

ISSN: 0976-8165

Bi-Monthly, Refereed, and Indexed Open Access eJournal

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 8, Issue- IV (August 2017)

UGC Approved Journal No 768

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

The Neo-Classical Transgression: Revisiting Pope in *Eloisa to Abelard*

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Article History: Submitted-28/07/2017, Revised-08/09/2017, Accepted-09/09/2017, Published-10/09/2017.

Abstract:

Reckoned to be the *perfecter* of the English heroic couplet, Alexander Pope is considered the leading writer of the Augustan Age and one of the most influential poetic satirists of all times. His verse is viewed as the definitive manifestation of eighteenth-century neoclassical ideals like order, structure, sophisticated wit, just to name a few. Pope is famous and honored for his epigrams, his poignant satires, and his translations of *Homer*. However, his best-loved poem—perhaps the best-loved poem of the whole Enlightenment era was quite untypical of him. In it, he managed to describe a passionate, earthly love with an intensity that makes us think of the nineteenth-century Romantic poets.

Based on critical reading of the poem *Eloisa to Abelard*, this paper aims at establishing that it was the Neo-Classical Transgression and the romantic side of Pope, who is rather widely known as *the Wasp of Twickenham*.

Keywords: Neo-Classical, Augustan, Transgression, Romantic, Satirist.

Introduction:

Pope is the most flawless of English verse writers. His mastery of epigram, satire and the mock epic are unparalleled. Nearly all of Pope's writings are associated with the moral, social, and intellectual state of humanity, which he considered of utmost significance to his craft. Ideals, such as order, beauty, sophisticated wit, and refined moral sentiment, are demonstrated throughout his verse. *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) and the mock-heroic poem, *The Rape of the Lock* (1712) are few of the examples, which attract readers even after more than three centuries of their coming into existence. *The Dunciad* (1728) that is Pope's most contentious work and most often considered his masterpiece severely mocks London writers who, Pope believed, had unfairly maligned him. Although satire, inspired by that of Roman poet *Horace*, represents much of his literary corpus and claim to critical praise, Pope is also extremely respected for his colossal translations of *Homer's Iliad* and *Odyssey* and for his critical deliberations on poetry and aesthetics.

The Neoclassical period was a time of rapid developments in science. This was the time of *Isaac Newton*: the English mathematician, physicist & astronomer, who was the first to describe gravity. The discovery of new things led to the belief that everything could be explained rationally and hence the era was called *The Age of Reason*. The literature of this period, which conformed to Pope's aesthetic philosophies, is notable by its striving for harmony and precision, its refinement, and its imitation of classical models such as *Homer*, *Cicero*, *Virgil*, and *Horace*. In verse, the constricted heroic couplet was common, and in prose, essay and satire were the predominant forms.

Pope's first and most important claim to greatness is the fact that he is pre-eminently the poet of his age. As with the works of Chaucer and Shakespeare, his poetry 'dates' sharply and vividly, crystallizing in memorable speech, the emotional and intellect of his day. Neo-classical period is the period in which satire was the most popular genre. Poetry was limited in the early eighteenth century: there were few lyrics, little or no love poetry, no epics, no dramas or songs of nature worth considering, but in the narrow field of satiric and didactic verse, Pope was the undisputed master. His influence completely dominated the poetry of his age, and many foreign writers, as well as the majority of English poets looked up to him.

Pope is a poet of the early *Enlightenment* who has given us several moralistic verses. However, unlike many of his contemporaries, he typically phrases these bits with such skill that they are poignant and quotable rather than dry and didactic. These lines from *An Essay on Criticism* are best examples:

Whoever thinks a faultless piece to see,
Thinks what ne'er was, nor is, nor e'er shall be.(253-254)

Not only the couplet above but also the one below is equally comprehensive in its philosophical spirit, and equally well wrought in its form. These are Pope's famous lines: Epitaph on Sir Isaac Newton:

NATURE and Nature's laws lay hid in night:
God said, "Let Newton be!" and all was light.

