepted cliches and conventions that surrounded women in his society. We can read Pope's challenges in his poetry about women. As an example, in the *Rape of the Lock*, he not only subverts the rhetoric of courtship to illustrate that it holds no power for women, but

---

<sup>4</sup>Yasmine Gooneratne, *Alexander Pope* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1976) 120.

<sup>5</sup>Valerie Rumbold, preface, *Women's Place in Pope's World* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1989) xv.

he also contradicts contemporary views by giving advice to women on how to assert their power by introducing his concept of good humour. Moreover, the notion that Pope held reservations is further supported when one examines certain aspects of his life.

It is my contention that Pope, unlike many of his male compatriots, felt that women deserved to be considered as individuals in their own right; Pope felt that women needed to be seen as more than merely objects. Pope considered women to be intellectually capable and was not comfortable with their inferior, subordinate role in society. Granted, Pope should not be considered a propagandist for women; the majority of his work did not deal exclusively with the issue of gender, nor can we place his writing within a feminist framework. Nevertheless, his attitude does appear to differ significantly from that of the majority of his male peers. I contend that Pope's apparent criticism of women, such as the stereotypes he studies in *To a Lady*, is in fact criticism of the root causes of women's behaviour. Pope's criticism of women in his works is not criticism of women *per se*, but of the social mores which forced women to act superficially and thus in a manner that laid them open to criticism. It was then this adherence to society's expectations that caused women to act in ways suggesting that they lacked intellectual substance. Pope recognized that adherence to societal expectations created a self-fulfilling prophecy. Both Pope's writings and his

actions ultimately reveal a man who was sympathetic to and concerned about the limited choices open to women in their society.

As an introduction to my argument, I will examine Pope's place and role within his society,<sup>6</sup> the role of upper and middle-class women in Pope's society, and Pope's relationship with women as shown through his correspondence. Subsequent chapters will develop and support my thesis through a detailed analysis of the following poems: *Epistle to Miss Blount, With the Works of Voiture; The Rape of the Lock; To Richard Temple, Viscount Cobham. Of the Characters of Men; and Epistle II. To a Lady. Of the Characters of Women.*

---

<sup>6</sup>It must be noted that the term society does not refer to the entire population of England during Pope's life. Rather, Pope's "audience was aristocratic and metropolitan in colouring...his readership [society] was a sophisticated tight knit group" (P. Rogers 5).

## CHAPTER I

### Alexander Pope's Place and Role Within His Society

One of the dominant elements in making Alexander Pope's attitudes toward women different from those of his contemporaries was his own life as a second-class citizen. Although many groups in Pope's society experienced marginalization, both Pope and women were marginalized in all aspects of life.

First of all, Alexander Pope was a Roman Catholic in a Protestant nation. He was born in 1688; a misfortune which meant that he lived in a time when Government fears of a Papist uprising resulted in the denial of basic rights for those who were Catholic. Among the restrictions they faced was one of residency; they were not allowed to reside within ten miles of London. As well, they were not allowed to hold civil office, or to attend University. They were also required to pay double the normal tax on land.

Pope's life was affected by these restrictions from the moment of his birth. In order to comply with the residency order Pope's father had to close up his linen-draper business, located on the Strand, and move his family to the country. Fortunately, Pope senior had made enough money for his family to live comfortably. Unfortunately, their financial situation

did not compensate for the social opportunities Alexander Pope was denied as he matured. Growing up, Pope was isolated both geographically and socially. Moreover, he was unable to compensate for either his geographic or social isolation by attending University, as University life and learning was also prohibited to Roman Catholics. Indeed, Pope, like the women of his day, had to pursue an education on his own initiative. However, the difference was that Pope had time while women as a rule did not. As a result of the restrictions he faced Pope's education "had been an unbalanced, scrappy sort of affair. 'God knows,' Pope was to say later, 'all the teaching I ever had...extended a very little way.'"<sup>7</sup>

A third way Pope was marginalized was physically. Afflicted with tuberculosis of the bone at the age of twelve, Pope grew to be only about four and one half feet tall. Not only was he of small stature but his back was curved and he suffered from respiratory problems "owing to the cramping of the contents of the thorax as the weakening spine and vertebrae collapsed" (Mack 153). Short, weak, often under attack from a cold, Pope also experienced debilitating headaches. Maynard Mack describes Pope's headaches as being "sometimes so severe that he could barely see the paper he wrote upon" (155-6). As Pope aged, his body deteriorated until he had always to rely heavily upon those about him to meet the requirements of daily living. This dependency is shown in a

---

<sup>7</sup>Bonamy Dobree, *Alexander Pope* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1963) 1.

report of Pope in his forties and fifties which

portrays the aging poet as unable to dress or undress himself, or get into bed without help; nor could he stand upright till a kind of stays, made of stiff linen, were laced on him, one of his sides being contracted almost to his backbone. He wanted much waiting on, but was very liberal to the Maid-servants about him...These females attended him at night, and, in the morning, brought him his writing desk to bed, lighted his fire, drew on his stockings (Mack 158).

Incapable of functioning on his own physically, Pope was completely reliant upon the good nature and care of those around him. This care was provided chiefly by women.

As well as being dependent physically, Pope was unable to partake in the same types of physical activities that his peers were accustomed to. This physical barrier was one he did not willingly accede to. Valerie Rumbold illustrates this with the following anecdote:

For many years he made strenuous efforts to live up to expectations of male robustness: at the first onset of chronic illness in adolescence he went riding regularly in the hope of preserving his health; as a young man he actively sought the reputation of a rake; one hot day in 1735 he exhausted himself by surrendering his coach to a woman with a broken arm and walking three miles into Oxford (5).

Pope's appearance and health also limited him sexually and romantically. Extremely self-conscious about his infirmities, Pope was quick to avoid any situation that might lead to possible humiliation on his part. One way that he attempted to avert potential sexual humiliation was to write as if he had rejected the idea of sexual liaisons, permanent

or otherwise. Pope explains why in a letter to Fortescue in which he thanks him for some scallops, "Those you favored me with are very safe arrived & have done me no little credit with the Dutchess of Hamilton. Alas! with any female they will do me little credit... I have no way so good to please 'em, as by presenting 'em with anything rather than with myself."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, though he felt strongly for Martha Blount,

when Caryll offered to give his god-daughter..a dowry if that was all that stood between them, Pope made clear the limits of their relationship:

'I have no tie to your God-daughter but a good opinion, which has grown into a friendship with experience that she deserves it' (Rumbold 4).

In order to negate any chance of being held up to scorn for his wish to be involved in a sexual relationship, Pope was quick to point out how ludicrous and unfair such a coupling would be to the unfortunate lady. A letter written to the Blount sisters, in September 1717, when Pope was 29, illustrates the manner in which Pope would respond when faced with an attempted or suggested marriage:

Here, at my Lord Harcourt's, I see a creature nearer an Angel than a Woman, (tho a Woman be very near as good as an Angel) I think you have formerly heard me mention Mrs Jennings as a Credit to the Maker of Angels. She is a relation of his Lordships, and he gravely proposed her to me for a Wife, being tender of her interests & knowing (what a Shame to Providence) that she is less indebted to Fortune than I. I told him his Lordship could never have thought of such a thing but for his

---

<sup>8</sup>George Sherburn, ed. *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope* 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956) 290, vol. II.



misfortune of being blind, and that I never cou'd till I was so: But that, as matters now were, I did not care to force so fine a woman to give the finishing stroke to all my deformities, by the last mark of a Beast, horns. (Corr.I.431)

In this letter not only is Pope's tendency to be witty at his own expense recognizable--asserting that his Lordship would have never thought of such a union unless he were blind--a technique now seen as a standard defense mechanism.

One way that Pope attempted to counter the effects of his marginalization was to seek out men that he considered talented. As Irvin Ehrenpreis tells us,

to gain recognition Pope...began a career of seeking out men of talent, rank and power...To do so he learned to charm with tact and wit, paying careful compliments.<sup>9</sup>

To do this Pope would strike up a friendship with learned men such as Sir William Trumbull and William Wycherley. Sir William Trumbull was a neighbour of Pope's; he and Pope not only rode together frequently, but they also exchanged books and ideas. Trumbull was older than Pope and the holder of a university degree; it is thought that Trumbull's "guidance and interest may have helped in some measure to replace the formal university training denied Pope by his religion."<sup>10</sup>

Another example of one such friendship is the one Pope

---

<sup>9</sup>Irvin Ehrenpreis, "Pope Bipolar Implication" in *Modern Essays on Eighteenth Century Literature*, ed. Leopold Damrosch (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1988) 98.

<sup>10</sup>Maynard Mack, *Alexander Pope A Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988) 107.

developed with William Wycherley. In 1705, at age seventeen, Pope began to correspond with sixty-four year old Wycherley. During the 1670's Wycherley had achieved success with four plays, one of which was *Country Wife*. However, although his plays continued to be popular, fresh success eluded him. In spite of his recent failures, to a young Pope, Wycherley represented literary success. The friendship between the two men lasted until Wycherley's death.

It was through Wycherley that Pope was introduced to England's literary society. Impressed by Pope's *Pastorals*, Wycherley passed them on to William Walsh, considered to be one of the best critics in England. Walsh too was impressed with Pope's writings, encouraging Pope to continue and passing Pope's works on to other members of the intelligentsia. As a result, when Pope went to London to help correct Wycherley's verses, his literary peers were already familiar with his work and ready to include Pope in their circles. Thus, by establishing himself among those who were known in literary circles Pope was able to invite himself into a male society from which he had been excluded in so many ways. Women were not so fortunate, they had no means to fully invite themselves into mainstream society. As a result of his ability to do so Pope was able to gain exposure, to receive feedback regarding his verses, and to create an audience.

It was Pope's ability to create an audience for his verse that enabled him to compensate for some aspects of the

marginalization he experienced. The major compensation he received was a financial one. He became the first professional writer in English letters; that is, he was the first man in English literary history who earned a living solely from his own writing as a result of his own marketing, and not from subsidies or contributions from patrons or from royal support. Pope managed his own business affairs; he gained control of the printing and selling of his works to a far greater degree than had been previously possible for writers. Pope was able to do this largely owing to changes in England's economic climate, as seen in the rise of the middle-class which had money to spend.<sup>11</sup>

The economic change that England was experiencing spurred a simultaneous change in social order and in the ability of artists to become financially independent. Now that a larger percentage of the population had discretionary income, extra money could be spent for enjoyment. More money meant that there were larger audiences for drama, for music, and for popular literature, including novels, letters, and poetry. The financial difference this made in the life of an artist can be seen in the following example: in 1677 John Milton received five pounds down and five pounds at the end of the first edition of *Paradise Lost*; on the other hand, within fifty years, Pope received four thousand pounds each for

---

<sup>11</sup>While I acknowledge arguments that to simplify England's social structure by dividing it into three classes can be limiting, it is necessary for the scope of this work.

translating the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. For Pope, the broader audience and the money he could earn meant that he was able to become a literary businessman; he was able to be independent, to be non-marginalized in two areas of his life: financially, as he made enough money to live independently, and creatively, as this independence meant that he, not a patron, could determine the focus of his poetry.

Pope was fortunate. The second-class status that he endured because of factors beyond his control--being born a Roman Catholic and being afflicted with a bone disease--was compensated for because of his skill as a writer. He was also fortunate that his skill as a writer allowed him to become included in the male society from which he would otherwise be excluded and from within which he would be able to critique society. In addition, Pope was also fortunate that he was born at a time when the social, economic and political conditions in England were such that a writer was able to receive ample financial remuneration. Women were not so advantaged.

#### The Role of Middle and Upper-Class Women in Pope's Society

Those same mercantile conditions that enabled Pope to compensate for his marginalization, paradoxically, further limited women. During this century the subordination and domestication of women increased. Although the belief in the inherent divine right of kings had been questioned, the corollary divine right of husband over wife had not. The

subordination of woman needed no justification as it was accepted as being part of the hierarchical vision of the Universe. This vision was reinforced, in part, through the Bible which supplied numerous arguments for women's inferiority--the teachings of Paul, for example, which taught that woman was created for the sake of man--and in part through satiric attacks on learned women by contemporary playwrights.<sup>13</sup>

Most importantly, the very factors in society that were helping to liberate Pope paradoxically hindered the emancipation of women as the rise of mercantilism deprived women of traditional domestic power. With the rise of mercantilism in the eighteenth century the traditional role of some women underwent change. Although lower class women were not as affected because of the necessity of an earned income, and the role of upper class women was not as affected because they were used to the role they played, the role of middle-class women underwent significant change. It was the eighteenth century, as Porter sums up, that "developed the pattern of the man at work and the woman at home."<sup>14</sup> We can see the change that the middle-class woman experienced in the eighteenth century if we compare her role to that of women in

---

<sup>13</sup>Sylvia Harcstark Myers, *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, Friendship, and the Life of the Mind in Eighteenth Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 3.

<sup>14</sup>Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972) 47.

the seventeenth century. In the seventeenth century it was not uncommon for women to be apprenticed to the trades or to work with their husbands in developing the family holdings. This began to change in the eighteenth century with the rise of mercantilism. The shift in the economy meant that those in the trades had more money; this in turn meant that the roles of women in the rising middle-class were redefined. Instead of a woman helping her husband to run the business, a clerk was hired, as it became a matter of prestige for the wife not to work. Unfortunately, women's main power base--in the home and over the children--was also compromised, for just as it was prestigious to have the wife at home, so it became socially correct to ape the manners and customs of the class above. Accordingly, maids were hired to maintain the home, housekeepers were hired to run the household, governesses were hired to guide and teach the children, and wet-nurses were hired to breastfeed newborns.<sup>15</sup> With the loss of their traditional power base middle-class women who had before been so vital to the development of their family holdings became further marginalized and trivialized. As Porter states, "ultimately, the cult of the family merely created doll's houses for women to live in within a man's world, underlining men's grip on the rest of society" (44).

All women were marginalized, all women were limited, no

---

<sup>15</sup>It is conjectured that Pope was infected with tuberculosis of the bone through the milk of Mary Beach, his wet nurse.

women were exempt. Though some women appeared to wield power behind the scenes, over their homes, children, or garden, their power was, in fact, illusory. No woman had any rights over her property or family; as Roy Porter points out, the legal existence of women was suspended during marriage. Having thus disposed of women, the law recognized all property and family as belonging to the man. Any power a female experienced was power that was gained only through her connections with men. All women were defined through their relationship with men. As a result,

In the public eye women were laced tightly into constrictive roles: wives, mothers, housekeepers, domestic servants, maiden aunts. Few escaped. The commonness of the stereotyping created a kind of invisibility; women were able to be men's shadows (Porter 36).

