

The following extracts are all from satirical works which focus in part on the lives of the upper classes. Select two of these passages for detailed discussion. Take account of such things as imagery, theme, tone and technique. Where it seems appropriate, relate the extract to the context of the work as a whole and comment on lines of comparison or contrast between the passages you have selected.

In this essay, I examine two extracts - from Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* and from Defoe's *Moll Flanders*; attempting in both cases to relate the satirical and narrative techniques of the passages to the quality of what each text seeks to undermine. Both Pope and Defoe use perceptions of the upper classes to mock the established order with varying degrees of subtlety. I question this act, or performance, and ask how subversive it can be.

Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, describes itself as "An Heroi-Comical Poem"¹ and its mock-heroic style finds expression in flamboyant and stylised descriptions of a world inhabited by "Heroes and Nymphs"; A vision of Hampton wherein "Meads are forever crown'd with Flow'rs" and the spirit of the river Thames is personified as a living essence of the natural world which "surveys his rising Tow'rs". It is this spiritualised reality which is under the sway of an almost mythical Queen. Queen Anne, whose power is seemingly indivisible from her "Glory" presides over three "Realms" - a word which in this context suggests a detached ephemeral order. This visionary exuberance has distorted the Hampton we may be familiar with, even on a metaphysical level: "The Sun obliquely shoots his burning Ray"; and the stylised form disorientates us not only through the personification of the sun, but also with the spectacle of this dramatic sunbeam.

The distorting mirror of this mock-heroic style, this ephemeral order, suggests exactly that. In an environment in which everything is ephemeral, the implicit suggestion is that there is nothing beneath the beguiling fripperies of outward show. Thus in the rhyming couplet "one speaks of the Glory of the *British Queen*, / And one describes a charming *Indian Screen*", the Queen becomes almost synonymous with an "*Indian Screen*": her persona has become reduced to a façade and nothing more. The screen through which we view this ephemeral realm is certainly "charming", but its rank two-dimensionality requires a conceit and narrowness of view in order for it to be considered substantial. The beauty of the Indian screen - and of this opulent Hampton scene - lies in its extravagance, yet behind both we find that an excess of show has left a void of substance.

Thus the "instructive hours" of court life are ridiculed. They epitomise the wasted hours of lives of leisure, devoid of practical consequence; where, in the absence of more weighty matters, the trivial has become elevated to significance. These "Heroes and Nymphs" have become entangled in a web of superfluous banality, and thus "resort" to discussing "who gave the *Ball*, or paid the *Visit* last". This is a court world of sharp wit and sycophancy in which chatter is of great social consequence. Pope creates the impression that in these ivory towers for the chattering classes, the stagnant incumbents are so detached from a world of the real, that for them "the long Labours of the *Toilette*" are a physical effort verging upon the arduous, and the consequences of a card game can be palpitating enough to "swell [Belinda's] Breast" and make her blush so that she "Burns". Heroism too, has become reduced to the bravery of "Conquests" in the game of "*Ombre*" for the "two adventurous Knights".

1 ¹*The Norton Anthology of Poetry*; fourth edition; Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, Jon Stallworthy; (USA; W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.; 1996); p547.

The comic technique of bathos is used repeatedly in *The Rape of the Lock*, not least in the title of this poem, to undermine the elevated self-importance of its subjects. Thus the queen whom "three Realms obey" is described for two traits: that she "Dost sometimes Counsel take - and sometimes *Tea*". This caricature serves to emphasise the human nature of authority and the typically understated ordinariness of the aristocracy. Although it is one conceit to attempt to appear superior to those beneath them, it is yet another for the upper classes of Pope's world to believe that their lives are of greater importance. When Pope deals with this, his tone is more harshly condemnatory in its satirical stabs. In the court, it is considered tragic that "At every Word a Reputation dies", yet this contrasts starkly with the actual gravity of the defendants who "hang that Jury-men may dine". The conceit that the lives of those in the upper classes are of tremendous consequence, is one which elevates the rise and fall of their reputations to an untenably serious position. To these courtly circles it seems to matter not that a "Wretch" should hang, because the "hungry Judges soon the Sentence sign". The conceited assumption that the whims of the socially superior should take precedence, is lampooned.

In Defoe's work, it is the voice of Moll Flanders which addresses us throughout the book, and as readers we are made to feel that we are being talked to. The narrative technique is explanatory, and the story we are told is driven by the patterns and the pace of speech: for example; "and, as I may say"; "you may be sure"; and "We'll go to Oxford," says he. "How," says I". This is a style which makes much use of colloquialisms such as "Well, the time was appointed" and "for, give him his due". Imagery is seldom used in this only sparsely descriptive form. Moll's mercenary nature is reflected in her summary of this episode when she describes that they came home again and "in a word", it was "to the tune of about £93 expense". This keynote also reflects a wider mercenary approach to narrative on Moll's part.

The satirical tone of Defoe's writing is more subtle and oblique than that of Pope. Moll Flanders engages in this carnivalesque festival of class tourism because her husband "has a mind to it". It is an opportunity to "look like quality for a week" and delight in the performance of lavish lifestyle and elevated social standing which is, for social and financial reasons, normally out of their grasp. To do so, and then to subsequently rack the value as an inordinate "expense", is in part, for Moll and her husband to acknowledge their social exclusion from these privileged circles. Yet this entertainment is capitalised upon as a chance to subject the gullible sensibilities of the upper classes to ironic mockery. Thus Moll describes how the pair "diverted ourselves with bantering several other poor scholars" subjecting them unknowingly to a derisory game wherein which the objects do not see or understand the joke.

That Moll and her husband are able to command respect simply by hiring a "rich coach" and vaunting their outward airs, satirises not only the superficiality of what aristocracy consists of; but also the susceptibility of society at large to follow conditioned Pavlovian responses to arbitrary symbols. The Althusserian process of subjection is confirmed by the reactions which ensue - "The servants all called him my lord, and the innkeepers, you may be sure, did the like". If two impostors can draw the respect of their equals and be treated as members of the upper classes merely because of outward fripperies, then by inference those very class divisions are weakened and undermined. Nonetheless, there is a suggestion in the text that the language by which such power is authored serves inescapably to strengthen the established order. Moll's husband is treated with respect, partly because "not a beggar alive knew better how to be a lord than my husband". The structure of language in which respectable behaviour is gentlemanly simply appropriates and assimilates the subversive actions of Moll and her

husband. It dictates that Moll's husband commanded respect precisely because he behaved like a gentleman.

In both texts, there is a sense that the speakers are on the outside of the privileged group, looking in. Pope's Hampton is the environment of love, of elaborate courtship, titillating flirtation and sensuous visual opulence. Part of the attraction of *The Rape of the Lock* is in the thrill of voyeurism. In a similar way, Moll Flanders fetishises the commodities of the rich: "we had a rich coach, very good horses, a coachman, postillion, and two footmen in very good liveries; a gentleman on horseback, and a page with a feather in his cap". The upper classes are mocked in these works as wantonly extravagant, gullibly detached from the real world, and as shallow revellers exploiting the conceit of class divisions. Yet while both authors satirise the perceived nature of the upper classes, they also seem inescapably to reinforce their own aspirant desires.

Bibliography

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