The critical remarks on his physical disabilities that he received made him retaliate through his satires – as if satires were his weapon. Many of such examples could be seen in his works. The best of it is evident in these lines from *An Essay on Criticism*:

Some have at first for Wits, then Poets past
Turn'd Critics next, and prov'd plain Fools at last
Some neither can for Wits nor Critics pass,

As heavy mules are neither horse nor ass.(36-39)

Justifying his preference for satire as a mode of expression, he once said:

Satire's my weapon, but I'm too discreet,
To run a-muck, and tilt at all I meet;
I only wear it in a land of hectors,
Thieves, supercargoes, sharpers, and dire

(Satire I: To Fortescue, 69)

Revisiting Pope in *Eloisa to Abelard*:

The mood, ideas and expression of feelings in classical writing tend to be sharp, clear, and direct. Their temper is controlled and poised. The writer retains his mastery of the subject and is never absorbed by them. Contrarily, romantic writing is iridescent, demonstrative, emotional and filled with personal enthusiasm. Classicism deals usually with the normal and the general, romanticism seeks to express the unique and the different, sometimes with an emotional predisposition that the classicist might consider morbid. The romantic poet seeks the unattainable, the strange and the new, beyond the limits of mind and reason and the circumstances of time. After experiencing Pope who epitomized the literature of his era, we are presented in 1717 with a great love poem of Pope – *Eloisa to Abelard*. Notable here is the fact that the satirist Pope aimed at de-idealization of facts but the Pope in this poem aims at idealizing a fact. Here, in this poem, we can feel more of Pope's personal investment, which we find negligible in satires. Based on the story and its representation, the latter half of this paper will focus on Pope's personal investment vis-à-vis this poem.

The poem is based on the story of the twelfth century French lover *Pierre Abelard* and his student *Héloïse*. Peter Abelard and Eloisa (Pope's English variations of *Pierre Abelard* & *Héloïse*) were two of the most eminent persons of their age in scholarship and beauty. They became famous for nothing more than their unfortunate passion & love for each other. In this poem, Pope makes a sustained attempt to present pathos and passion. The letters of Abelard and Eloisa originally wrote in Latin, gained popularity by a translation, or rather their paraphrase in French first that was published at the Hague in 1693 and further translated into English by John Hughes.

Abelard (1079-1142) was a pre-eminent philosopher and theologian of the twelfth century: a brilliant disputant and lecturer at the schools of St. Genevieve and Notre Dame in Paris. Abelard was hired by Eloisa's uncle Fulbert, an old canon of Notre-Dame to tutor Eloisa. They fell in love and when Eloisa conceived, Abelard sent her secretly to Brittany (where his family lived) and a son was born. To make peace with Fulbert, Abelard agreed to marry Eloisa secretly. Eloisa argued against this (probably fearing the damage it will do to Abelard's career)

but Fulbert started telling people about their marriage. To this, Eloisa denied that they are married. To protect Eloisa from the wrath of his uncle, Abelard sent Eloisa to nunnery of Argenteuil. Fulbert, assuming that Abelard had forced his niece to become a nun and is trying to rid himself of Eloisa, paid ruffians to break into Abelard's lodging and castrate him. The imagery used by Pope to describe this is not the same Pope whose satires we have admired for ages:

Alas, how chang'd! what sudden horrors rise!
A naked lover bound and bleeding lies!
Where, where was Eloise? her voice, her hand,
Her poniard, had oppos'd the dire command.
Barbarian, stay! that bloody stroke restrain;
The crime was common, common be the pain.
I can no more; by shame, by rage suppress'd,
Let tears, and burning blushes speak the rest. (Pope, 99-106)

This episode gave an end of Abelard's career and he decided to become a monk at a monastery of St. Denis, near Paris. Their love ended in a tragic separation and in a famous correspondence. It was from St. Gildas that Abelard addressed a letter to an unfortunate friend, describing his career in adversity. And this letter, Eloisa reads by chance, and their correspondence begins. These letters have souls, they can speak, they have in them the fires of human passions, they have all the softness and delicacy of speech:

Why rove my thoughts beyond this last retreat?
Why feels my heart its long-forgotten heat?
Yet, yet I love!—From Abelard it came,
And Eloisa yet must kiss the name. (5-8)

In short, the letters connected the lovers with a strong relationship. This correspondence continued for several long years. The lines below heighten the love effect of the poem to maximum intensity:

Thou know'st how guiltless first I met thy flame,
When Love approach'd me under Friendship's name;
My fancy form'd thee of angelic kind,
Some emanation of th' all-beauteous Mind.(59-62)

Eloisa is continuously reminded of those moments of togetherness with Abelard. She was barely seventeen or eighteen years old (Abelard, almost double her age) when she first felt her desire for Abelard.

