**Analysis of Alexander Pope’s Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot**

Alexander Pope spent some time considering the choice of form for his late-career rebuttal of those who had most demeaned him in print. He selected a poetic letter, [*Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44895/epistle-to-dr-arbuthnot) (1734)*,* which later critics would deem a rhetorical masterpiece. Because Arbuthnot held the public’s esteem, his choice as the ostensible recipient of Pope’s remarks proved a brilliant strategy, as it lent instant credibility to Pope’s words. In its originally published form, the poem did not contain dialogue by Arbuthnot, once a royal physician, a spirited member of the Martinus Scriblerus Club, and one of Pope’s best friends. When the poem was published in Warburton’s 1751 edition, the form most familiar to readers, Arbuthnot’s direct remarks had been introduced, changing the form from epistle to dramatic dialogue.

Arbuthnot apparently had urged Pope to take aim at his detractors, applying the “lash” represented by satire. In 1733 when his friend lay close to death, Pope decided to act on his urging. The 18th century considered satire a desirable form of social punishment, believing it might actually lead the subject to change his ways. However, as Pope began to understand late in his career, such change rarely occurred. He writes in this poem of some of his own satire, particularly that found in[*The Dunciad*](https://literariness.org/2020/07/07/analysis-of-alexander-popes-the-dunciad/) (1728), “You think this cruel? Take it for a rule, / No creature smarts so little as a Fool,” to which he adds,

Who shames a Scribler? Break one cobweb thro’,  
He spins the slight, self-pleasing thread anew;  
Destroy his Fib, or Sophistry; in vain,  
The Creature’s at his dirty work again;  
Thron’d in the Centre of his thin designs;  
Proud of a vast Extent of fl imsy lines. (89–94)

While Pope suffered various criticisms over his lifetime to which he skillfully reacted, the year 1733 yielded some of the more vicious attacks. Once Pope’s friend, Mary Wortley Montague took offense at Pope’s unfounded comment about her in his *The First Satire of the Second Book of Horace* (ll. 83–84), joining Lord John Hervey to publish the vitriolic *Verses Addressed to the Imitator of Horace* (1733). Montague had in truth been provoked to take action. However, Hervey, an effeminate unpopular courtier and adviser to Queen Caroline, made assumptions regarding some of Pope’s allusions with no true evidence they pertained to him. He published on his own a second attack on Pope during 1733 titled *Epistle to a Doctor of Divinity from a Nobleman at Hampton Court.* Pope would characterize Hervey in subsequent work as Lord Fanny, while Montague appeared under her own name, as well as the name Sappho. Pope included Lord Fanny among the dunce poetasters in his satires, most specifically in the [*The Dunciad.*](https://literariness.org/2020/07/07/analysis-of-alexander-popes-the-dunciad/)

*Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* opens in an even tone with a small vignette with which most readers could identify. The speaker urges his friend to sit quietly and talk with him, as they hide from public concerns: “Shut, shut the door, good John! fatigu’d I said, / Tye up the knocker, say I’m sick, I’m dead.” The speaker engages “John” with a rendition of his troubles, as his attackers seem to be able to find him no matter where he goes, even in his beloved grotto: “They pierce my Thickets, thro’ my Grot they glide.” The vague they later becomes quite specifi c, as Pope takes on many individuals who had caused him confl ict, both by name and allusion. They include the Reverend Laurence Eusden, poet and clergyman, whose drunkenness while serving as poet laureate became legendary; James Moore Smythe, who adopted some of Pope’s work into poorly written drama and joined the dunces in their attacks; Edmund Curll, who published unauthorized work by others as well as notorious literature; and Bernard Lintot, a publisher of most of Pope’s early writing. However, Pope reserves his most skillfully expressed and contained fury for those weak opportunistic individuals who claimed most publicly to be poets:

And has not *Colly* still his Lord, and Whore:  
His Butchers *Henley,* his Free-masons Moor?  
Does not one Table *Bavius* still admit?  
Still to one Bishop *Philips* seem a Wit?  
Still *Sapho*—”Hold! For God-sake—you’ll offend;  
“No Names—be calm—learn Prudence of a Friend.” (97–102)

In this passage, the voice of Arbuthnot interrupts Pope as he names Sapho, whom all readers would recognize as Montague. However, his satire emphasizes the fact that the other names he has used would be just as well recognized. His subjects include “Colly,” or Colley Cibber, long Pope’s deserved target and an actor, playwright, and eventual poet laureate, the hero of [*The Dunciad*](https://literariness.org/2020/07/07/analysis-of-alexander-popes-the-dunciad/); John Henley, an orator who publicly held forth on unsuitable topics; “Moor,” James Moore Smythe, known for his practice of freemasonry; “Bavius,” a catch-all label, actually a poet who attacked Virgil and Homer, an act ridiculous in the extreme; and Ambrose Philips, minor poet and dramatist who served the archbishop of Armagh, Dr. Hugh Boulter, as secretary. The incorporation of Bavius proves an exceptional rhetorical strategy, as Pope places himself in the company of Virgil and Homer by extension.