Vulnerable and powerless, women realized that any hope they had for any remnant of power still lay in attaining their traditional power base through the attracting of a husband. Though still technically powerless, within a marriage a woman at least had financial security and association with the power wielded by the husband. The need for a husband was paramount; as Katherine Rogers notes, "women were often forced into marriage, either by family pressure or financial need, since most had no opportunities for supporting themselves."<sup>16</sup> One way women attempted to develop their attractiveness

---

<sup>16</sup>Katherine Rogers, ed. *Before Their Time: Six Women Writers of the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1979) viii-ix.

to men was to adhere to men's expectations of them. Men's views of women's role and their expectations of them were reinforced by novels such as Richardson's *Pamela*, letters, and the fashionable conduct books. Written by men and designed to instruct women on all aspects of expected behaviour, conduct books were a very important tool in the male construction of female character. As Vivien Jones points out: "The concern of all eighteenth century 'conduct' manuals for women is how women might create themselves as objects of male desire, but in terms which will contain that desire within the publicly sanctioned form of marriage."<sup>17</sup> It is this need for attention to surface, or physical appearance, at the expense of substance, or the development of inner worth, that Pope critiques in his works about women.

Through writings such as the Bible and conduct books, women were conditioned to act in a predetermined manner. Knowing that one way they had of attracting a man was through their surface appearance it was natural for women to devote a large amount of their time to making themselves look attractive. Unfortunately, as women adhered to men's expectations in order to attract a husband, they became faced with a double-bind. On the one hand they were seen by men to be superficial and incapable of intellectual or emotional depth. However, if, on the other hand, women wished to survive

---

<sup>17</sup> Vivien Jones, ed. *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 14.



economically or socially in their society, they were forced to play roles which fulfilled these very expectations. In addition, unless a woman had someone who sought to educate her, unless a woman had access to books, there was little she could do to compensate for her lack of education. Thus, women's actions created a double-bind as they only reinforced the acceptability and validity of the male view as well as the rationale for the restrictive, rigid mold they were forced into.

Although most women appeared to accept or endure the male conventions that formed their own character there were dissenting voices, voices such as Mary Astell and Alexander Pope.<sup>18</sup> Mary Astell and Alexander Pope both believed that marriage should not be the only option for women, both felt that women should develop beyond the limits set by society, and both felt that if a woman were married the development of her good-humour would enable her to survive and possibly improve her situation. The belief that women should be educated was one that Pope also shared with Mary Astell.

---

<sup>18</sup>To argue that all eighteenth century men except Alexander Pope believed that women should be limited by defined societal roles would be a generalization that could not be supported. In recognition of this, however, it must be realized how limited the eighteenth century man would be in his ability to change the status quo. Those men who were supportive had to develop some means of challenging women's conventional roles without jeopardizing their own position within the same society. Some men may have allowed their wives more involvement within the marriage (by consulting them over decisions, for instance), while others may have educated their daughters as they would a son. Others, such as Pope, made use of the written word.

Unfortunately, although she is now considered to have been the first feminist because she attempted to clarify and improve the status of women through her writing, Astell effected little change in women's position during her time. This failure to effect change is particularly evident when one realizes that over ninety-eight years later Mary Wollstonecraft was covering much of the same ground.

In 1694, Mary Astell wrote *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest*. Astell, who never married, created this proposal as a blueprint of a feasible alternative to marriage. Astell believed that women had a right to education. To this end she advocated the creation of a religious-educational institution where women could learn and live together free from sin and temptation. As Astell argued,

For since God has given women as well as men intelligent souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them? Since he has not denied us the faculty of thinking, why should we not (at least in gratitude to him) employ our thoughts on himself their noblest object, and not unworthily bestow them on trifles...Being the soul was created for the contemplation of truth as well as for the fruition of good, is it not as cruel and unjust to exclude women from the knowledge of the one as from the enjoyment of the other? <sup>19</sup>

Astell argued that women needed to be allowed to develop their substance [soul] instead of being encouraged to waste time on

---

<sup>19</sup>Mary Astell, *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies* in the *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* eds. Susan M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, (1985) 115.

trifles [surface]. Arguing that God gave both men and women souls, she asserts that all women should be given the opportunity to improve them. Astell's argument for the education of women was one that would be echoed by Mary Wollstonecraft near the end of the century and was one that Pope touched upon briefly in his poem *To a Lady*, which I shall deal with later.

In 1700 Astell published *Some Reflections Upon Marriage*. In this work she describes how marriage can affect a woman's life:

Let the business be carried as prudently as it can on the woman's side, a reasonable man can't deny that she has by much the harder bargain, because she puts herself entirely into her husband's power, and if the matrimonial yoke be grievous, neither law nor custom afford her that redress which a man obtains (K. Rogers 38).

Astell sees marriage as one of the worst fates that can befall a woman because it is no different from slavery. Pope echoes this view of marriage in both *Epistle to Miss Blount*, *With the Works of Voiture* and *Epistle II. To a Lady*, when he subverts the rhetoric of courtship to expose the issue of male power that it conceals. Yet, paradoxically, also like Pope, Astell believes that if a woman is married she must do what she can to make the situation bearable, short of outright rebellion. To this end Astell introduces the concept of good humour, one that Pope also puts forth and which I will discuss later.

There is no direct evidence that Pope ever read Astell's works; I was unable to discover any mention of her or her

works in his correspondence or poems. However, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Pope might have been influenced by her work, for her major works were being published and reprinted in Pope's time. Her *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of Their True and Greatest Interest*, went through three editions, the last one in 1696. *Some Reflections Upon Marriage* achieved four editions, the last one in 1730, fourteen years before Pope's death. As well, Astell and Pope had a friend in common, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu.<sup>20</sup> Although Pope and Lady Mary dissolved their friendship sometime during the 1720's, both Pope and Lady Mary continued to throw digs at each other in their poems. Because of this evidence of awareness it is not illogical to infer that Pope would have been aware that Astell wrote the Preface to Lady Mary's *Embassy Letters*, published in 1724 and 1725. In addition, in Pope's correspondence there is reference to Pope's having letters from a Mr. Norris (Corr.11.439). According to the Index of Sherburn's edition of Pope's correspondence, this is the same John Norris of Bemerton that Astell considered her mentor. Finally, it is thought that when Astell moved to London she lived in Chelsea "to be near her friend and correspondent Bishop Atterbury" (Hill 7). The same Bishop Atterbury was also a good friend of Pope's. In fact, Pope and Atterbury were such good friends that Pope testified

---

<sup>20</sup>Bridget Hill, ed. *The First English Feminist* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986) 63.

on Atterbury's behalf when Atterbury was being tried for being a Jacobite. In short, Astell's works were popular and available in Pope's time, they both had some of the same friends or acquaintances, and there is a definite parallel between their works. In any case, whether or not Pope was exposed to Astell's work, it is important to note the parallels that occur between his work and the work of the woman who has been called the first feminist, particularly as much of the criticism of Pope's works asserts that his views of women were entirely consistent with those of his time.

### Conclusion

The eighteenth century had no organized feminist movement; it was not until the next century that the suffragette movement, largely in response to works such as Astell's and Wollstonecraft's, really began. As Anderson and Zinsser state:

The centuries from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment broadened the possibilities for men, giving men more access to education and choices in occupation. They did the opposite for women. New national law codes denied women control of their property and earnings and gave primary authority within the family to the husband alone, outlawed any efforts by women to control their fertility, and barred women from higher education and professional training.<sup>21</sup>

Women in Pope's time faced a paradox in that the century which

---

<sup>21</sup>Bonnie S. Anderson, Judith P. Zinnser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1988) xxii.

saw the rise of mercantilism also saw the increasing restriction of women within the domestic sphere. Forced to allow men to construct their character if they wished to survive, women were faced with a no win situation. Castigated for being superficial women were denied any opportunity to behave any other way. Denied access to all legitimate societal involvement such as full physical and mental participation, control of their future, accessibility to education, even the tradition of child rearing, women were further marginalized from sources of real power. Society was defined by those who ran it, men. Unlike Alexander Pope, women had no means of inviting themselves into the male-dominated society from which they were excluded. Pope perceived the limitations women faced, in part because he also was marginalized in so many ways.

## CHAPTER II

Alexander Pope and Women

In the eighteenth century deeply rooted assumptions about the subordination of women were reinforced through social tools such as conduct books, the theatre, and the Bible. Any attempt by women to fulfil their individual potential faced this deeply ingrained conditioning. In contrast to the accepted social view, Alexander Pope encouraged women to grow beyond the customs and traditions they faced within their society. In his poetry he identified the male-constructed role of women as being artificial, not natural. He identified the limited positions women could hold in society, and he proposed a means of improving their situation and gaining power from it through the development of a virtue he called good humour. To Pope good humour represented the development of an inner strength, an inner integrity, as well as "patience, cheerfulness, a sense of the ridiculous, [and] an ability to laugh at [ones] self" (Mack 242).

I contend that Pope encouraged women to develop beyond their limited societal role because he knew what it was like to be marginalized himself. Indeed, as Valerie Rumbold argues, Pope can relate closely to the plight of women, for "if as he states in *Characters of Women*, it is the distinction of woman

to develop her personality to the full only in private life, his disqualifications from public life brought him to a condition in that respect parallel to hers, despite his easy assumptions that he belongs to the world of men" (2).

Pope's understanding of women's lot was also enhanced through his relationships with women. Of the women he was close to, his mother was the most important; "for Pope his mother was woman at her best: 'Matrium Optima, Mulierum Amantissima' he called her on the obelisk which he erected in her memory" (Rumbold 24). Pope's mother was the "stable centre of his inner life" (Rumbold 42). Although letters between Pope and his mother are rare, Pope wrote about his feelings for his mother to many of his friends; he did not attempt to disguise his feelings for her, as we see when he says,

I am so unfashionable as to think my mother the best friend I have, for she is certainly the most partial one...as she thinks best of me, she must be the kindest to me. And I am morally certain she does that without any difficulty, or art, which it would cost the devil and all of pains for anybody else to do (Rumbold 43).

The deep affection that Pope and his mother shared for each other was "likely to have been enhanced as she and her son grew older by the mutual nursing services required of each other ...and also by the warmth of an undoubtedly passionate man to whom nature had denied, or so he thought, attachments of another kind" (Mack 548). The relationship between Pope and his mother could have easily held resentment on both sides as Pope was so physically dependent. Yet, by all accounts, it is



clear that his mother did not find him a burden and that Pope's family was very close emotionally. Maynard Mack, in his *Alexander Pope: A Life*, states that "the Pope household seems on the evidence to have been remarkably affectionate, tightly knit, and, in comparison with ... a large number of seventeenth-century families, easygoing" (28). Mack states that where others in Pope's day addressed their parents as Sir or Madam, Pope's letters to his mother show her being addressed as "Dear Mother."

Edith Pope not only made a strong impression on her son during her life, she continued to be the "stable centre of his inner life" even after her death. Pope's major area of interest outside of poetry lay in the creation of his garden. He spent as much time as he could cultivating his garden and eventually became acknowledged as a successful gardener and landscape artist. That the obelisk he had made in memory of his mother was the principal focus of his garden is a telling statement of her importance to, and influence over, him.

Pope's understanding of and sympathy for women's lot was not restricted to family; Pope also assisted women who had no personal tie to him. Pope's involvement with two women in particular illustrate his sensitivity to the limits in women's roles. Both episodes of his intervention are recorded and illustrated in his correspondence. One of these who Pope assisted was Anne Cope. A cousin of John Caryll, one of Pope's closest friends, and a victim of an unfortunate marriage, she

faced emotional and financial problems. These problems were exacerbated after her move to France, as she was discovered to suffer from breast cancer. Pope's concern about Mrs. Cope's situation was great enough that he intervened with financial support, emotional support, and legal assistance against her husband. In a letter to Caryll in 1718 Pope discusses the legal ramifications that could now face Mr. Cope:

Meeting with the gentleman who has been to wait on you in relation to Mrs. Cope's affair, I find that her husband is very suddenly to go back to his command, and that her relief will be almost impracticable if not attempted before. The Board of Officers will not meddle in a family concern, and people of skill in these matters assure me that the only method is to procure a writ from the chancery Ne exeat regno, which may be had for a trifle, and will so far distress him as to oblige him to find bail, and bring him to some composition, not to be hindered from going abroad...

(Corr.I.522)

This is an important letter as it illustrates Pope's willingness to become involved in a cause that did not directly concern him or a relative. To all intents and purposes, though Pope had met her and liked her, Mrs. Cope was the responsibility of her family. It was also understood that her husband had all the rights, as seen in the fact that the Board of Officers would not meddle in a family concern. In effect, Pope's involvement could be seen as a challenge to this societal stance.

Pope's interest in and concern for Anne Cope did not cease even after she was set up abroad. In 1720 he wrote a

letter to Caryll in which he asks, "I wonder you never mention my friend Mrs. Cope, who it seems is with you. You know my regard for that lady's person and interest, and I'm therefore pleased to think you espouse them"(Corr.II.58). Most important, Pope's concern about her situation was such that he sent her twenty pounds a year until she died (Corr.III.18). In addition, Pope constantly reproached Caryll for not doing more for her, and in one letter he complained, "I cannot but lay before you this case which is of the last importance to the poor lady, and indeed must affect any charitable man."(Corr.I.522) Moreover, Pope paid for her medical bills after her death: "The only thing I am now concerned at is, that (for want of some abler or richer friend to her) I find myself stand engaged to Abbe Southcote for 20LL. toward his charges for surgeons and necessities in her last illness."(Corr.III.13)

Pope's work on Mrs. Cope's behalf and his support of her reveals something of his attitude towards women. If Pope agreed with the societal view that women should be subject to their husbands it is unlikely he would have undermined it by enabling her to leave her married situation. Nor is it likely that he would have provided her with aid of any sort, particularly since she was not a relative. However, the fact is that not only did he provide emotional support but he also provided legal and financial aid. Pope's willingness to become involved, to procure her financial assistance, to undermine

the traditional authority of her husband, suggests the reservations he held regarding his society's prevailing assumptions about gender.

Pope's sympathy for the lot women faced is also illustrated through his relationship with Elizabeth Weston. This relationship clearly illustrates Pope's inability to completely accept the standard view of women and their place. Mrs. Weston was also, in Pope's opinion, the victim of an unfortunate marriage. His concern for Mrs. Weston and his actions on her behalf were rooted in such a strong belief that she had been wronged that nothing deterred him from seeking aid for her, not even the breakdown of his relationship with his own half-sister's family, who sided with the husband. Indeed, Pope was so convinced that Mrs. Weston had been wronged that he felt she should have nothing to do with her husband and so he resisted any attempts by others to patch the marriage up. In response to this idea Pope wrote to Caryll in 1711, "I am very confident they can't be united, tho' they may be brought together: 'Tis an easy thing (we daily find) to join two bodies, but in matching minds there lies some difficulty." (Corr.I.123) Pope's interventions on behalf of married women illustrate the reservations he held with his time's views of gender. Clear actions such as his were one way of undermining the traditional view of male-female relationships.

Sometimes Pope's friendships with women were complicated

by an amorous element, sometimes not. One of Pope's longest friendships, and one that made a lasting impression on him, was that with Martha and Teresa Blount. Of the two sisters Pope clearly had a sexual attraction to Teresa, one that possibly complicated their friendship. However, his friendship with Martha developed beyond the standard male-female conventions as we will see when we look at Pope's letters to Martha. Of the two sisters, Pope's friendship with Martha lasted until his death.