Ev'n thought meets thought, ere from the lips it part,
And each warm wish springs mutual from the heart.

This sure is bliss (if bliss on earth there be)
And once the lot of Abelard and me.(95-98)

She sees in Abelard, marks of the deity with the 'all beautiful mind'. Yet he is a man whom she loved rather than an angel.

Back through the paths of pleasing sense I ran,
Nor wish'd an angel whom I loved a man.
Dim and remote the joys of saints I see;
Nor envy them that heaven I lose for thee. (69-72)

The 'well-known name' of Abelard awakens all of Eloisa's woes again: '*Oh name forever sad! Forever dear! Still breath'd in sighs, still usher'd with a tear*'(31-32). It is hard to estimate the poetic genius of Pope in this love poem after having knowledge of Pope's great satirical creations. A poet, who believed in satires the most, used them to his utmost prowess, can also feel the pangs of love and separation so intensely that it remains unmatched with any other love poet of the period:

Now warm in love, now with'ring in thy bloom,
Lost in a convent's solitary gloom!
There stern religion quench'dth' unwilling flame,
There died the best of passions, love and fame. (37-40)

Pope takes this poem in hand, subjecting Eloisa's *plunging soul* to such consummate art that the poem has been suggestively described as uniting fire and ice. The poem is developed keeping in mind Eloisa's point of view and her internal conflict between her duty towards the almighty and her passion for Abelard. And in this poem, Pope is in no way less to Shakespeare in his versatility of imagery, depth of feelings and his depiction of true love:

Dear fatal name! rest ever unreveal'd,
Nor pass these lips in holy silence seal'd.
Hide it, my heart, within that close disguise,
Where mix'd with God's, his lov'd idea lies. (9-12)

The letter by Eloisa carries the vibrant passions of the lover to her beloved through simple yet beautiful words of the poem. The news of Abelard's death has moved Eloisa. She compares her corporal frame with that of her beloved, as *Tho' cold like you, unmoved and silent grown* (23). Yet she has not been completely transformed into *stone*.

I ought to grieve, but cannot what I ought;
I mourn the lover, not lament the fault;

I view my crime, but kindle at the view,
Repent old pleasures, and solicit new; (183-186)

The process for the transformation to take place is gradually being accomplished in the course of this letter:

Yet here for ever, ever must I stay;
Sad proof how well a lover can obey!
Death, only death, can break the lasting chain;
And here, ev'n then, shall my cold dust remain,
Here all its frailties, all its flames resign,
And wait till 'tis no sin to mix with thine. (171-176)

Along with the words, tears also fill most of the lines of this poem. Eloisa, still alive with the memories of her beloved, is bound to follow severe austerities; now knows that it was her longing for Abelard that has made her split between her body and her soul. She understands and acknowledges courageously her frailties as a nun and waits for another life in the next world:

But all is calm in this eternal sleep;
Here grief forgets to groan, and love to weep,
Ev'n superstition loses ev'ry fear:
For God, not man, absolves our frailties here. (313-316)

Twenty years after the death of Abelard, time brings to them the final reunion as contrasted to life, which tore them apart from each other all their life. The story of the love of Abelard and Eloisa is essentially romantic and Pope leaves by no chance exploring the romantic possibilities; the glamour of distance enhances the interest that surrounds this story of frustrated passion. This Pope wanted the readers to feel and paint the picture of this true and tragic love story of Eloisa & Abelard:

Condemn'd whole years in absence to deplore,
And image charms he must behold no more;
Such if there be, who loves so long, so well;
Let him our sad, our tender story tell;
The well-sung woes will soothe my pensive ghost;
He best can paint 'em, who shall feel 'em most. (361-366)

Pope was an exponent and propounded the order of Augustan age, which is well known for its writing in relevance to its official order, its newfound Classicism. He wrote in accordance to the demands of his age and time, emphasizing more on the order, style and structure. However, *Eloisa to Abelard* shows something eccentric about Pope. In this poem, Pope's image becomes quite similar to a heretic:

Heav'n scarce believ'd the conquest it survey'd,
And saints with wonder heard the vows I made.
Yet then, to those dread altars as I drew,
Not on the Cross my eyes were fix'd, but you:
Not grace, or zeal, love only was my call,
And if I lose thy love, I lose my all. (113-118)

