

Epics (Pope & Milton). Handout

Alexander Pope

1688-1744

After a retired childhood in Windsor Forest, under the double disability of retarded growth from chronic ill-health and of Catholic parentage in an age of civil penalties, Pope showed precocious talent in his *Pastorals* (1709) and *Essay on Criticism* (1711); *The Rape of the Lock* (1714, enlarged version) placed him at the forefront of contemporary poetry, while he became associated with the wits and satirists of the Scribblers Club (Gay, Swift, Arbuthnot). His translation of Homer's *Iliad* (1715-20) established his financial security, permitting his long residence at Twickenham (then well outside London), where by the river he built up his famous garden and grotto, which show his interest in the visual arts. Despite his friendships with literary men, and with Martha Blount and Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (see p. 256), his growing fame and his collaboration in the Scriblerian ridicule of bad writing increasingly involved him in literary warfare: Theobald (1728; revised in four books with C. Cibber as hero, 1743). Partly under the influence of the former politician Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, Pope produced *An Essay on Man* (1733-4); the four *Moral Essays* (1731-5) are epistles to friends on appropriate topics. Also in the 1730s, he cultivated *Imitations of Horace*, in which he fruitfully exploits the parallels between his situation and the Roman satirist's, to criticise the decay of morality and literature, opposing the life of retired contemplation and friendship to the money-grubbing and corruption of business and public life: the *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* stands as the prologue to these satires.

Pope laboured to refine the verse techniques inherited from Dryden, and attempted the traditional genres from pastoral to epic (mock, in his case). His great satires transcend personal animosity in their traditional concern to expose deviation from sound social and moral values. The romantic reaction against the heroic couplet reached its apogee in Matthew Arnold's verdict (1880) that 'Dryden and Pope are not classics of our poetry, they are classics of our prose'.

THE RAPE OF THE LOCK†

Canto I

- What dire offence from amorous causes springs,
What mighty contests rise from trivial things,
I sing - This verse to Caryl, Muse! is due;
This, even Belinda may vouchsafe to view:
Slight is the subject, but not so the praise,
If she inspire, and he approve my lays.
Say what strange motive, Goddess! could compel
A well-bred lord to assault a gentle belle?
Oh, say what stranger cause, yet unexplored,
Could make a gentle belle reject a lord?

The Rape of the Lock Pope's friend John Caryl (l.3) hoped he might laugh away the quarrel caused when Lord Petre cut a lock of hair from Arabella Fermor ('Belinda'). The two-canto version of 1712 was expanded by the 'machinery' and further incidents into five cantos in 1714; Charrisa's speech in

Canto V was added in 1717. The poem continually juxtaposes the trivial modern action with the mock-heroic manner: the speeches, battles, descent to the underworld, are epic in origin, with many echoes of the *Iliad*, *Aeneid*, and *Paradise Lost*; but the comparisons are not entirely to the discredit of the modern world. *Dire offence* begins by traditional epic statement of the subject

- Teach infant cheeks a hidden blush to know,
 And little hearts to flutter at a beau.
 'Oft when the world imagine women stray,
 The Sylphs through mystic mazes guide their way,
 Through all the giddy circle they pursue,
 And old impertinence expel by new.
 95 What tender maid but must a victim fall
 To one man's treat, but for another's ball?
 When Florio speaks, what virgin could withstand,
 If gentle Damon did not squeeze her hand?
 With varying vanities, from every part,
 100 They shift the moving toyshop of their heart;
 Where wigs with wigs, with sword-knots† sword-knots strive,
 Beaux banish beaux, and coaches coaches drive.
 This erring morals levity may call;
 Oh blind to truth! the Sylphs connive it all.
 105 'Of these am I, who thy protection claim,
 A watchful sprite, and Ariel is my name.
 Late, as I ranged the crystal wilds of air,
 In the clear mirror of thy ruling star
 I saw, alas! some dread event impend,
 110 Ere to the main this morning sun descend,
 But Heaven reveals not what, or how, or where:
 Warned by the Sylph, Oh pious maid, beware!
 This to disclose is all thy guardian can:
 Beware of all, but most beware of Man!
 115 He said; when Shock,† who thought she slept too long,
 Leaped up, and waked his mistress with his tongue.
 'T was then, Belinda, if report say true,
 Thy eyes first opened on a biller-doux;
 Wounds, charms, and ardours were no sooner read,
 120 But all the vision vanished from thy head.
 And now, unveiled, the toilet† stands displayed,
 Each silver vase in mystic order laid.
 First, robed in white, the nymph intent adores,
 With head uncovered, the cosmetic powers.
 A heavenly image in the glass appears;
 125 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.