Teresa's friendship with Pope appears to have ended shortly after he settled on her an annuity of 40 pounds. Pope was aware of Teresa's limited financial means and so sought to improve them. To this end he executed a bond in her favour on March 10, 1717 which supplied Teresa with forty pounds a year for six years or until she became married. Teresa, however, clearly objected to this financial assistance, as demonstrated in the following letter:

Madam,-I am too much out of order to trouble you with a long letter. But I desire to know what is your meaning to resent my complying with your request, & endeavoring to serve you in the way you proposd.....

You exprest yourself desirous of increasing your present income upon Life: I proposed the only method I then could find, & you encouragd me to proceed in it-when it was done, you received it as if it were an Affront.-Since when, I find the very thing, in the very manner you wishd, & mention it to you; You don't think it worth an answer.

(Corr.1.p.468)

Pope went through with the issue of the bond even though Teresa received it as an affront. What eventually terminated

their friendship may have been related to Teresa's reaction to Pope's action:

what enraged Teresa in Pope's action may be guessed from the comment of a nineteenth-century chaplain at Mapledurham, to whom it seemed obvious that the annuity indicated their intention to marry. Yet Pope's hurt at her reaction seems to speak of a deeper and probably correct intuition that beneath any social embarrassment he might cause Teresa lay revulsion at finding herself obliged to a deformed cripple whose friendship had always had an unwelcome amorous element (Rumbold 122).

Whatever the reasons for the demise of their friendship, one of Pope's first cautionary portraits about women, *Epistle to Miss Blount With the Works of Voiture*, was written with Teresa in mind. Written in 1710, the poem constitutes a general attempt to warn Teresa, and those women like her who considered appearance as more important than substance, about the type of future she could face. Pope could also have been responding personally to Teresa with the realization that any attraction he had for her would not be returned because of his physical appearance.

In *Verses Sent to Mrs T.B. with his Works*, a poem written in 1717 and published in 1721, Pope takes the theme of surface verses substance one step further. In this poem Pope illustrates that the development of surface at the expense of substance not only damages the individual person as they have attained material wealth at the expense of intellectual or inner worth, but that it can also damage personal relationships. Although Pope and Teresa were supposed to have

been friends, in this poem Pope charges that Teresa never really knew him. He claims that Teresa was unable to get beyond the surface of his appearance to the substance of his personality. Teresa, in Pope's eyes, like the women in *Epistle to Miss Blount, With the Works of Voiture*, was attracted to material wealth at the expense of inner worth. Although he had warned her about the probabilities of her fate if she were enticed by "false shows" or "empty titles," Teresa disregarded his concern. Pope's dismay at her treatment of him over the annuity and her lack of response to him as anything other than a neighbour, could have prompted this poem. At any rate, the poem clearly illustrates Pope's contention that Teresa never really knew him:

This Book, which, like its Author, You  
By the bare Outside only knew,  
(Whatever was in either Good,  
Not look'd in, or, not understood)  
Comes, as the Writer did too long,  
To be about you, right or wrong;  
(11.1-6)

Using the metaphor of the book, Pope states that Teresa only knew him as he appeared physically, "by the bare Outside." She neither looked inside him nor attempted to understand what his inner being was. After identifying Teresa's inability to discern his substance, he illustrates the fatal flaw in her character, her attraction to the surface: "No, trust the Sex's sacred Rule;/The gaudy Dress will save the Fool." (*Works*.11.21-22) Although this citing of women's attraction to the superficial is an anti-feminist commonplace, Pope is not

condemning all women; he is condemning women like Teresa who not only seek material things, like the dress, but who consider the acquisition of such things to be their salvation. He is condemning Teresa and those like her who have bought the precept perpetuated by men that this is what their "Sex's sacred rule" is.

In this poem it is clear that Pope wants women to develop the quality of good humour so that they will be able to discern substance over surface; he wants them to be able to see past the superficial appearance of the book cover and to understand the writer. Unfortunately, Teresa and Pope's relationship never managed to develop beyond the superficial; it never managed to develop beyond the male/female convention that dominated their society.

In striking contrast to his aborted friendship with Teresa is the relationship Pope developed with her sister Martha. This relationship was relatively free of the male-female conventions that bound him and Teresa. Free from these conventions, Pope and Martha were able to become friends.

Pope's friendship and love for Martha went beyond the limits of physical appearance; he was attracted by her inner qualities. Although some critics argue that Pope and Martha were lovers, this is an assertion that has no basis in fact. How Pope cared about Martha as a person is revealed in a letter written to Teresa while Martha was battling small-pox:

I cannot be so good a Christian as to be  
willing...to resign my own happiness here for



hers in another life. I do more than wish for her Safety, for ev'ry wish I make I find immediately changed into a Prayer, and now a more fervent one than I had learned to make till now. May her Life be longer and happier than perhaps herself may desire...May her Beauty be as great as possible; that is, as it always was, or as Yours is: But whatever Ravages a merciless Distemper may commit, I dare promise her boldly...she shall have one man as much her Admirer as ever. (Corr.I.265)

Pope's friendship with Martha developed beyond the roles men and women expected each other to fill. Martha was not just a representative of her sex, she was a friend. It was this friendship with Martha which influenced his portrayal of the good woman in his *Epistle II. To a Lady*, one of his most misunderstood works.

Pope and Martha, known to her friends and family as Patty, had a friendship much like those he had with his male peers. As he did with his male friends, he sent her plays to read "I desire Mrs Patty to stay her Stomach with these half hundred Plays, till I can procure her a Romance big enough to satisfie her Great Soul with Adventures"(Corr.I.252). As well he sent her copies of his poems to comment upon (Corr.I.143) and arranged seats for the theatre: "I beg a Box may be had for Monday, the third Night (if there be any empty), for Mrs. Blount, a particular Friend of mine"(Corr.III.253-4). She in turn sent him pamphlets for his friends (Corr.I.472), and kept in contact with his mother as we see in a letter from Pope to Martha in 1728: "Dear Madam,-I thank you for many things, and particularly for your Letters. That which gave me an account

of my mother's tolerable health,...satisfied me..."(Corr.II.513). As well, she kept in touch with his other friends and passed their news on to him.

It is in his letters to Martha that Pope most obviously steps beyond the social conventions ruling men and women. His letters to her are non-gender specific. By this I mean they are letters that one would write to a friend; no play of sexual games clouds the intent of the letters.

An examination of Pope's letters to Martha shows that as their friendship deepens, he writes to her as he would to a male friend, or he writes to a male friend as he would to her - sex is not an issue. This is in direct contrast to the accepted styles of writing to women. Two styles that Pope employed when he first began to correspond to Martha were the precious style and the courtly style. The former was composed of elaborate flattery and hyperbole; the latter was composed of "fulsome compliments, protestations of devotion, and sexual double-entendres"<sup>20</sup> and was based on the letter style of Vincent Voiture, a seventeenth century writer. A letter Pope wrote to Martha Blount on May 25, 1712 is an example of the courtly style of writing:

Madam,-At last I do myself the honour to send you the Rape of the Locke; which has been so long coming out, that the Ladies Charms might have been half decay'd, while the Poet was celebrating them, and the Printer publishing them. But yourself and your fair Sister must

---

<sup>20</sup>James Anderson Winn, *A Window in the Bosom, The Letters of Alexander Pope* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1977) 101.

needs have been surfeited already with this Trifle; and therefore you have no hopes of Entertainment but from the rest of this Booke, wherein (they tell me) are some things that may be dangerous to be look'd upon; however I think You may venture, tho' you shou'd Blush for it, since Blushing becomes you the best of any Lady in England, and then the most dangerous thing to be lookd upon is Yourself-Indeed Madam, not to flatter you, our Virtue will be sooner over-thrown by one Glance of yours, than by all the wicked Poets can write in an Age, as has been too dearly experienc'd by the wickedest of 'em all, that is to say, by| Madam| Your most obedient| humble  
 Servant,| A: Pope: (Corr.I.143)

Though the letter to Martha is basically just a note attached to a poem he would like her to read, Pope makes use of compliments such as "Blushing becomes you the best of any Lady in England" and hyperbole, as seen in the line "Indeed Madam, not to flatter you, our Virtue will be sooner over-thrown by one Glance of yours, than by all the wicked Poets can write in an Age." As well, although the letter does not require the use of sexual double-entendre to advance its purpose, it also is included: "wherein (they tell me) are some things that may be dangerous to be lookd upon; however I think You may venture, tho' you shou'd Blush." In Pope's day blushing showed a woman's modesty yet simultaneously revealed her own sexual awareness and desire. This served as an attraction to men.

At the same time that Pope was writing in the courtly style of letter to Martha he was also writing in the courtly/libertine style used between men. One letter that he wrote in this manner was written to Henry Cromwell in 1711, in which he voiced his thoughts about the Blount sisters:

If I have not writ to you as soon as I ought,  
 let my writing now atone for the delay; as it  
 will infallibly do, when you know what a  
 Sacrifice I make you at this Time, and that  
 every moment my Eyes are employed upon this  
 paper, they are taken off from Two of the  
 finest faces in the Universe: For I am at this  
 instant plac'd betwixt Two such ladies that in  
 good faith 'tis all I'm able to do, to keep my  
 self in my Skin...-You fancy now that Sapho's  
 Eyes are a couple of these my Tapers, but 'tis  
 no such matter Sir; these are Eyes that have  
 more Persuasion in one Glance than in all  
 Sapho's Oratory and Gesture together,...How  
 gladly wou'd I give all I am worth, that is to  
 say, my *Pastorals* for One of their  
*Maidenheads*, & my *Essay* for the other? I wou'd  
 lay out all my *Poetry in Love*; an *Original* for  
 a *Lady*, & a *Translation* for a *Waiting Maid*...  
 (Corr.I.137-8)

In this passage Pope makes use of compliment to describe the two ladies, lines such as "Two of the finest faces in the Universe" and "Eyes that have more Persuasion in one Glance than in all Sapho's Oratory and Gesture." He uses hyperbole to describe how entranced he is with the two faces stating "gladly wou'd I give all I am worth, that is to say, my *Pastorals* for One of their *Maidenheads*, & my *Essay* for the other." This is no idle statement when you consider that it is only through his poetry that Pope has been able to compensate for his marginalization. Finally, in the male-to-male libertine style that creates lascivious camaraderie and makes women into sexual objects, he makes use of double-entendre, though it is not subtle, in the line "'tis all I'm able to do, to keep my self in my Skin," referring of course, to sexual ejaculation. Both the courtly style of writing to Martha and the courtly/libertine style of writing used in the letter to

Henry Cromwell represent the period when Pope played the Rake. Both letters contained or attempted to contain women by turning them into objects and as such were a means of male construction of female character.

As the century progressed and England's middle class grew, epistolary fashions shifted away from this artificial style of writing towards a more natural, clear style of writing. This was a change, however, that was generally associated with how men wrote to each other, not how men wrote to women. Pope's letters to Martha, however, reflected this change. In contrast to the artificial style of writing we see in the letter to Cromwell is a letter Pope wrote to Martha in 1716. A reflection of the change in epistolary style, this letter is more informal in tone and natural and direct in diction as compared to the courtly or rake convention:

Madam,-It is usual with unfortunate Young Women to betake themselves to Romances, and thereby feed & indulge that melancholy which is occasioned by the Want of a Lover: As the Want of Money is generally attended with the Want I have mentioned, I presume it may be so far your present case, as to render the five Volumes of the Grand Cyrus no unreasonable Present to you. My dear Madana, if you are disposed to wander upon adventures, suffer the unhappy Artamenes to be your Companion! Great as he afterwards was, he would rather have chose to rule your heart than the Empires of Persia & Media. Let your faithless Sister triumph in her ill-gotten Treasures; let her put on New Gowns to be the Gaze of Fools, and Pageant of a Birth-night! While you with all your innocence enjoy a Shady Grove without any leaves on, & dwell with a virtuous Aunt in a Country Paradise.

Tell that abandon'd creature who is unworthy to be called your Relation, and who

has so lately Prostituted herself to a man in  
 a Sheet of paper, that her money like her  
 self, shall be put out to Use to such people  
 as will give most for it....I have been at  
 home an entire week besieged with fifty Greek  
 books, which have all been written to explain  
 a Story of a fine Lady that was Ravishd.....  
 (Corr.I.375-6)

In this letter there is no use of hyperbole, sexual double-entendre, or false flattery. Although the letter is still rather metaphorical Pope is ignoring the conventional style of writing to a lady. He obviously considered Martha Blount one of his dearest friends and so wrote to her in a more personal vein. Although the language in the letter is metaphorical, by using it he is sharing a private joke with Martha as he refers to the romantic characters that he and the Blounts used to act out.

An example of the depth of Pope's and Martha's friendship can be seen in a letter he wrote to her on March 25, 1744, two months before his death:

Dear Madam,-Writing is become very painful to me, if I would write a Letter of any Length. In Bed, or sitting, it hurts my breast, & in the afternoon I can do nothing, still less by Candlelight. I would else tell you evry thing that past between Mr Allen & me. He proposd to have stayd only to dinner, but recollecting the next day was Good friday, he said he would take a bed here & fast with me. The next morning I desird him to come into my room before I rose, & opend myself very freely upon the Subject, requiring the same Unreserve on his part. I told him what I thought of Mrs. A's conduct to me before you came, & both hers and his after: He did pretty much what you expected, utterly denyd any Unkindness or Coolness, & protested his utmost desire, and answerd for hers, to have pleasd you. layd it upon the *mutual dissatisfaction* between you &

her, & hopd I would not be alterd toward him by any misrepresentation you might make, not that he believed you would tell an untruth, but that you saw things in a mistaken light. I very strongly told him that you never made any such....

My own condition is much at one, & to save writing to you the particulars, which I know you desire to be apprized of, I inclose my Letter to the Doctor.

I assure you I don't think half so much what will become of me, as of You; and when I grow worst, I find the anxiety for you doubled. Would to God you would Quicken your haste to settle, by reflecting what a pleasure it would be to me, just to see it, and to see you at ease; & then I could contentedly leave you to the Providence of God, in this Life, & resign my Self to it in the other! I have little to say to you when we meet. but I love you upon unalterable Principles, which make me feel my heart the same to you as if i saw you every hour. adieu....

(Corr.IV.510-11)

Pope only wrote seventeen more letters before he died. All of them were written to men, and none of them approached the length of his letter to Martha. Although he was weak and in pain, Pope cared enough about Martha to discuss with her the outcome of a confrontation he had with Mr. Allen over how Martha and Pope had been treated during a past visit. Pope and Martha had obviously talked about the incident, as we see when Pope writes "He did pretty much what you expected." In the discussion Pope clearly stood up for Martha and did not allow Mr. Allen to cast aspersions upon Martha's character: "I very strongly told him you never made any such." Pope does not seem to attempt to censor any of the conversation he held with Mr. Allen; he appears to relay exactly what was said though it could be inferred as uncomplimentary: "& hopd I would not be

altered toward him by any misrepresentations you might make." Pope is treating Martha as an equal, as a friend. He and Martha are free of the limits imposed by the social conventions surrounding male-female relationships. He is free to tell her how he feels; he is free to tell her that he loves her. The final proof of Martha's importance to Pope is not seen just through what he says but through what he does. To stave off any more financial problems, Pope leaves Martha the bulk of his estate, leaving it to the friend who means more to him than family.