Pope next discusses why he became a poet, inserting the now-famous line “I lisp’d in Numbers, for the Numbers came” (128), where the term *numbers* refers to meter in poetry. His description makes clear that poetry came naturally to him, by instinct, something he argued as far more important than training in his *Essay on Criticism*. He balances his attacks on the dullards with praise for those he considers exemplary poets, such as Virgil; George Granville, Lord Lansdowne, who served Queen Anne as secretary of war, and to whom Pope dedicated Windsor Forest; William Walsh, a poet and critic who encouraged Pope in his youth; Sir Samuel Garth, author of *The Dispensary* (1699), a satiric poem on apothecaries that Pope enjoyed; the playwright William Congreve; his friends the poets Jonathan Swift and John Gay; and the celebrated [John Dryden](https://literariness.org/2017/11/17/literary-criticism-of-john-dryden/), among others. He next engages in self-censure when he writes that he at first wrote purely descriptive poetry, lacking “Sense,” or meaning, comparing himself to Lord Hervey. He notes that the critics, whose advice he meekly attempted to follow, had never written a word of poetry themselves. How then could they claim to evaluate John Milton and Shakespeare, much less the work of Pope and his contemporaries? His narrative notes that he learned from others, particularly Joseph Addison, esteemed poet and essayist with whom Pope had a brief falling out, but would later write of in a more positive manner. Here Pope inserts a description of Addison that became one of the most famous lines of poetry written in the English language, when he describes him as one who tends to “Damn with faint praise” (201), wounding, rather than striking. Addison had publicly criticized Pope for his satiric “strokes” against John Dennis, whose badnatured criticism Pope had attacked. Pope also takes on those poets who write only to praise certain patrons, labeling such a patron *Bufo*, the Latin word for “toad.”

Most important to Pope is to make clear that he would not use poetry simply to attack a worthy individual who had wounded his vanity, as his enemies had him: “Curst be the Verse, how well soe’er it fl ow, / That tends to make one worthy Man my foe” (183– 184). A dunce is one “Who reads but with a Lust to mis-apply, / Make Satire a Lampoon, and Fiction, Lye.” However, “A Lash like mine no honest man shall dred, / But all such babbling blockheads in his stead” (303– 304). Then he includes the lines later attributed to Arbuthnot that caused some critics to believe Pope took advantage of his friend by placing in his mouth words he probably would not utter. The poem’s speaker mentions Sporus, or Lord Hervey, as one who should tremble in fear that Pope might satirize him. Arbuthnot replies,

“. . . What? That Thing of silk, Sporus,  
that mere white Curd of Ass’s milk?  
Satire or Sense alas! Can Sporus feel?  
Who breaks a Butterfl y upon a Wheel?” (305–309)

Pope provides a spirited answer to Arbuthnot’s protest, explaining just why such poetasters do deserve his lash. The low quality of their work remains obvious to the trained eye, but they take advantage of the public by establishing themselves as experts. He concludes that group of lines with a description of Sporus, whose “virtues” even prove repulsive: “Beauty that shocks you, Parts that none will trust, / Wit that can creep, and Pride that licks the dust” (332–33). He continues to blast Hervey as a libeler and a Plagiarist. Worse yet, Hervey had viciously attacked Pope’s family and his heritage, characterizing his parents as having weak characters when the opposite proved true. Pope’s mother lived to read their vindication in her son’s poem; she died at age 93, shortly after its publication. The fi nal lines close the poem with a reverent tone in acknowledging Pope’s dear friend’s illness and wishing him the best, a method modeled after that of Horace.

Of this much published and repeated poem, Samuel Johnon would write:

*The Epistle to Arbuthnot*, . . . is a performance consisting, as it seems, of many fragments wrought into one design, which by this union of scattered beauties contains more striking paragraphs than could probably have been brought together into an occasional work. As there is no stronger motive to exertion than self-defence, no part has more elegance, spirit, or dignity than the poet’s vindication of his own character.