sword-knots decorative ribbons on sword hilt;
Shock a shough, rough-haired lap-dog;
toilet the dressing-table, an altar at which
 Belinda worships her own image. After the
 epic dream-warning, Pope parodies religious
 ritual and the earning of the hero
inferior priestess the maid, commonly called
 Betty (l. 148)

- Unnumbered treasures ope at once, and here
 130 The various offerings of the world appear;
 From each she nicely cuts with curious toil,
 And decks the goddess with the glittering spoil.
 This casket India's glowing gems unlocks,
 And all Arabia breathes from yonder box.
 135 The tortoise here and elephant unite,
 Transformed to combs, the speckled and the white.
 Here files of pins extend their shining rows,
 Puffs, powders, patches,† bibles, biller-doux.
 Now awful beauty puts on all its arms;
 140 The fair each moment rises in her charms,
 Repairs her smiles, awakens every grace,
 And calls forth all the wonders of her face;
 Sees by degrees a purer blush arise,
 And keener lightnings quicken in her eyes.
 145 The busy Sylphs surround their darling care;
 These set the head, and those divide the hair,
 Some fold the sleeve, whilst others plait the gown;
 And Betty's praised for labours not her own.

Canto II

- Not with more glories, in th' ethereal plain,
 The sun first rises o'er the purpled main,
 Than, issuing forth, the rival of his beams
 5 Launched on the bosom of the silver Thames.
 Fair nymphs and well-dressed youths around her shone,
 But every eye was fixed on her alone.
 On her white breast a sparkling cross she wore,
 Which Jews might kiss, and infidels adore.
 Her lively looks a sprightly mind disclose,
 10 Quick as her eyes, and as unfixed as those:
 Favours to none, to all she smiles extends;
 Oft she rejects, but never once offends.
 Bright as the sun, her eyes the gazers strike,
 And, like the sun, they shine on all alike.
 15 Yet graceful ease, and sweetness void of pride,
 Might hide her faults, if belles had faults to hide:

Arzbia eastern perfumes; the combs are of
 tortoise-shell and ivory
 patches artificial beauty-spots

Canto 5

Th' expiring swan,¹ and as he sings he dies.

When bold Sir Plume had drawn Clarissa down,
Chloe stepped in, and killed him with a frown;

70 She smiled to see the doughy hero slain,
But at her smile the beau revived again.

Now Jove suspends his golden scales¹ in air,
Weights the men's wits against the lady's hair;

The doubtful beam long nods from side to side;
At length the wits mount up, the hairs subside.

75 See, fierce Belinda on the Baron flies,

With more than usual lightning in her eyes;
Nor feared the chief th' unequal fight to try,

Who sought no more than on his foe to die,¹
But this bold lord, with manly strength endued,

80 She with one finger and a thumb subdued:
Just where the breath of life his nostrils drew,

A charge of snuff the wily virgin threw;
The Gnomes direct, to every atom just,

The pungent grains of titillating dust.
Sudden, with starting tears each eye o'erflows,

85 And the high dome re-echoes to his nose.
Now meet thy fate, incensed Belinda cried,
And drew a deadly bodkin from her side,

(The same,¹ his ancient personage to deck,
Her great-great-grandfire wore about his neck

90 In three seal-rings; which after, melted down,
Formed a vast buckle for his widow's gown:
Her infant grandam's whistle next it grew,

The bells she jingled, and the whistle blew;
Then in a bodkin graced her mother's hairs,
Which long she wore, and now Belinda wears.)

95 'Boast not my fall,' he cried, 'insulting foe!
Thou by some other shalt be laid as low.
Nor think, to die dejects my lofty mind;

All that I dread is leaving you behind!
Rather than so, ah let me still survive,
And burn in Cupid's flames — but burn alive!

100 'Restore the lock!' she cries, and all around
'Restore the lock!' the vaulted roofs rebound.