### Conclusion

Pope's friendships with women such as his mother, Mrs. Cope, Mrs. Weston, and the Blount sisters sensitized him to the limits women of their class faced in society. Rumbold points out that "although girls like the Blounts were in many ways extremely privileged, Pope, as a relative outsider, was struck by the potential sterility of the goals that town life set before them" (64). Pope became aware that for women marriage was limiting, that it seldom involved love and was often just a financial move. In particular, Pope became aware of the financial insecurity faced by those, like the Blounts, who did not marry. He became aware that often "with the only productive career for women closed to them, widows and spinsters lived on jointures and allowances often perceived by heads of families as a drain on embarrassed estates" (Rumbold



65-6).

The respect and love Pope had for Martha and his mother, and his willingness to help his female friends are not traits one would normally associate with a man thought to perpetuate female sentiments. Nor are they the traits of a man who serves to enforce the belief that women are objects, as Ellen Pollak contends.

Pope's efforts on behalf of those women that he felt were wronged are remarkable for both their courage and compassion. They are remarkable particularly as his society could have considered his efforts as aberrant social behaviour, for, through his efforts to aid married women, Pope was helping to undermine the idea that a husband's rights were absolute. This subversion of the so-called natural order of things is one that we will see running through his poetry about women.

## CHAPTER III

General Introduction to the Poems

Examination of Alexander Pope's marginalization within his society, his relationships with women, and his use of genre and form enables the modern reader to interpret Pope's major poems about women. These poems operate on two levels. On the first superficial level, Pope appears to be reinforcing his society's beliefs about women by reiterating accepted cliches and conventions surrounding women. On a second deeper level, Pope is clearly challenging these assumptions about gender as he critiques these same cliches and conventions in order to subvert them. In his major poetry about women Pope uses the satire and epistle poetic forms. Both allow Pope to subvert and critique accepted male constructions of female character through the use of irony, myth, allusion, etc.

In satire the use of wit and irony creates a double layer of meaning. It is because of the duality inherent in satire that political satires could castigate their subjects on the one hand, yet, on the other, could appear to be innocent of any negative intent. It is because of this duality that Pope's poems about women are often misunderstood. Pope uses satire not to criticize women, but to criticize the social mores that forced women to act in ways suggesting that they were of

little worth. Through the use of satire Pope can point out both the limits of women's roles in their society and the cause behind these limited roles, and he can suggest a way for women to acquire power. Indeed, as Pope writes in the tradition of the satirist, it is no fairer to criticize him for being anti-woman than it is to criticize Jonathan Swift for being a blood-thirsty savage in his *A Modest Proposal*.

In addition to satire Pope often used the epistle as a poetic form: three of the four poems I shall examine are Epistles. The poetic epistolary form and the prose epistle, or letter, share many characteristics. First, just as the familiar epistle was to have been written between two people near enough in standing to have the same frame of reference, so the epistolary poem was also written as if to a friend who possessed the same general knowledge. This understanding was imperative if any allusions within the poem were to be understood. Finally, as one would be free within a letter to defend oneself, to tell stories, to pass on jokes, so too was this freedom to be seen in the epistolary poem. Pat Rogers relates the guidelines the poet must follow:

He can defend himself when required, answer objections, suggest qualifications. He can tell stories, point morals, draw characters, crack jokes. Some garrulity is forgivable, so long as the close tie between speaker and listener is not broken - if there is a danger of this...the poet can exploit that very threat (69).

It is the close tie of the speaker to the addressee that plays an important role in understanding *To a Lady*.

I shall examine the following poems: *Epistle to Miss Blount, With the Works of Voiture; The Rape of the Lock; To Richard Temple, Viscount Cobham. Of the Characters of Men; and To a Lady. Of the Characters of Women.* I shall examine the poems chronologically in order of creation and publication. By examining the poems chronologically we will be able to see the development of Pope's thought and attitudes concerning women; as well, we will be able to better understand Pope's concept of good humour as he develops it in more detail in each poem.

*"Epistle to Miss Blount, With the Works of Voiture"*

Written in 1710 and published in 1712, *"Epistle to Miss Blount, With the Works of Voiture"* is an example of a poem that has two seemingly contrasting themes. On the surface level, it is a poem documenting women's place within their society and their shallowness in being attracted to material things. On a deeper level, it is a critique of the social mores that prompt women to act superficially. Therefore, on a surface level it is a complimentary poem, but on a deeper level it serves as a cautionary poem.

Although the poem is limited in that Pope does not develop alternative courses of action for women to implement if they are to avoid what could be a confining fate, it represents the first time Pope publicly acknowledges and deals with the problems women face. It is also in this poem that he first introduces his concept of good humour as a means for

women to develop their inner moral strength, self-possession, integrity, and possible power.

The key to understanding the poem lies in knowing the style upon which it was modelled. The poem is modelled on a style created by Vincent Voiture, whose style is best described by James Anderson Winn:

Voiture's letters betray an assumption, usually tacit, that all ladies, whatever their age or marital status, are to be approached as if they were objects for romance....the style based on this assumption uses raillery, compliment, and double-entendre to insinuate the writer's fundamentally sexual response to the women being addressed. The writer usually portrays himself as languishing; again, exaggeration is fundamental.<sup>21</sup>

Pope's use of Voiture as his model indicated a number of important things to the audience before they even read it. It indicated that the poem was going to be about women and that the poem would be complimentary in nature. Indeed, the poem is about women and it is complimentary in nature. Its purpose, however, is not only to praise, but also to warn its reader therefore showing that woman is not an object but a moral being. Where Voiture's complimentary letters to women reinforced women's male-constructed identity, Pope's complimentary poems to women exposed women's male-constructed identity and subverted it. By choosing to invoke Voiture, Pope echoes the courtly experience and then subverts it by turning the poem into one that could be read, as he intended, on the

---

<sup>21</sup> James Anderson Winn, *A Window in the Bosom The Letters of Alexander Pope* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1977) 63.

more substantial cautionary level that implies woman's moral autonomy.

Within this poem Pope identifies the choice of roles women face and he illustrates the limits of the roles as they exist. Speaking of social role expectations, Pope states, "Too much your Sex is by their Forms confin'd/ severe to all but most to Womankind." (1.31-2) The word form is important because it carries three distinct meanings. On one level it means a woman's physicality; on a second level it refers to the social expectations of the time; and on a third level it refers to the social conventions of that society. On all three levels form equals confinement for women. Pope elaborates on this situation in the next line when he states "Custom grown blind with Age, must be your Guide." (1.33) The word custom similarly has more than one meaning. The first is that expectation or behaviour that has been established by society and the second is that custom that society has passed as a law. Again, in both meanings, the word custom is confining. Confined by law, women had no real rights; confined by custom, by societal expectations, women had no real power and only a limited position. Not only is Pope saying that custom can be confining, he is also implying that it has grown blind as his time's customs have not changed.

Not only does Pope outline problems surrounding women before marriage but he also attempts to illustrate the problems women may face if they marry. As marriage was

considered a woman's *raison d'être*, Pope inverts a traditional value system that would see marriage as better than spinsterhood. As Astell did, Pope argues that marriage is the worse of the two choices open to women: "Marriage may all those petty Tyrants chace,/But sets up One, a greater, in their Place." (l.37-8) Although bound by custom and form before marriage, after marriage women are bound to and by their husbands. Men who "for some months ador'd" (l.43) the women, men who had been "...fawning servant[s]" (l.44), once they became husbands, could make marriage a worse hazard than spinsterhood as women did not have the courts available to help them if the marriage was unbearable or their husband became abusive (Jones 19). Pope is therefore satirizing the rhetoric of courtship which makes the lover a humble servant of his mistress, and he is exposing it for its duplicity by showing where the real, proactive power lies:

But the last Tyrant ever proves the worst.  
 Still in constraint your suff'ring Sex remains  
 or bound in formal, or in real Chains;  
 Whole Years neglected for some months ador'd  
 The fawning Servant turns a haughty Lord.  
 (ll.40-4)

By describing the potential husband as a "Tyrant" Pope highlights the power struggle within marriage. The last tyrant is the boss; any power a woman hopes to gain from marriage is illusory. Pope points out that the rhetoric of courtship does not supply a good basis for a marriage. The "fawning Servant" is false; the word fawning has connotations associated with flattery and false praise, two traits Pope avoided in both his

poetry and his mature letters to women. As the poem works on two levels, so too does the rhetoric of courtship; Pope is thus forcing the reader to acknowledge the limits of this ritual and the truth behind it - that marriage is based on a power struggle, not on love.

Though Pope fails to supply an alternate course of action for women to follow, he does at least illustrate for them what their future could be if they "let false Shows, or empty Titles .."(I.47) entice them to marry for the wrong reasons thereby showing what could happen if women allow themselves to be seduced into an "advantageous" match. Pope's warning about the possible fate women may face if they are lured into marriage by material things is evident in the following exemplum:

The Gods, to curse Pamela with her Pray'rs,  
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, glitt'ring, wretched Thing!  
Pride, Pomp, and State but reach her outward  
Part,  
She sighs, and is no Dutchess at her heart.  
(11.49-56)

Pamela represents a possible future for Teresa Blount and all the other women like her who are concerned only with appearance. Having been caught up in the surface attraction of material things, Pamela has allowed herself to settle for a relationship devoid of any meaning. Pamela prayed for a socially successful marriage and has acquired everything she



wished for, the "Gilt Coach," jewels, and robes, all of which are superficial objects. But Pamela's mate is also superficial; he is a fool. He is added to the list of things she has acquired and is thus equated with an object. Pamela, having settled for surface, cannot be happy for she too has become an object-though she remains a feeling subject inside. By exploiting the subject/object contrast, Pope shows that Pamela herself has substance. The things she possesses "but reach her outward Part," not her inner self, and this is why she is unhappy. Pope therefore deconstructs the object that Pamela is likened to and shows her as a subject; Pamela "sighs, and is no Dutchess at her heart." Pamela turns out to be more than the socially constructed role of Dutchess; she has a heart.

After the exemplum Pope begins to give the reader advice. In the following passage Pope introduces the concept he called "Good Humour." To Pope good humour referred to those attributes, such as patience and cheerfulness, that would help a person of either sex to be able to endure any situation. Pope suggests good humour as a means for women to minimize the negative aspects of marriage:

Trust not too much your now resistless Charms,  
Those, Age or Sickness, soon or late, disarm;  
Good Humour only teaches Charms to last,  
Still makes new Conquests, and maintains the  
Love, rais'd on Beauty, will like That decay.  
past;  
(11.59-62)

In a time when women were appreciated for their beauty, when

they had to rely, for the most part, on their ability to flirt and charm, Pope suggests they deviate from the narrowness of this path by developing their inner resource of good humour. Though he does not claim that good humour will solve their problems, he does at least suggest that it might help to make the limitations that they face a little more bearable. The concept of good humour, however, has been problematic for feminist critics. They see it as one more tool that men in the eighteenth century used to prevent women from having a voice. However, Pope is suggesting that women develop their inner self for their own sakes, not for the sakes of men so that they can avoid ending like Pamela--objectified and unhappy. In addition, Pope suggests that good humour could be seen as a means of exerting power as it not only "teaches Charms to last" it "makes new Conquests, and maintains the past."

By juxtaposing these two value systems satirically Pope is illustrating the contrast between that system which sees women as objects, as decoration, or as forms, and that one which sees women as moral subjects capable of developing an inner sense of self. Pope is not challenging the social attitudes towards women so much as he is illustrating the limits of the roles that these attitudes force women to adopt. In addition he suggests modifications to these roles. By cautioning women against marrying for monetary reasons only and by showing what one of those marriages could be like, Pope can challenge women to acknowledge the barrenness, the

sterility that is inherent when one sees oneself as an object of barter. Although he does not supply women with an alternative course of action, his proposal that they develop good humour supplies them with a means of existing more easily within their social position. Through the use of two layers of meaning Pope creates then a poem that does more than just point out the flaws in women's character; he identifies both the reason that their character has these flaws and the fallacy that lies beneath the courtship ritual. As well, he identifies a means for women to achieve and maintain power.

## CHAPTER IV

*The Rape of the Lock*

In "Epistle to Miss Blount, With the Works of *Figure*," Pope identified the limitations that women in his society faced. In *The Rape of the Lock* Pope not only identifies the problems women face, but he more clearly suggests that the cause of their problems is men. Pope takes the subject matter of the first poem and elaborates upon it in the second, in the course of which he further develops the theme of good humour and its importance to women.

Critical Background

*The Rape of the Lock* has received a wide range of criticism. It has been interpreted as being a severe moral satire in which Pope mocks the selfish vanity of fashionable society, and it has also been read as a celebration of the new ease of the English middle class as it embraced capitalism. It has been called a mock-epic, a comic-epic, and even an immortality/love poem.<sup>22</sup>

Of the critical examinations this poem has received, two

---

<sup>22</sup>Robin Grove, "Uniting Airy Substance: *The Rape of the Lock* 1712-1736," in *The Art of Alexander Pope*, Howard Erskine-Hill and Anne Smith eds. (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1979) 85.

are particularly relevant to my concerns. The first is a feminist approach by Ellen Pollak. Pollak believes that Pope enforces the "myth of passive womanhood" in *The Rape of the Lock*. She feels that his satire "on a culture that objectifies individuals is itself a pretext for his own objectification of the female," (77) and that Pope presents Belinda as the opposite of a social being. Pollak contends that Pope's *Rape of the Lock* asserts the doctrine of passive womanhood, more completely perhaps than any other work of its age. Thus, Pollak sees this poem as reinforcing the acceptance of the change in the role of eighteenth century women from active participants in the development of the family holdings to passive recipients of the largesse awarded to them by their husbands.

Laura Brown, a Marxist critic, holds that it is through poems like *The Rape of the Lock*, with its objectification of women, that the identity of woman as commodity is enforced. Brown feels that women "embody the material consequences of commodification much more directly than men...and the direct association of women with the commodity and all its corollaries of indiscriminacy and acquisition also serves to attach an abstract imputation of moral indiscriminacy and deceit to female character."<sup>23</sup> In short, she argues that as Belinda is seen as a commodity, an object, she holds as much

---

<sup>23</sup>Laura Brown, *Alexander Pope* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985) 103.

worth as the objects she uses to decorate herself, and has consequently no moral autonomy. She and these ornaments are interchangeable. Belinda's worth then reflects the worth, or lack of, of women in the eighteenth century.

Pollak and Brown both argue that Pope perceives women as objects, that he sees women as morally insubstantial, and that this is what he portrays in *The Rape of the Lock*. Neither Pollak nor Brown examine Pope's development of good humour as a means of empowering women.