Also,

I waste the matin lamp in sighs for thee,
Thy image steals between my God and me,
Thy voice I seem in ev'ry hymn to hear,
With ev'rybead I drop too soft a tear. (267-270)

There was much in the story of *Eloisa to Abelard* that tempted Pope to manifest the powers, which, although were exhibited in his poems, he never had the occasion to develop them fully. It seems as if the material lay ready, waiting for him, in the Latin letters of the two lovers. This poem glows with a sensuousness that reflects the passion of the two lovers. The conception of Eloisa in Pope's mind shows him in possession of a kind of Shakespearean dramatic power.

The virgin's wish without her fears impart,
Excuse the blush, and pour out all the heart,
Speed the soft intercourse from soul to soul,
And waft a sigh from Indus to the Pole. (55-58)

Pope was a difficult man, not impossible to understand. The impressions that one carries since childhood play a major role in shaping one's character. Moreover, time could be fatal than anything else.

The protrusion was painful as well as noticeable, and in time forced him to walk with a stick (cane) and to wear specially fitted shoes. The accident he sustained as a child may also have contributed to genital difficulties he suffered from throughout his life: difficulty in urinating, painful testicles, and urethral pain so bad that he begged the surgeons for frequent operations to ease it. He also suffered from chronically poor eyesight, occasionally so acute that his parents and early doctors erroneously attributed his curved spine and humped back to excessive reading that wrecked his eyes. Voltaire epitomized him as "protuberant before and behind" and Pope himself later claimed that his "Crazy Constitution" had amounted to "this long Disease, my Life." (Rousseau)

Pope was destined to poignant criticism that led to several behavioral changes in him. A well-tempered boy, due to sarcastic remarks, especially related to his physical deformities, turned to be one of the veteran satirists of his age, in fact of all ages. The Pope that we know is the unrivalled king of verse satires, but we should also remember that the *Other Pope* was as much a romantic like any other veteran romantic poet:

It would not be quite true to say that Pope has proved a poet for all the ages, if only because some late Victorians thought him safely dead and buried in terms of any active presence in the poetry of their day. Even then, however, Pope refused to lie down, and for the past three hundred years he has shown surprising resilience in the face of condescension, assumed indifference, or outright hostility. Recent generations of poets and critics have joined the Scholars in helping to recover some of the ground he had lost. A look at his reputation as it stood 100, 200, and 300 years ago may help to make the point. (Rogers)

The romantic side of Pope did not gain much popularity because it neither was expected nor appreciated during his age; he was not fortunate enough to project his romantic genius either. The criticism that he was destined to made his satires dominate over his romantic verses, despite the fact that in no way his romantic verses were less versatile than his satires. Although, Pope has been famous for ages and is widely known and accepted as a satirist, many of us not exactly know his other façade. The image of Pope as a poet definitely needs retrospection to bring to the front the image of a veteran satirist who was at par with the romantic poets- a classicist in approach and a romantic at heart.

Oh happy state! when souls each other draw,
When love is liberty, and nature, law:
All then is full, possessing, and possess'd,
No craving void left aching in the breast: (91-94)

A romantic poet thinks it nobler to fail in attempting something great than to achieve the limited perfection that is the classical writer's goal. Pope had already achieved that 'limited perfection' and in this poem, he is attempting something greater beyond the limits of his age. The theme of *Eloisa to Abelard* is frustrated passion and for an age in which the novels of Richardson were best-sellers, Pope's elaborate and explicit analysis of the feelings of a woman torn from her lover and forced to recant against her will had a strong appeal. Pope is the master of rhetoric of passion throughout its range and his manipulation of the antithetic couplet is unparalleled in its sustained variety. The kind of poetry that *Eloisa to Abelard* is, we can say, with reasonable assurance that if it is not the demand of its age then at least it is a necessary outcome of its limiting tendencies.

No doubt, the poem is brilliantly executed and after reading this poem, we are forced to think that the same Pope is revolting against order and style; we find more of his personal investment in writing this poetry. In other words, we can say that here is the Pope revolting against the previous Pope – the classicist Pope; and perhaps that is why it is called as *the Neo-Classical Transgression*. (Baines)

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