105

Nor fierce Othello¹ in so loud a strain
Roared for the handkerchief that caused his pain,
But see how oft ambitious aims are crossed,
And chiefs contend till all the prize is lost!

110

The lock, obtained with guilt, and kept with pain,
In every place is sought, but sought in vain:
With such a prize no mortal must be blest,
So Heaven decrees! with Heaven who can contest?

115

Some thought it mounted to the lunar sphere,
Since all things lost on earth are treasured there.
There heroes' wits are kept in ponderous vases,
And beaux' in snuffboxes and tweeter-cases.

120

There broken vows and deathbed aims are found,
And lovers' hearts with ends of riband bound;
The courier's promises, and sick man's prayers,
The smiles of harlots, and the tears of heirs,

125

Cages for gnats, and chains to yoke a flea,
Dried butterflies, and tomes of casuistry¹
But trust the Muse — she saw it upward rise,
Though marked by none but quick poetic eyes

130

(So Rome's great founder to the heavens withdrew,
To Proculus¹ alone confessed in view):
A sudden star, it shot through liquid air,
And drew behind a radiant trail of hair.

135

Not Berenice's locks¹ first rose so bright,
The heavens bespangling with dishvelled light.
The Sylphs beheld it kindling as it flies,
And pleased pursue its progress through the skies.

140

This the beau monde shall from the Mall¹ survey,
And hail with music its propitious ray.
This the blest lover shall for Venus¹ take,
And send up vows from Rosamonda's Lake.

145

This Partridge¹ soon shall view in cloudless skies,
When next he looks through Galileo's¹ eyes;
And hence th' egregious wizard shall foredoom
The fate of Louis,¹ and the fall of Rome.

Othello in Shakespeare's play, III.4

casuistry quibbling about moral conduct

Proculus saw Romulus ascend to heaven in a storm

Berenice's locks offered to the gods for safe return of her husband Prokne's ill from war,

they turned into a constellation

Mall ... *Rosamonda's Lake* walk in St James's Park (where the Lake was associated with unhappy love)

Venus goddess of love

Partridge astronomer, satirised by Swift c. 1708

Galileo Italian astronomer (1564–1642), improved the telescope

Louis Louis XIV, King of France (d. 1715); Rome, of course, was long fallen

swan traditionally sings as it dies

golden scales used in epic by Jove to decide a battle's outcome

die the pun on sexual climax continues the poem's vein of innuendo (compare 198)

the same object parody of the descent of a heroic

Then cease, bright nymph! to mourn thy ravished hair,
Which adds new glory to the shining sphere!
Not all the tresses that fair head can boast
Shall draw such envy as the lock you lost.

145 For, after all the murders of your eye,
When, after millions slain, yourself shall die;
When those fair suns shall set, as set they must,
And all those tresses shall be laid in dust;
150 This lock the Muse shall consecrate to fame,
And 'midst the stars inscribe Belinda's name!

1712-14

1714, 1717

James Thomson

1700-48

Brought up in the Scottish borders, Thomson came to London at 25 and eventually became acquainted with the Scriblerus wits; his poetry represents a contemporary alternative to the urban, satiric strain. His four poems on the seasons appeared 1726-30, and the complete work was repeatedly revised to 1746, having great popularity. The blank verse, latinate diction and syntax owe much to Milton. The close study of nature is set in a framework of moral reflection and concern with the great author of the universe. Thomson also wrote dramas and, probably, 'Rule Britannia'. His last work, *The Castle of Indolence* (1748), is an allegory which returns to the stanza used by Spenser in *The Faerie Queene* (1590-6), whose archaic language it echoes.

THE SEASONS

From *Summer*

'Tis raging noon; and, vertical, the Sun
Darts on the head direct his forceful rays.
O'er heaven and earth, far as the ranging eye
435 Can sweep, a dazzling deluge reigns; and all
From pole to pole is undistinguished blaze.
In vain the sight dejected to the ground
Scoops for relief; thence hot ascending streams
And keen reflection pain. Deep to the root
440 Of vegetation parched, the cleaving fields
And slippery lawn an arid hue disclose,
Blast fancy's blooms, and wither even the soul.
Echo no more returns the cheerful sound
Of sharpening scythe: the mower, sinking, heaps
445 O'er him the humid hay, with flowers perfumed,
And scarce a chirping grasshopper is heard
Through the dumb mead. Distressful nature pants,
The very streams look languid from afar,

Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit
 Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
 Brought death into the World, and all our woe,
 With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
 Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
 Sing, Heavenly Muse, that, on the secret top
 Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
 That shepherd who first taught the chosen seed
 In the beginning how the heavens and earth
 Rose out of Chaos: or, if Sion hill
 Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flowed
 Fast by the oracle of God, I thence
 Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song,
 That with no middle flight intends to soar
 Above th' Aonian mount, while it pursues
 Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.
 And chiefly thou, O Spirit, that dost prefer
 Before all temples th' upright heart and pure,
 Instruct me, for thou know'st; thou from the first
 Wast present, and, with mighty wings outspread,
 Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast Abyss,
 And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark
 Illumine, what is low raise and support;
 That, to the height of this great argument,
 I may assert Eternal Providence,
 And justify the ways of God to men.
 (from Book 1: 1-25)

O, had his powerful destiny ordained
 Me some inferiour Angel, I had stood
 Then happy; no unbounded hope had raised
 Ambition! Yet why not some other Power
 As great might have aspired, and me, though mean,
 Drawn to his part; but other Powers as great
 Fell not, but stand unshaken, from within
 Or from without, to all temptations armed.
 Hadst thou the same free will and power to stand?
 Thou hadst: whom hast thou then or what to accuse,
 But Heaven's free love dealt equally to all?
 Be then his love accursed, since love or hate,
 To me alike, it deals eternal woe.
 Nay, cursed be thou; since against his thy will
 Chose freely what it now so justly rues.
 Me miserable! which way shall I fly
 Infinite wrath, and infinite despair?
 Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell;
 And, in the lowest deep, a lower deep
 Still threatening to devour me opens wide,
 To which the Hell I suffer seems a Heaven.
 O, then, at last relent: Is there no place
 Left for repentance, none for pardon left?
 (Book 4: 57-80)

They, looking back, all the eastern side beheld
 Of Paradise, so late their happy seat,
 Waved over by that flaming brand; the gate
 With dreadful faces thronged, and fiery arms:

(from Book 12: 641-649)

From this Assyrian garden, where the Fiend
 Saw, undelighted, all delight, all kind
 Of living creatures, new to sight, and strange
 Two of far nobler shape, erect and tall,
 Godlike erect, with native honour clad
 In naked majesty seemed lords of all:
 And worthy seemed; for in their looks divine
 The image of their glorious Maker shone,
 Truth, wisdom, sanctitude severe and pure,
 (Severe, but in true filial freedom placed,)
 Whence true authority in men; though both
 Not equal, as their sex not equal seemed;
 For contemplation he and valour formed;
 For softness she and sweet attractive grace;
 He for God only, she for God in him:
 (from Book 4: 285-299)

--
 Forbids us then to taste! but his forbidding
 Commends thee more, while it infers the good
 By thee communicated, and our want:
 For good unknown sure is not had; or, had
 And yet unknown, is as not had at all.
 In plain then, what forbids he but to know,
 Forbids us good, forbids us to be wise?
 Such prohibitions bind not. But, if death
 Bind us with after-bands, what profits then
 Our inward freedom? In the day we eat
 Of this fair fruit, our doom is, we shall die!
 How dies the Serpent? he hath eaten and lives,
 And knows, and speaks, and reasons, and discerns,
 Irrational till then. For us alone
 Was death invented? or to us denied
 This intellectual food, for beasts reserved?
 For beasts it seems: yet that one beast which first
 Hath tasted envies not, but brings with joy
 The good befallen him, author unsuspect,
 Friendly to man, far from deceit or guile.
 What fear I then? rather, what know to fear
 Under this ignorance of good and evil,
 Of God or death, of law or penalty?
 Here grows the cure of all, this fruit divine,
 Fair to the eye, inviting to the taste,
 Of virtue to make wise: What hinders then
 To reach, and feed at once both body and mind?
 So saying, her rash hand in evil hour
 Forth reaching to the fruit, she plucked, she eat!
 Earth felt the wound; and Nature from her seat,
 Sighing through all her works, gave signs of woe,
 That all was lost.
 (from Book 9: 762-794)

Some natural tears they dropt, but wiped them soon;
 The world was all before them, where to choose
 Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
 They, hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,
 Through Eden took their solitary way.