### Exegesis

*The Rape of the Lock* is the masterpiece of Pope's early writing. Written as an occasional piece in response to a request to resolve a quarrel that was disrupting the relationship of two prominent Catholic families, the poem operates as a vehicle of entertainment and social commentary. On the surface it is a narrative poem about a society gentleman who spoilt the hairdo of a society beauty by cutting off a lock of hair. But, on a more significant level, it is a social satire. Just as Pope's *Epistle to Miss Blount*, *With the Works of Voiture* was both a complimentary and cautionary poem, so also is this poem both a burlesque upon the practices of English upper-class polite society, and a warning to women about the realities of their fate. Mock-heroic in style, the poem concentrates on the actions of men and women within their personal relationships as prescribed by their contemporary

society. In addition, it deals specifically with the limitations and restrictions imposed upon women, as illustrated in the toilette scene, the battle image, and the visit to the Cave of Spleen.

In an effort to treat the subject matter in a way that would provoke humour, while still arousing serious reflection upon and awareness of the deeper issues he was dealing with, Pope chose the style and form of the Mock-Epic. Stylistically, this genre serves two purposes. First, it serves to trivialize the whole of the story in a way that will provide amusement and entertainment. Secondly, by elevating the trivial subject matter to the grandeur of classical epics, Pope creates opportunities for ironic contrast. It is this ironic contrast that provides the thematic depth and significance of the poem. Indeed, it is this level of discourse, through its inversion of surface/substance, trivial/important, and artificial/natural that provides the satire of the social mores that caused women to believe that their sense of self was dependent upon their physical beauty.

In Canto One Pope introduces his concern that the societal game women are forced to play causes them to pay attention to external appearance at the expense of their inner self. Pope begins the poem by introducing Belinda and the theme of beauty. As I have previously discussed, in Pope's society beauty was a virtue, in the sense of it as a powerful or ethical quality. This assumption that beauty was a form of

power itself inverts surface and substance. Beauty was of strategic importance in the power struggle between men and women. As we have seen it was possession of beauty that enabled women to compete with each other in their attempt to attain a husband and thus security and power. To attain this goal beauty was improved upon by any means possible. With the elevation of beauty to a virtue, pride, normally considered a sin, became elevated also, inverting the Christian humanist value <sup>②</sup> system fundamental to Pope's moral framework. The elevation of pride was possible because in the game between the sexes women were expected to flirt, tease, be fickle, and most of all be proud. To be proud was the most important; a proud woman maintained a distance between herself and her admirers. Consequently, this "playing hard to get" served as a means to entice the man's interest. We see all of this behaviour in Pope's portrayal of Belinda.

Canto One focuses on Belinda. As early as line fourteen we are made aware of Belinda's high status. Through the use of the epic simile "And oped those eyes that must eclipse the day," we learn that although there are two worlds, the outside world and Belinda's, Belinda's world is of the greater importance for her eyes alone will "...eclipse the day." However, we quickly see that what should be surface, Belinda's world, becomes substance and what should be substance, the day, becomes surface. It is through this inversion that the two levels of discourse, as developed through the mock-epic,



become apparent. By working with opposites like surface/substance, trivial/important, artificial/natural, Pope can comment on those social conventions, as seen in courtly hyperbole of mistress/sun parallel, that are responsible for this inversion. It is here that Pope begins to develop the reversal of surface and substance.

Belinda's high status, a result of this inversion, is reinforced by Ariel, her guardian sylph, who both watches over Belinda and communicates with her through her dreams. It is Ariel who warns Belinda that something is going to happen. It is Ariel's warning that first hints that man is responsible for the inversion of the value system, as it is man that Ariel warns Belinda against (ROL.I.1 111-14). What is not told is why or how man is responsible. However, Ariel's warning is in vain, for when Belinda awakens, her attention is distracted from the warning by a love letter beside her bed. In Pope's time the idea of a special style of writing to ladies was a cultural norm; as mentioned previously, the love letter used in his day was based on an epistolary style employed by Vincent Voiture which made use of exaggeration, compliment, and "double-entendre" to "insinuate the writer's fundamentally sexual response to the women being addressed." Through the introduction of a love-letter Pope is again setting up the contrast between surface and substance and introducing the concept of the power struggle between the sexes. The love-letter is all surface as all women regardless of marital

status or age were to "be approached as if they were objects for romance...exaggeration is fundamental (Winn 63). However, as will be seen by Belinda's response, she perceives the love letter as being of substance.

The love-letter serves to introduce the fundamental differences between the sexes. Although the letter is clearly superficial, Belinda responds as if it contains words of substance. Upon reading the "Wounds, Charms, and Ardors..."(l.119) contained within the letter, Belinda forgets Ariel's warning. Reading the letter as a standard social convention between men and women in the battle of the sexes, Belinda interprets it as an invitation to enter into the battle between the sexes with the Baron. This battle represents the struggle for power that occurs between the sexes since for women it is through this battle that they win their husbands and thus some measure of power. However, this power struggle is clearly illusory, for men have all the control.

It is the battle metaphor that further develops the difference in perception between men and women. Belinda's preparation for her meeting with the Baron occurs in lines 121-128. Known as the "toilette scene," this passage stresses the superficial nature of women's make-up. In Pope's society the only weapon a woman possessed was her physical appearance; thus the attention to and enhancement of this weapon was "natural." The "unnatural" weapon would be the development of

her inner strength, as it was not deemed of importance by men. Women constructed themselves as they perceived men wished them to be in order to play this game. Yet they cannot help but lose, for their weapons have been given to them by men. The unnaturalness of inner strength as a weapon is seen in Belinda's and her peers response to Clarissa after Belinda loses the "game." Belinda and her peers ignore Clarissa's advice to develop good humour instead of beauty, and continue to fight using objects of beauty and meaningless love jargon. In a true epic battle, the hero would be armed with material weapons only to protect his physical being; his most important weapon would be his inner strength and courage. In Belinda's case, the weapon she fights with is superficial; it is beauty, a beauty not all her own as it is artificially enhanced.

As well, it is this passage that begins to show the misplaced religious devotion in her world as physical surface is mistaken for spiritual and moral substance. That women's physical appearance could, nonetheless, be powerful is seen as Belinda prepares for her encounter with the Baron. With the application of powders and jewellery we see Belinda's power emerge as she becomes a Goddess who worships the superficial:

With Head uncover'd, the COSMETIC Powers.  
 A heav'nly Image in the Glass appears,  
 To that she bends, to that her Eyes she rears;  
 Th'inferior Priestess, at her Altar's side,  
 Trembling, begins the sacred Rites of Pride.  
 Unnumber'd Treasures ope at once, and here  
 The various Off'rings of the World appear;  
 From each she nicely culls with curious Toil,  
 And decks the Goddess with the glitt'ring  
 Spoil.

(1. 11.124-32)

The Goddess, however, is false, for her powers are cosmetic not cosmic, that is, they are superficial. Her "heav'nly image" appears in the Glass and she bends to it; she who should be worshipped, instead, worships her own beauty. Ultimately, then, her beauty is false, for it is an illusion, an illusion created by covering what is real with what is false-cosmetics. It is Clarissa who exposes this act as one of covering up; Belinda only sees herself as calling up all the wonders of her face. To Belinda all that is important is what is reflected in this glass; all the glass can reflect is the surface appearance of things or people. Again Pope develops the surface/substance contrast, for the "inferior priestess," Belinda, can deck the Goddess, Belinda's image, with external adornment, "glitt'ring spoil," but she cannot sustain the beauty forever as she is mortal.

Pope creates an ironic contrast between the religion of vanity and Christian religion through the placing of the Bible upon her dressing table. All religions have their own system of faith and worship. The religion of Vanity is no exception; its rite is the creation of a false beauty. It enacts this rite through the use of cosmetics; the dressing table rite serves as a form of Mass that transforms Belinda from an earthly woman into a goddess. This transformation was part of the social conventions that perceived women as objects that adorned the homes of men. Christians, in contrast, celebrate

the love poured out for them by Christ as he gave his life for their salvation. They do this through celebration of the word and the sacrament of the Eucharist. The sacrament of the Eucharist supplies strength and nourishment both physically and spiritually, and the celebration of the word allows the worshipper to be in deep communion with God. The religion of Vanity does not have a communion as it is entirely self-worshipping. With all spiritual and moral substance lost, the religion of Vanity mistakes surface for substance. The juxtaposition of the Bible with the frivolities of "puffs, powders, patches, and billet-doux" reinforces how inverted the value system of Belinda and the Baron is. By giving the Bible a position of importance equal to the cosmetics that Belinda uses, Pope can illustrate the absurdities that exist in his society and the paradox that men have placed women in; they are condemned for enhancing their appearance but would not win a husband if they did not enhance their looks. They are condemned for having no inner strength, but are themselves trivialized and objectified at the expense of spiritual development. Hence, Belinda is unable to recognize the true purpose and worth of the Bible on her dressing table.

Pope does not condemn women for their attention to beauty because, as he argues later in *To a Lady*, he is aware that men's expectations of women have created this behaviour. In Canto Two of *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope establishes that it is the construction of women's identities by men that has created





women's situation is underscored by some of the darkest lines in the poem:

Resolv'd to win, he meditates the way,  
By Force to ravish, or by Fraud betray;  
For when Success a Lover's Toil attends,  
Few ask, if Fraud or Force attain'd his Ends.  
(II.11.31-4)

Women cannot win this game because it is not played fairly. Pope exposes the fact that society blames women no matter what happens. The futility of Belinda's preparation for battle is evident before the action begins; we know that she must lose the battle (and the game).

It is in Canto Three that the perilous position of women who engage in the social game of survival becomes clear; it is in this Canto that the first epic battle, as seen in the card game, occurs. Women's existence was perilous not because she was unequal, not because she was incapable of competing, but because both sexes approached their encounter with different rules.

Pope's use of epic characteristics to elevate the subject matter in the poem serves to demonstrate the essential conflict between the sexes. Though they are both playing what would appear to be the same game, the card game ombre, in actuality they are not. Each sex has ascribed to the game their own rules and expectations. To men the game is mock-epic, as seen by the Baron's desire to win the Lock, not Belinda: "Th' Adventrous Baron the bright Locks admir'd,/He saw, he wish'd, and to the Prize aspir'd"(II.11.29-30). To



women it is epic, for it is serious; it is life-engaging as the outcome of the game could determine their future. Both are playing for different stakes. Through this apparent contradiction Pope highlights the whole problem, the unequal relationship between the sexes. Through the ironic contrast created by his use of the mock-epic Pope is able to depict a woman enmeshed in society's confining expectations, for, as we will see, no matter what a woman does the results are determined by men.

Belinda wins the card game and thinks it is real; the Baron wins the social game, which is real. The Baron, by forceful and foul means, cuts off a lock of Belinda's hair. In Belinda's society a woman would give a lock of hair to her love as a love-token; thus Belinda's reputation would be hurt if it were thought that she gave the lock willingly. It is partly because of this, and partly because of pride, that Belinda creates such an uproar in her fight to get the lock back. It must be remembered that the only means women in Pope's time had to exert power was to find a husband. One way they competed in the marriage market was by packaging themselves as attractive and virginal parcels. With her reputation and beauty marred, Belinda's ability to compete could be seriously hindered.

Canto Four focuses on the absolute helplessness women experience when confronted with social injustice. Belinda has lost her lock of hair, yet she has no access to a course of



character. Though the bag full of sighs and sobs works up Belinda's and Thalestris' anger, it accomplishes nothing constructive. When Thalestris' appeal to Sir Plume for the return of Belinda's lock is heard and won, Belinda still loses because the Baron refuses to comply:

But this Lock, this sacred Lock I swear,  
 (Which never more shall join its parted Hair,  
 Which never more its Honours shall renew,  
 Clipt from the lovely Head where late it grew)  
 That while my Nostrils draw the vital Air,  
 The Hand, which won it, shall for ever wear.  
 (4.11.133-38)

The Baron's freedom to refuse to give back the lock, his power to refuse to comply with Sir Plume's order, illustrates women's legal existence--Women have no position under the law for they are not recognized as persons. In a marriage a woman was subject to a man; the Baron's disregard for Belinda's feelings illustrates this lack of female power. Belinda is powerless, she is helpless; not even the breaking of the vial of tears and Belinda's appearance with "Her Eyes half-languishing, half-drown'd in Tears"(4.1.144) is able to effect change in her circumstances:

the pitying Audience melt in Tears,  
 But Fate and Jove had stopp'd the Baron's  
 Ears.  
 In vain Thalestris with Reproach assails,  
 For who can move when fair Belinda fails?  
 (5.11.1-4)

Her personal weapons have failed her; she has received no external assistance; even a recourse to masculine law and to human mercy proved futile. Belinda's power is shown to be illusory.



Soul.  
(5.11.25-34)

Clarissa is pointing out that what is considered to be a powerful weapon is in itself frail and transient, as "frail Beauty must decay." She is asserting that since beauty will decay, women as works of art are perishable "since painted, or not painted, all shall fade." She suggests that because beauty is perishable and because "she who scorns a man, must die a maid," women should develop another weapon; they should develop the power of good humour. Women's other weapons, as seen in the Cave of Spleen, are useless. They are false for they are weapons constructed by men as part of women's "natural" character. Pope, through Clarissa, proposes that women develop another weapon, one that men cannot construct, an individual inner strength that is more powerful than the useless weapons of the Cave of Spleen, "When Airs, and Flights, and Screams, and Scolding" fail. Clarissa is here suggesting that women turn away from developing their surface, their appearance, and develop instead their substance, their inner strength. Pope is not suggesting women develop this power as a means of improving their docility, a possible feminist interpretation. Instead Pope suggests that women develop this strength as a means of affirming their personal integrity, their sense of self. Through Clarissa he suggests that if women develop good humour not only will they be able to effect change, but their merit may attract a man with soul. Merit is a word he applies to Mrs. Weston and Martha Blount;

it is a matter of intrinsic personal worth not just a means of manipulating men. Here, as in the *Epistle to Miss Blount*, With the *Works of Voiture*, Pope concludes that the answer for women lies in the development of "good humour," not as a permanent solution to women's predicament, but as a means of achieving a sense of self-worth. Much as Mary Astell argued in *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*, he is suggesting that women not let their thoughts be concerned only with how they are perceived by men, but rather that they begin to develop their own self-perception. In addition, through the development of good humour even if it is necessary for a woman to continue the game of trying to attain a husband it is possible that she will attract one of substance, not surface.

In conclusion, we see that Pope trivializes Belinda and her machinations not to satirize women, but to satirize the social mores perpetuated by men that caused women to believe their sense of self is dependent upon physical beauty. Pope has created a poem that deals with the restrictions women face, the cause of these restrictions, and a proposal for them to effect positive change in their situation. Through the introduction of good humour Pope has given women a means of constructing their own selves: Through the character of Clarissa, he has questioned women's role and suggested that it needs change. Finally, by the sending of the lock into the heavens Pope reiterates the need for change in the character of both sexes as neither sex is worthy of receiving the lock.

Pope does not then reinforce his society's views; he challenges them.

## CHAPTER V

## "Epistles to Several Persons"

Critical Background

Much of the criticism asserting that Pope's views of women conformed to those of his time has been based on *The Rape of the Lock*, which was examined in Chapter Four, and on "Epistle II. To a Lady. Of the Characters of Women. However, it is my belief that of all Pope's works on women, *To a Lady* is the one poem that has not been fully or correctly interpreted. One reason this is so is because many critics primarily examine *To a Lady* as a "Moral Essay" (P Rogers 68). Pope, however, called these Moral Essays "Epistles to Several Persons." Although, as Pat Rogers notes, the title "Moral Essays" has long been built into literary history and is therefore not too distracting, the title "Epistles to Several Persons" adds two significant elements that the critics overlook: it draws attention to the epistolary style, and, it draws attention to the person to whom the poem is addressed. Secondly, I feel that *To a Lady* has not been interpreted fully because it is often examined separately from *To Richard Temple, Viscount Cobham. Of the Characters of Men*. It is my contention that for a full reading the two need to be read



together. Originally Pope planned on writing an *Opus Magnum* or "Map of Man," which "was a system of ethics in the Horatian way." As Pope said,

my works will in one respect be like the works of Nature, much more to be liked and understood when consider'd in the relation they bear with each other, than when ignorantly look'd upon one by one; and often, those parts which attract most at first sight, will appear to be not the most, but the least considerable." (Corr.III.348)

As Pope planned in his *Opus Magnum*, they were to be read in sequence. Just as William Blake later was to expect a reader to examine *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* as complementary pairs, so should *To a Lady* be read in conjunction with *To Cobham*.

As we have seen, two critics that have done much to reinforce the standard view of Pope and women are Ellen Pollak and Laura Brown. One of Pollak's major contentions is that Pope reinforces in his poetry the idea that women were objects; she believes that he does nothing to qualify or limit male construction of female character, and indeed suggests that he reinforces it:

Instead of exploiting the dissonance between reality and myth, Pope seemed to go out of his way to resolve that dissonance, to rhetorically accommodate the contradictions inherent in his culture's dominant sexual codes - to make them seem sufficient to experience fulfilled. His poetry fed on the stock paradoxes that conventional myth allowed, not on those it found unthinkable (12).

It is this observation that enables Pollak to feel justified

in stating

Thus in..."To a Lady," he portrays Martha Blount in the image of the feminine ideal even as he establishes the essential negativity of women. Indeed, in order to render a literary compliment that is consistent to the terms of the sexual ideology he sanctions in his text, he must take liberties with the facts of Martha's life, must literally reconstitute the history of the woman he so gallantly celebrates (12-13).

Although Pollak realizes that Pope uses Martha Blount as the image of the feminine ideal, she interprets Pope's "liberties with the facts of Martha's life" as proof that he sees women as objects. Pollak is, however, ignoring the eulogistic tradition in this poem which is being employed in the same way as if it were being written for a man. What she appears not to recognize is that Pope knows Martha well. She does not consider that Pope, by giving Martha a voice in the poem clearly diverges from convention. He is not constructing her character; rather, he is reflecting some of the intellectual give and take demonstrated in their letters. He is addressing her as a friend, as a person, not as an object, for Martha clearly has those inner qualities that Pope deems of importance. Martha possesses inner virtue, moral sense, and good humour. He is not painting a biographical portrait of Martha, but an idealized one. Through his idealized portrait of Martha, which stands in opposition to his satirical portraits, Pope challenges women's view of themselves.

Pollak is not alone with her contention; Laura Brown also claims that Pope saw women as objects. As well, she contends

that he was a misogynist. However, Brown qualifies this remark by placing Pope within the larger context of classical tradition:

Pope's misogyny does not spring fully grown from his own personal antagonism. Classical attacks on women, especially Juvenal's misogynist satires, serve as an authority and justification for much of the anti-female literature of Pope's period (102-3).

By placing Pope within this tradition she sees him as reinforcing the standard view of women. What both Brown and Pollak neglect to do, however, is to consider the epistolary tradition and how the character of the addressee informs the whole poem. They neglect to consider how Pope uses genre, choice of addressee, irony, and the sequence of the two poems to introduce two levels of discourse: one level of which appears to accept male construction of female character and the other which undermines this apparent acceptance.

### Exegesis

Examination of the four features mentioned above - genre, choice of addressee, sequence, and overall irony - demonstrates that Pope's ideas not only do not reflect contemporary views, but, in fact, are nearly antithetical to them.

The identity of the addressees and their relationship with Pope is one of the most important aspects of his use of the epistolary genre. It is the identity of the addressee that determines the poem's treatment and mood, and which provides

the ironic commentary. The addressee in each poem is held up as a moral example; each addressee is a close friend of Pope, Richard Temple, and Martha Blount. As well, following Horatian tradition, in *To a Lady*, the addressee also serves as the adversarius, or interlocutor of the satiric dialogue:

The dialogue itself permits an enlivening of the satiric discourse, a diversification of style, tone, and statement; promotes dramatic immediacy; and affords at least the appearance of objectivity. Where the interlocutor is friendly, the poet benefits by the presence of a second satirist on the scene. Where he is antagonistic, he furnishes concrete evidence of the satirist's provocation and specific justification of his contention...<sup>24</sup>

In accordance with Aden's description of the types of *adversarius*, Martha is friendly, and Pope benefits from her interjections. It is Martha's comment, "Most Women have no Characters at all," that enables Pope to begin his discourse about the characters of women. In addition, it is her assertion that Cloe is a good woman that allows Pope to disagree and offer a portrait of a truly good woman, a portrait that is central to his thesis.

Finally, awareness of Pope's intentions and the sequence of the poems is necessary when interpreting *To Cobham* and *To a Lady*. Part of Pope's "Map of Man" in his *Opus Magnum* was to include the Epistles. Pope describes his design in the Prefix to his *Essay on Man*:

---

<sup>24</sup>John M. Aden, "The Satiric Adversary," in *Pope: a Collection of Critical Essays* ed. J.V. Guerinet (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1972) 158.

What is now published, is only to be considered as a general Map of MAN, marking out no more than the greater parts, their extent, their limits, and their connection, but leaving the particular to be more fully delineated in the charts which are to follow. Consequently, these Epistles in their progress (if I have health and leisure to make any progress) will be less dry, and more susceptible of poetic ornament. I am here only opening the fountains, and clearing the passage. To deduce the rivers, to follow them in their course, and to observe their effects, may be a task more agreeable.<sup>25</sup>

The epistles Pope planned to write were to show men and women in action. Of these epistles the first two would have been the most important because they were to be "an introduction to ETHICS or practical Morality" (P. Rogers 67). *To Cobham*, written between 1730 and 1733, was published in 1734. It was immediately followed by *To a Lady*, written between 1732 and 1734 and published in 1735. Both satires study the characters of one of the sexes: *To Cobham* examines the characters of men; *To a Lady* examines the characters of women. As neither sex exists independently of the other Pope set out to examine the interplay of the sexes through these two poems.

In these poems Pope reveals his reservations about contemporary views about gender first by examining the characters of men and highlighting their inconsistency of character. Secondly, through the interplay of images between the two poems, Pope reveals that the inconsistencies he has discerned in men's character are the same inconsistencies that

---

<sup>25</sup>Miriam Leranbaum, *Alexander Pope's 'OPUS MAGNUM' 1729-1744* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977) vii.

have been traditionally attributed to women and judged negatively. By doing this Pope points out the similarities between the two sexes and suggests that each sex needs to become master or mistress of itself. Traditionally a male virtue it was a commonplace that men should have integrity and be Master of themselves; that women should be Mistress of themselves was not. In *To Cobham* his central message is that not only do men not understand their own character but that part of their character is composed of those attributes, such as fickleness, normally seen as female and therefore negative. In *To a Lady* he develops this issue and takes it one step further by showing that women should not be bound by man's misunderstandings but should go beyond them to develop their own individual potential. Pope achieves this by first drawing portraits of women whose roles are confining and/or self-destructive, and second by comparing these portraits to that of the good women, in the image of the addressee.

*To Sir Richard Temple, Viscount Cobham. Of the Characters of Men*

The addressee in this poem is Richard Temple, Viscount Cobham. Richard Temple had been associated with Pope for over five years, as Pope had been visiting him since 1725. A lieutenant-general, Cobham had been a supporter of the Walpole administration until he opposed the excise bill in 1733, at which time he was removed from his regiment. As Maynard Mack

conjectures:

By addressing a major poem to Cobham, he [Pope] could, on the one hand, perform an act of personal loyalty and friendship; on the other, honor publicly a man disgraced by Walpole for the very virtue most admirable in a public servant: independence of mind. His working papers for the never-to-be-completed "Opus Magnum" almost certainly contained by this time a sketch towards the epistle designated as "Characters of Men and Manners" in the manuscript exordium of his Essay on Man. Why not, it might readily occur to him, develop this topic...Develop it in such a way as would set off against the flux and mercury of our natures that element of stability (whether called a ruling passion, as by Pope, or an acquired habit of inner direction, as by some of today's sociologists, or simply a genetic disposition) which allows us on occasion to be "our own Master's still" and to take such stands against prevailing currents as that for which Cobham was now paying the price (597)?

By choosing Cobham as his addressee, Pope was able to have as his positive role-model a person with whom his readers would be familiar and one whom they knew had been morally tested and had passed that test. Pope admires Cobham in particular for his independence of mind; this is a trait that he also admires in Martha, his addressee in *To a Lady*, and one that he instructs women to develop in that poem. In fact, Martha's independence of mind was not normally seen as a "good" trait for a woman, and certainly not one that a "traditional" male would encourage.

In *To Cobham* Pope subjects men to the same construction or examination women have traditionally been subjected to by men; he feminizes human nature by attempting to define

character within his own expectations of why an action would occur. Maynard Mack sums the poem up the best when he states "Pope devotes much of the body of the epistle to the lively exposition of the difficulty if not near-impossibility of reading human character correctly" (599). This near impossibility of reading human character applies equally to men and women and is one that Pope uses to subvert the acceptance of types in *To a Lady*. One way that Pope attempts to judge man is by his actions. However, he realizes the weakness in this approach and says,

Not always actions show the man; we find  
 Who does a kindness is not therefore kind;  
 Perhaps Prosperity becalm'd his breast,  
 Perhaps the Wind just shifted from the east.  
 (ll.61-4)

It is impossible to judge a man by his actions because it is impossible to determine what prompts his actions. In effect, the nature of both men and women is unknowable.

Having examined and dismissed all approaches to understanding man's character, Pope eventually looks at the Ruling Passion. It is important to note that in this, his initial examination of the Ruling Passion, Pope applies it to women also. By so doing Pope not only provides a link between the two poems, but he also provides a link between the two sexes. Pope views men and women as belonging in the same category, as holding the same inner motives.

Pope argues that the one way to judge a man is through his ruling passion, which is the one thing that is an integral



part of man's nature:

Judge we by Nature? Habit can efface,  
In tr'st o'ercome, or Policy take place:  
By Actions? those Uncertainty divides:  
By Passions? these Dissimulation hides:  
Opinions? they still take a wider range:  
Find, if you can, in what you cannot change  
Search then the Ruling Passion: There alone,  
The Wild are constant, and the Cunning known;  
The Fool consistent, and the False sincere;  
Priests, Princes, Women, no dissemblers here.  
This clue once found, unravels all the rest  
(11.166-78)

However, Pope's ability to use ruling passion to pin down human character is limited. In men, the ruling passion is an inherent quality that is only revealed at the moment of death; in women, it is a form of social construction. We see the limits of ruling passion as a method of determining true character in the portrait of the Duke of Wharton and Narcissa.

To elaborate upon his theory of ruling passion Pope sketches a series of characters and for each reveals the ruling passion. One illustration that Pope develops is that of the Duke of Wharton. Wharton is seen to be an example of a man with no character, because every trait or characteristic he possesses is joined with its opposite:

A constant Bounty which no friend has made;  
An angel Tongue, which no man can persuade;  
A Fool, with more of Wit than half mankind,  
Too quick for Thought, for Action too refin'd;  
A Tyrant to the wife his heart approves;  
A Rebel to the very king he loves;  
He dies, sad out-cast of each church and  
state,  
And (harder still) flagitious, yet not great!  
(11.198-205)

His is the ultimate example of the changeableness of man's

character. For "fear the Knaves should call him fool"(1.207) he becomes whatever character he determines that others expect. Through Wharton, Pope shows that men can possess traits Wharton possesses, like fickleness, traits commonly attributed to women. Women adapt themselves to be what they perceive men want them to be. As a result, most women have no real character; their character is one that they construct in response to male expectations. Wharton's life, and by extension woman's life, is sterile and wasted. In *To a Lady*, this theme is developed through the character of Atossa.

Pope examines this idea of waste again in the portrait of the actress, Narcissa. An odd character in this study of the characters of men, Narcissa provides two more links between the two poems. First, by her inclusion Pope suggests that men and women both have a Ruling Passion. Second, he introduces the fatal flaw that women possess - concern with their physical appearance - and links that concern with the world of men. The actress, aptly named Narcissa, is caught up in the theatrics of her physical appearance. Like Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock*, Narcissa is so enamoured of her physical appearance that the only thing to concern her as she lies upon her deathbed is how her corpse will look:

'Odious! in woolen! t'would a Saint provoke,  
(Were the last words that poor Narcissa  
spoke)  
No, let a charming Chintz, and Brussels lace  
Wrap my cold limbs, and shade my lifeless  
face:  
One would not, sure, be frightful when one's  
dead-

And -Betty- give this cheek a little Red'  
(11.242-47)

As in Belinda's ritual before the mirror, we see the Narcissus myth--destruction and loss of self in the worship of one's image. Narcissa is only concerned with her outer appearance. She does not see herself as a person; she sees herself as a work of art, an object. Narcissa's ruling passion is vanity. She is concerned only with her outer shell, her corpse, not with her soul. Narcissa's character was determined by her occupation which required her to act in predetermined roles for the pleasure of the audience. As such, Narcissa was unable to break free from societal expectations that would not allow her to be anything but entertaining in looks or actions even upon her deathbed. Narcissa can then be compared to Wharton--both of them played for an audience and let their audience determine what character they were going to be.

In contrast to the characters of Wharton and Narcissa is the character of Cobham. Cobham is the one person whose ruling passion has been revealed to be a virtue, he is honest, and so he stands for all that men can aspire to be. It is now that the importance of the addressee becomes evident; certainly the readers in Pope's time would have been aware of Cobham's political career and so would understand the implications of Pope's choice, i.e. that honour is a virtue and that virtue is public, and that virtue shines brightest when it is out of place, when it is marginalized. Cobham epitomizes male virtue and power, all public qualities. In contrast, Wharton

represents man's inability to understand his own character and Narcissa represents women's willingness to let men construct their character. This difference between the male and female ruling passion is developed further in *To a Lady*.

*Epistle II. To a Lady. Of the Characters of Women*

In *To Cobham* Pope demonstrated his theory that most men are unable to understand their own character because, unlike Cobham, their ruling passion is not evident. In *To a Lady*, Pope develops this problem by attempting to discern women's character. His inability to do so implies that this problem exists because men have constructed women's identity and therefore their ruling passions, whereas in *To Cobham* man's ruling passion was revealed to be inherent, or "natural." In this failure Pope subverts the accepted view of women's character and clearly shows that any shortcomings in women's character is direct result of the shortcomings in men's character. By doing this Pope can encourage, or enable, women to see the limits of and the fallacy in letting society dictate their identity. Though Pope does not deny that women are as changeable as men, he points out that their two ruling energies, "The love of Pleasure, and the Love of Sway," (*Lady*.1.210), are determined for them by a male-dominated society. Unlike men, women are "bred to disguise." Encouraged to dissemble, women are not as they appear; because of this it then becomes impossible to discern between a

women's shame or pride, weakness or delicacy, as "each may seem a virtue or a vice" (*Lady*.1.206). Absorbed completely in being what society (men) tells them to be, women lack a personal self. Pope attempts to affirm that personal self through the portrait of a figure like Martha Blount.

Pope identifies the difficulty in pinning down women's character in *To a Lady* as he did in *To Cobham*, by examining character sketches of women and comparing them to the sketch of the good woman. Just as he chose Cobham as the role-model for what men can aspire to be, so he chose a role-model for women in the person of Martha Blount.

Martha Blount, the addressee in *To a Lady*, was one of Pope's oldest and closest friends. As we have seen, it was to Martha that Pope left the bulk of his estate and it is Martha, next to his mother, that Pope most admired and respected. Unfortunately, Martha's life, unlike Cobham's, was not one with which a large number of people would be familiar. The problem does not lie with Pope's choice of addressee, rather it lies in the very nature of the sex he was about to examine. Men were easy to write about as their roles were well-known, public and full of responsibilities. On the other hand, women's lives, particularly the life of the good woman, were private. Valerie Rumbold explains why there would be difficulty in recognizing the importance of Martha as an addressee:

While the public life of men offered a range of different careers, the private life that

was the good woman's primary context was relatively stereotyped, offering no convenient shorthand for indicating individual identity. For those who knew Patty (Martha), the epistle was not without the personal allusions associated with the genre; but for most readers the compliment intended by the choice of genre has been thwarted by the impossibility of constructing a public face that is both individual and respectable (269-70).

This is where feminist critiques fail in their interpretation of Pope's use of Martha as an addressee. They see Martha as representative of a stereotypical construction of woman. They do not acknowledge that this stereotypical construction is a direct result of the private life that was the good woman's primary context. They do not appreciate the difficulty inherent in any attempt by Pope to get beyond the stereotype to find an individual. It is the promotion of individual over type that Pope develops through his use of Martha as the example of the good woman. Martha, because she has inner strength dictated by good humour, has developed beyond type to become an individual. She is only able to become an individual because she has inner integrity and a sense of self worth, all integral facets of good humour. part of good humour.

In *To Cobham*, the mutability of man's character is clearly within man's control. This is illustrated through the portrait of Wharton, who was able to don those actions, characteristics, and thoughts that he believed were as those around him. As a man, he had the ability to determine his actions. By contrast, in *To a Lady* the changeableness of

women's character is seen to be influenced by their need to appear as men perceive them, if they are to find a husband, since women are by "Man's oppression curst"(L.1.213). With their identity constructed for them, women are taught by their male-dominated culture that they exist to please: "That, Nature gives; and where the lesson taught/Is but to please, can Pleasure seem a fault?"(L.1.2111-12). Pope challenges this societal expectation of women.

Coming as it does after *To Cobham*, *To a Lady* clarifies Pope's thesis by exposing the limits of male construction of female character and posing Martha Blount as an alternative. The ordering of the two poems shows that men cannot understand their own character and so should not construct women's character. To illustrate this Pope reiterates commonly recognized female stereotypes and subverts them. It is this subversion that supplies the poem with two levels of meaning. As in *The Rape of the Lock*, the one level seems to reinforce his time's views about women and the deeper level challenges them. Moreover, the very ordering of the two texts implies the poem's theme that, in fact, women--as seen through the portrait of the good woman--have the intelligence and capability to act independently from men.

What is extremely important about *To a Lady* is not just that Pope provides a positive role model for women but that he steps beyond this role model and gives instruction to women about how they can improve their lot from within circumstances

of extreme repression and constraint. I am not arguing that Pope was a feminist, but that he did not buy completely into the gender code determined by his time. As well, the final line of the poem, which I shall look at later, does much to counteract any suggestions of sexism.

In order for Pope to make his point, he needs first to expose those women who, in response to society's expectations, are attempting to make themselves into objects of beauty and are allowing themselves to become types. What Pollak and Brown neglect to consider about Pope's use of types to expose these women is that Pope introduces the awareness that he is not examining just women but the social conventions that make women what they are. He does this through the combination of the couplet attributed to Martha--"nothing so true as what you (Martha) once let fall/'Most Women have no Characters at all,'" and the couplet, "How many pictures of one Nymph we view,/All how unlike each other, all how true!" These couplets, when combined, clearly mock not only the Nymph with her lack of character, but also the inability of the artist to draw the character he sees and the ability of the reader to interpret a character out of the sketches. These couplets illustrate that although women's outer "character"<sup>26</sup> can be defined, their inner character defies attempts at construction. Pope, rather than treating women as an object,

---

<sup>26</sup>The term character has a more than one meaning. It can refer to an imprint, a reference or character sketch, or the inner qualities that make a person unique.



uses the epistolary genre and satire to challenge his society's view of women by showing how men's construction of women has resulted in serious constraints women's character.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike the types Pope examined in *To Cobham*, the types that Pope is examining in *To a Lady* are social portraits of women; they are poses that women have had to don in their attempt to survive in this man's world. The portraits are a metaphor for his society's social conventions that have painted women this way. This metaphor is enhanced through the metaphor of the portrait gallery:

How many pictures of one Nymph we view,  
All how unlike each other, all how true!  
Arcadia's Countess, here, in ermin'd pride,  
Is there, Pastoral by a fountain side:  
Here Fannia, leering on her own good man,  
Is there, a naked Leda with a Swan.  
Let then the Fair one beautifully cry,  
In Magdalen's loose hair and lifted eye,  
Or drest in smiles of sweet Cecilia shine,  
With simp'ring Angels, Palms, and harps  
divine;  
Whether the Charmer sinner it, or saint it,  
If Folly grows romantic, I must paint it.  
(11.5-16)

The Nymph represents all women; men see many pictures of her because in order to survive she takes on that character she thinks would best please her observer, sinner or saint, virgin or whore, whatever men want women to be. Women then have "no

---

<sup>27</sup>Although character was used figuratively in painting to refer to what distinguishes a thing from something else, it was defined most "literally" as a written or inscribed symbol, a signifying mark. Ellen Pollak, "Pope and Sexual Difference: Women as Part and Counterpart in the 'Epistle to a Lady'" *Studies in English Literature* 24.3 (1984): 465.

characters at all" because women have constructed their character to reflect those attributes men deem important. As we saw in *The Rape of the Lock*, men are attracted to the surface; they are attracted to types that they have created. By stating "if folly grows romantic I must paint it," Pope is stating his intention to expose, as he did in *To Cobham*, not only the follies that rule human character but also the romance and the ideals that accept these follies as real; the romance that mistakes surface for substance, type for individual.

The difference between the two poems lies in one fact: unlike men whose ruling passion can be self-generated, women's folly is a direct result of man's control over their existence. One example that Pope gives to develop this point is that of Flavia: "Flavia's a Wit, has too much sense to Pray,/To Toast our wants and wishes, is her way." (l.87-8) Flavia's character is determined by men as she adheres to their wants and wishes. We know Flavia has been controlled by men's expectations because she constructs herself to please men. Flavia is not alone; Simo's mate is also defined by her husband: "Turn then from Wits; and look on Simo's Mate,/No Ass so meek, no Ass so obstinate." (l.1.101-2) Simo's mate is so constructed by her husband that in this sketch she not only does not have a name of her own, her character is likened to an animal.

Pope also uses the character of Rufa to underscore men's

Rufa's attempt to study could represent her attempt to define her own role. Unfortunately, Rufa is unable to break free, as we see when she engages men in an action deemed a part of female character, flirting. If this is the case, then Rufa's folly is not her weak will--she did at least attempt to move beyond the limits of her role--but rather her inability to break out of the conditioning she has received regarding how a female should act. However, the lines comparing Rufa to Sappho need to be considered. Sappho was the name given to a figure used in Pope's time to satirize learned women and women who wrote. However, Rufa is not a learned woman to be satirized; she is just posing with Locke to attract men. Locke belongs no more to Rufa than diamonds do with Sappho's smock. Here Pope is not affirming his own misogyny by developing Rufa's inability to be educated like a man; he is instead utilizing the tradition of the misogynistic satire of women and subverting it. Rufa does not fail because of her own intellectual inability; she fails because she cannot break free of her social conditioning. This social conditioning sees any woman who is strong and educated in the negative terms of

a Sappho who is slovenly because she does not attend exclusively to her physical beauty. Thus Rufa's actions, on the one hand, could show her struggle for change. On the other hand, her actions more likely show her acquiescence to the realities of the role that has been defined for her since she only plays at breaking free from it.

Pope does not deny that women can be, or are, as mutable as men. However, through the use of the poetry/painting metaphor, Pope illustrates that women often change or paint themselves according to how they perceive men want them to be. Thus in his character sketches he is only painting them as they paint themselves. To drive home this point Pope compares women to variegated tulips and states:

Ladies, like variegated Tulips, show  
 'Tis to their Changes that their Charms we  
owe:  
 Their happy Spots the nice admirer take,  
 Fine by defect, and delicately weak.  
(L.11.41-4)

Pope develops here the contrast between nature and culture. Men consider women's charms to be related to their changes, yet condemn them for this mutability (L.1.2-3). Pope compares women with cross-bred tulips which are bred for show and are not only weaker than the pure strain, but are considered defects. Pope implies here that those women who are "bred to disguise" are also weak and not representative of the natural strain of womanhood as seen in the portrait of the good woman, Martha, who is bred not by society but by heaven. As a

knowledgeable gardener, Pope would have been aware that variegated tulips could occur only if they were cross-bred, artificially cultivated as it were, to meet the expectation of the gardener.

The portraits of Cloe and Atossa represent two extremes of women's character. Cloe is an example of society's ideal woman, for she has immersed herself completely into the social role that was created for her and so has lost her sense of self. As such she is the antithesis to Martha Blount. It is Martha who introduces Cloe as an example of a good woman-- "'Yet Cloe sure was form'd without a spot-' "(L.l.157). Pope responds, "Nature in her then err'd not, but forgot"(L.l.158) her inner self, the example of inner strength that both Cobham and Martha exemplify. Unlike Martha, Cloe is only an example of a "good sort" of woman, not a good woman. Cloe "speaks, behaves, and acts just as she ought"(L.l.161); however, as Pope states, this is not enough for, though "...Cloe sure was formed without a spot'"(L.l.157) she "...wants a Heart."(L.l.160) Cloe, by adhering to society's expectations, has become an object, for she has no heart and therefore nothing of what makes a human feel love, compassion or emotion. Men appear to want a woman of passion, but in attempting to construct women's response for themselves they have stifled it: "She while her Lover pants upon her breast/Can mark the figures on an Indian chest."(L.l.167-88) Cloe is all surface; she has no substance she will "Never yet

to love, or to be lov'd."(L.l.166).

Cloe possesses the negative female virtues of decency and prudence. Unfortunately, she does not possess the capacity for a generous thought, an inner moral freedom, as she "never, never, reach'd one gen'rous Thought"(L.l.162). This capacity to have a generous thought is a traditional heroic male virtue. That Pope would expect a good woman to have this virtue underscores his view of women as intellectually and emotionally capable. Because Cloe is the ideal social construction of female character she is not capable of independent or generous thought. In cultivating the virtue of prudence she has lost the ability to feel. Ironically, men's attempt to make a woman into an ideal results in the loss of her humanity as she has no passion, no feelings.

Cloe's opposite is Atossa. Atossa is a feminine version of Wharton. Atossa possesses all of the characteristics of all of the social roles created for women by men; she is "Scarce once herself, by turns all Womankind." Atossa, as is Wharton, is possessed of characteristics that cancel each other out; she is a paradox. Quarrelsome, arrogant, selfish, and cruel, Atossa does not have a character of her own. Like Cloe she is characterless; but unlike Cloe, Atossa has feeling. Unfortunately, Atossa's feelings are not representative of the complete emotional range. S

he seems to be propelled only by rage - a rage that springs from desire unfulfilled, from the impotence of women:

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.

.....  
 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 gratify'd except her Rage.  
(L.l.116-26)

The question that must be answered is, why is Atossa full of rage? The answer lies in the first line of Pope's description of her, "Scarce once herself, by turns all Womankind". Atossa possesses all aspects of men's ideas of woman's character: maternal, sensual, subordinate, lover, wife and these aspects cancel each other out. Atossa is maternal yet sexually enticing. A contradiction—"curs'd with ev'ry granted pray'r,"--she is "Childless with all her Children." Though her prayers are granted they are curses; though she has children biologically she remains distant maternally. Atossa is married but not in love, and so has sexual release but not lasting pleasure or deep attachment and respect: "Last night, her Lord was all that's good and great,/A Knave this morning, and his Will a Cheat." (L.ll.141-2) As well, her marriage has not given her the identity or role she thought it would. Through marriage, the means, she has not acquired power, the ends: "Strange! by the Means defeated of the Ends." (L.l.143) Atossa is unhappy because she has no power and, unlike Wharton, she does not have the free will to be able to change into something she would like to be. Just as Cloe is caught up

in her role, Atossa is caught by the limits of all of the roles created for women. Atossa is unable to attain power because she has too much spirit; she too obviously challenges established male traditions and so cannot be happy as she is unable to fit into a male-constructed female identity and she is unable to develop good humour. Limited by the roles created for women, she is unable to attain freedom or power; angry with her life, she is unable to do that which would help to make it bearable, make friends: "Strange by the Means defeated of the ends,/by Spirit robb'd of pow'r, by Warmth of Friends." Atossa possesses all of the passion that Cloe lacks, but she possesses it to excess. As Cloe ended without feeling because of the limits of her society-created role, so Atossa ends without the feelings normally ascribed to women because of the limits of all of the roles created for women.

Pope's next portrait, that of the Queen, represents the ultimate position of power a woman could wish to attain yet, although her role is public, she represents the ultimate example of a woman who is adept at disguise. Because of her disguise it is impossible to determine the value of her character. The trappings of the monarchy hide her true nature: "That Robe of Quality so struts and swells,/None see what Parts of Nature it conceals." (ll.189-90) Again Pope is developing the conflict between nature and culture. The need for disguise bred by culture conceals the nature of women. All that is seen publicly is the deception, the mask, not the



reality:

But grant, in Public Men sometimes are shown,  
A Woman's seen in Private life alone:  
Our bolder Talents in full light display'd,  
Your Virtues open fairest in the shade.  
Bred to disguise, in Public 'tis you hide;  
There, none distinguish 'twixt your Shame or  
Pride,  
Weakness or Delicacy; all so nice,  
That each may seem a Virtue, or a Vice.  
(L.11.199-206)

The private nature of women as opposed to the public nature of men is a social convention created by men; thus, as Pope points out, "Our bolder Talents in full light display'd,/ Your Virtues open fairest in the Shade./Bred to disguise, in Public 'tis you hide;/There, none distinguish 'twixt your Shame or Pride"(L.11.199-202)... In showing that women are expected to assume a disguise, that they do not display their virtues in public, Pope illustrates the hypocrisy of social standards that would have women judged for this kind of behaviour. Women cannot be judged because men do not know how to distinguish between their "Shame or Pride." Men can only see the outside, the surface; they cannot determine inner motives or define a woman's inner self.

In Pope's analysis, it is men's fault that women behave as they do, for they are "By Man's oppression curst." (L.1.213) Where men have a variety of ruling passions, women have only two and these two are socially constructed: "The Love of Pleasure, and the Love of Sway." (L.1.210) Because a woman is so dependent upon a man it is imperative that she please him; as a result, the limits of the roles created for women by men



the male libertine chooses to act in this fashion, women are forced to act this way. Their attention to surface appearance and power struggles means that their inner substance is denied. As a result they are not able to realize the glory, joy, peace, or happiness that they seek. As a final caution, Pope equates these beauties with tyrants. Here Pope exploits courtship jargon; woman is the tyrant in the power struggle when she denies man his desires.

In contrast to the problematic types of women Pope sketches, is that of the good women modelled after Martha Blount. Although Martha's character has its own share of contradictions, they are all positive, as they embody the best of male and female characteristics. All of the traits alone are positive: reserve, truth, softness. Yet those traits that would appear to cancel them out--frankness, art, courage--only serve to temper them. In addition, the qualities that make up Martha's character are not limited to qualities it is thought appropriate that only a woman should possess. As David B. Morris states, "she avoids the defects of traditional masculine and feminine conduct while she simultaneously unites the traditionally divided virtues of womanly softness and manly strength."<sup>28</sup> The qualities that make up Martha's character are both male and female, with the result that "Heav'n, when it strives to polish all it can/Its last best

---

<sup>28</sup>David B. Morris, *Alexander Pope: The Genius of Sense* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard U.P., 1984) 44.

work, but forms a softer Man"(L.1.271-72). Martha is not, as some critics suggest androgynous. The description of Martha as a "softer man" does not privilege men, not as men appear in Pope's society. Rather it suggests that even men need to change, to become softer. By extension, this implies that women's characters would also change as they would develop inner strength. Just as Cobham's character is an example of what a man can aspire to be, so too is Martha's character an example of what a woman can aspire to. It is through Martha's character that Pope exposes the constraints women face and affirms the importance of inner strength. Although it is argued that in Martha Blount's portrait Pope is really reinforcing his belief that women should adhere to the roles created for them, this is incorrect. Martha is like Cobham; she has inner strength existing despite constraints and is thus an example of the best of humanity that Heaven can produce. In addition, because Martha is not wealthy: "And gave you Beauty, but deny'd the Pelf/Which buys your sex a Tyrant o'er itself"(L.11.287-88) Martha will not become entangled in the unequal game between the sexes that Belinda was emeshed in. Pope is therefore affirming the importance of women's inner self. By stating that Martha's lack of money will deny her a Tyrant, Pope is giving her freedom over herself.

Pope does not just identify the fallacies within the roles created for women; for those women who are unable to change their circumstances, he also supplies instructions as

to how women can improve their life from within the confines of their constructed roles. He suggests they develop good humour which will give them inner integrity and self-worth. Pope instructs women by using a commonplace criticism of women, that they are jealous, by subverting it shows it to be false:

Oh! blest with Temper, whose unclouded ray  
Can make to morrow cheerful as to day;  
She, who can love a Sister's charms, or hear  
Sighs for a Daughter with unwounded ear.  
(L.l.257-60)

The implication is of course that if women attempt to get beyond the petty limitations and jealousies that occur when women are focused on only one thing, such as competing in the marriage market, then they will be able to develop true, sincere relationships. When this occurs, women will find that they actually have more personal power, for as Pope says

She, who ne'er answers till a Husband cools,  
Or, if she rules him, never shows she rules;  
Charms by accepting, by submitting sways,  
Yet has her humour most, when she obeys.  
(L.l.261-64)

Pope is not telling them to be blindly subordinate; he is suggesting that women employ the fine art of diplomacy: "if she rules him, never shows she rules." Pope is telling women how to rule from within. By not answering until a husband cools, a wife can prevent a fight, a crude power struggle on male terms, which she will inevitably lose. Instead she can achieve her ends as she "Charms by accepting, by submitting sways." It is a woman's good humour which will enable her to

have the inner strength to do this. Though, as I have stated, to a twentieth-century reader this advice could sound sexist, and it is in our time, it was not in Pope's time. One must remember that women in Pope's time had no rights and had been removed from even their traditional avenues of power. That Pope was willing and able to suggest ways for women to be able to attain power proves that he was a progressive writer for his time. Moreover, that he was able to suggest ways for them to attain power at minimal risk to themselves or their way of life illustrates his awareness of how the system works, and suggests the best way to effect change with minimal personal pain. Pope would have been particularly aware of the importance of good humour as he, just as Martha and Cobham were, was subject to restrictions by society and, like them, kept his integrity in the face of immense opposition.

Through the character of the good woman and his instruction of how to effect change Pope suggests that women should abandon their preoccupation with fulfilling societal expectations and begin instead to effect change as he does, by working within the confines of society. Women would achieve change by working from within their created roles; Pope would create change through his poetry. The woman who does this, the woman who develops good humour will find that she has become "...Mistress of herself..."(L.1.268); she will have begun to develop her own identity apart from the one designed for her.

It is heaven, good humour, and good sense that enable



friend is necessary for the purpose of the poem as he gives her himself (friendship) instead of marriage.

### Conclusion

Thus we see how *To Cobham* and *To a Lady*, their genre, order, choice of addressee, and overall irony illustrate Pope's reservations with his time's prevailing assumptions about gender. As each poem deals with half of those that make up society and, therefore, together they make a whole, it is obvious that neither poem can be fully examined or understood unless it is examined within the context that makes it whole. When interpreted within this context it is clear that Pope is critiquing the social mores that forced women (and men, as in *To Cobham* they did not live up to their potential either) to act superficially. In reality, the poems are not reinforcing his society's views; they are challenging them.



### Conclusion

In summation, by examining the biographical details of Pope's life, his religious, physical, and social marginalization, and by examining his relationships with women, and his correspondence to and about women, it is revealed that Alexander Pope was not, as some critics claim, a misogynist. It is clear that Pope considered women to be intellectually capable, as seen through his relationship with Martha Blount. As well, it is evident through his intervention on behalf of Anne Cope and Elizabeth Weston, both of whom he felt were wronged in their marriages, that he was not comfortable with women's inferior subordinate role in society. In addition, when one relates these details to Pope's social satires about women it becomes evident that these poems operate on two levels of meaning. The first level is superficial and appears to reinforce eighteenth century assumptions about gender. The second, deeper level, actually undermines his time's views on a woman's place by subverting some of the social constructions that men have used to create female character.

In the four poems studied we see that Pope's ability, and indeed willingness, to respond critically to these male constructions develops until he is not only identifying the

limitations women face and the cause of these limitations, but is suggesting a tool with which women can effect change.

The first poem in my study, *Epistle to Miss Blount, With the Works of Voiture*, identifies the limits of both the spinster role and the married role. Although in his time a woman's main goal was to be married, here Pope points out how marriage is actually the worse of the two choices because the men that were "fawning servants" could become "haughty lords" or Tyrants. As well, Pope illustrates the negative aspects of being attracted to surface appearance and not substance in his depiction of the fate of Pamela, a character who becomes both a subject and an object who is unhappy in spite of her material things because she is married to "a fool." In addition, it is in this poem that Pope begins to develop his concept of good humour as a means for women to achieve power.

The second poem, *The Rape of the Lock*, develops this theme of surface versus substance through the genre of the mock-epic. Using the characters of Belinda and the Baron, Pope depicts woman's attention to appearance as necessary if they are to compete in the battle between the sexes. However, he also points out that this game can never be won by a woman for not only does her beauty, her only weapon, fade, but also men play by their own rules. It is in this poem that Pope begins to develop more fully the concept of good humour as a means for women to effect change. He suggests that the development of good humour will give a woman inner strength; he argues

that it is this inner strength that will enable a woman to endure her situation and implies that her inner strength might actually even attract a better type of man for only those with a soul will be attracted to merit.

The last two poems, *To Cobham* and *To a Lady*, more than any other of Pope's poems, show his reservations with his time's prevailing assumptions about gender. Written as part of a design to map humanity, each poem reveals Pope attempting to examine male and female character. In *To Cobham*, Pope examines the characters of men and highlights their inconsistency of character. Then, through the interplay of images between the two poems, Pope reveals that the inconsistencies he has discerned in men's character are the same inconsistencies that have been attributed to women and so judged negatively. By examining the sexes in this manner Pope illustrates the similarities between the two. In *To a Lady*, he suggests, through the example of the good woman, that women develop their good humour. He argues that the development of good humour would help women to develop their own identity as they would have inner strength.

Overall, Alexander Pope was a man who recognized the limits inherent in the second class status women accorded to women. Not content to be a passive observer of the conventional male construction of female character, Pope attempted to help improve women's position. To do this he helped women financially, emotionally, and legally. As well,

through his social satires, Pope critiqued the male-construction of female character that perpetuated women's second-class status. Pope felt that women deserved to be considered as more than a means of family perpetuation. He considered women to be intellectually capable and was not comfortable with their inferior, subordinate role in society. Pope's criticism of women in his works is not, therefore, criticism of women *per se*, but of the social mores which forced women to act superficially and thus in a manner that laid them open to criticism. Both Pope's writings and his actions reveal a man who was sympathetic to and concerned about the limited choices open to women in their society.

## Bibliography

- Amussen, Susan Dwyer. *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988.
- Anderson, Bonnie S., Zinsser, Judith P. *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*. 2 vols. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.
- Anderson, Howard, Daghljan, Philip B., Ehrenpreis, Irvin. eds. *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century*. Lawrence: U. of Kansas Press, 1966.
- Brown, Laura. *Alexander Pope*. New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985.
- Browne, Alice. *The Eighteenth Century Feminist Mind*. Detroit: Wayne State U.P., 1987.
- Clifford, James L. ed. *Modern Essays in Criticism*. Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1959.
- Course, Taylor. "Heaven's 'Last Best Work': Pope's 'Epistle To a Lady.'" *Studies in English Literature* 27.3 (1987): 413-425.
- Damrosch, Leopold Jr., ed. *Modern Essays on Eighteenth-Century Literature*. Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1988.
- Dixon, Peter. *The World of Pope's Satires*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1968.
- Dobree, Bonamy. *Alexander Pope*. Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1963.
- Erskine-Hill, Howard, Smith, Anne., eds. *The Art of Alexander Pope*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1979.
- Erskine-Hill, Howard. "Alexander Pope: The Political Poet in His Time." *Eighteenth Century Studies* 15 (1981-82): 123-41.
- Fairer, David. *Pope's Imagination*. Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1984.
- Fairer, David. ed. *Pope New Contexts*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990.

- 1578-1799. Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1985.
- Ferguson, Rebecca. *The Unbalanced Mind Pope and the Rule of Passion*. Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania Press, 1986.
- Gilbert, Susan M. Gruber, Susan. *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*. 1985.
- Gertmenian, Meg. "Strangeness and Temper: Pope in the Act of Judgement" *Studies in English Literature*. 22.3 (1982): 491-504.
- Griffen, Dustin H. *Alexander Pope: The Poet in the Poems*. Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1978.
- Gooneratne, Yasmine. *Alexander Pope*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1976.
- Guerinot, J.V. Ed. *Pope a Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972.
- Hill, Bridget. Ed. *The First English Feminist*. New York: St Martin's Press, 1986.
- Jones, Wendy L. *Talking on Paper: Pope's Letters*. Victoria: U. of Victoria Press, 1990. #50 Monograph Series
- LeGates, Marlene. "The Cult of Womanhood in Eighteenth-Century Thought" *Eighteenth Century Studies*. 10 (1976): 21-39.
- Leranbaum, Miriam. *Alexander Pope's 'OPUS MAGNUM.'* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.
- Mack, Maynard. *Alexander Pope A Life*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1985.
- Meridian Anthology of Early Women Writers*. Eds. Rogers, Katherine. McCarthy, William. New York: 1987.
- Myers, Sylvia Harcstark. *The Bluestocking Circle: Women, Friendship, and the Life of the Mind in Eighteenth Century England*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.
- Pollak, Ellen. *The Poetics of Sexual Myth*. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1985.
- Pollak, Ellen. "Pope and Sexual Difference: Women as Part and Counterpart in the 'Epistle To a Lady.'" *Studies in English Literature*. 24.3 (1984): 461-81.
- Pohli, Carol Virginia. "'The Point Where Sense and Dulness

- Meet': What Pope Knows About Knowing and About Women." *Eighteenth Century Studies*. 19.2 (1985-6): 206-34.
- Porter, Roy. *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972.
- Quinsey, K.M. "From Moving Toyshop to Cave of Spleen: The Depth of Satire in 'The Rape of the Lock'" *Ariel*. 11.2 (1980): 3-22.
- Rogers, Katherine. Ed. *Before Their Time Six Women Writers of the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1979.
- Rogers, Pat. *An Introduction to Pope*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1975.
- Rousseau, G.S. Rogers, Pat. Eds. *The Enduring legacy Alexander Pope Tercentenary Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1978.
- Rumbold, Valerie. *Women's Place in Pope's World*. Cambridge: Camridge U.P., 1989.
- Russo, John Paul. *Alexander Pope Tradition and Identity*. Cambridge. Mass: Harvard U.P., 1972.
- Sambrook, James. *The Eighteenth Century: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1700-1789*. London: Longman, 1986.
- Sherburn, George. *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*. 5 Vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956.
- Shevelov, Kathryn. *Women and Print Culture*. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Springer, Marlene. Ed. *What Manner of Woman, Essays on English and American Life and Literature*. New York: New York U.P., 1977.
- Twickenham Text: *The Poems of Alexander Pope*. Ed. John Butt. New Haven: Yale U.P., 1963.
- Wilson, Penelope. "Feminism and the Augustans: some readings and problems" *Critical Quarterly*. 28.1-2 (1986): 80-92.
- Winn, James Anderson. *A Window in the Bosom The Letters of Alexander Pope*. Hamden: Archon Books, 1977.

## VITA AUCTORIS

NAME: Chris-Anne Stumpf

PLACE OF BIRTH: Galt, Ontario

YEAR OF BIRTH: 1960

EDUCATION: General Amherst High School, Amherstburg  
1974-79

St. Clair College, Thames Campus, Chatham  
1983-85 DSW (Developmental Service Worker)

University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario  
1985-89 B.A. (Honours)  
1989-92 M.A.