While one requires references to understand fully the identities of Pope’s targets and the context in which they wrote, the beauty and skill of his expression remain obvious. Alexander Pope believed in the power of poetry, supported by a man’s character, to reveal the truth. He took great offense at those who used it for dastardly purposes. Unfortunately for them, he expressed that offense in a manner guaranteeing their deeds would live in infamy, long after their words had been forgotten.

COMMENTARY

Pope advertises the fact that his poem is a patchwork or hybrid, created from several existing fragments and versions [37]. As the poem emerges from various levels of publicity – private notes, manuscript circulation, miscellany fragment, letter – so it is *about* the various forms of publicity which writing and writers have to engage with. In his ‘Advertisement’ Pope gives as the occasion for publication two verse attacks on him: *Verses Address’d to the Imitator* … *of Horace,* compiled in ‘witty fornication’ (Pope’s phrase) between Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Lord Hervey, and Hervey’s *Epistle to a Doctor of Divinity from a Nobleman at Hampton Court* which transgressed the boundaries of public and private in that they attacked not only his writing (‘of which being publick the Publick judge’), but his ‘Person, Morals, and Family’ (TE IV: 95) [36]. The poem is, on the other hand, addressed to a dying friend, and acts as a testimony to that mutual regard. The most obviously autobiographical of Pope’s poems, it gives not only a defence of his stance as a writer but a beautifully imagined mythic account of his parentage. Not introspective in the manner of Wordsworth, it defines a personal space which is always under pressure from the selfish probing of the Dunces, but also always made meaningful by the presence of the virtuous.

In some ways, the poem is a miniature, personalised Dunciad, with the itch for writing destabilizing all manner of propriety – class, gender, the bourgeois ethics of trade – and invading not just Westminster but Twickenham, a place of holy retirement. Paradoxically, the poem opens with the repeated word ‘Shut’. Private space is all too permeable, as Pope characterises it:

What Walls can guard me, or what Shades can hide  
They pierce my Thickets, thro’ my Grot they glide,  
By land, by water, they renew the charge,  
They stop the Chariot, and they board the Barge. (Arb, 7–10)

Partly this is comic exaggeration, the first means of rebutting Hervey’s assertions that Pope was a friendless outcast: he has only too many socalled ‘friends’ (a more lasting answer to the charge is registered by the pervasive dialogue with the true friend Arbuthnot, and by the catalogue of those by whom he is ‘belov’d’ at 135–44). It is also partly designed to idealise the ambiguous space which the poem creates, an ‘at home’ with Alexander Pope, offered to Arbuthnot/the reader rather than seized by some Dunce (some of the poem’s contrary depictions of space oddly resemble those in *Eloisa to Abelard*). ‘Twit’nam’, as Pope familiarly names his home, may be besieged by refugees from Parnassus (home of the Muses), or Bedlam (the London madhouse) – it is hard to tell the difference, Pope imlies – but poetry itself can offer alternative versions of representative space. The trouble with the Dunces is that not only do they not respect other people’s privacy, but they do not respect their own. The drunk parson, ‘maudlin poetess’ and ‘rhyming peer’ who beset Pope for advice (‘to keep them mad or vain’, Arb, 22) are *by definition* ‘wrong’ as writers; aspirant poets should not give up the day job (15–26). Indeed, poetic aspirations are cruelly in contrast to material needs: the ‘Man of Rhyme’ who walks so casually forth on Sundays and is ‘happy’ to catch Pope ‘just at Dinner-time’ is only in jovial mood because he cannot be arrested for debt on a Sunday and Pope will give him a meal (Arb, 11–14); another is incongruously ‘Lull’d by soft Zephyrs thro’ the broken Pane’ (Arb, 41), and finds himself ‘Oblig’d by hunger and Request of friends’ (Arb, 43) to publish, in Pope’s snigger at the way writers pretend to have been encouraged into print by zealous friends. In a succinctly modulated example, ‘Three things another’s modest wishes bound,/My Friendship, and a Prologue, and ten Pound’ (Arb, 47–8). In many ways, Pope argues, opposition is better than this kind of friendship, and Pope recalls the opening lines of the poem by getting rid of the most importunate and impoverished (in every sense) Dunce: ‘Glad of a quarrel, strait I clap the door,/Sir, let me see your works and you no more’ (Arb, 67–8).

Better, Pope argues, a foe who can actually bite than a flatterer whose spittle might infect one (106). The desire for opposition continues into a comic self-portrait which deals with the Hervey-Montagu charge that Pope’s deformity represented his deformed mind (they write: ‘with the Emblem of thy crooked Mind,/Mark’d on thy back, like *Cain*, by God’s own hand’: Barnard 1973: 272) by constructing a composite statue of bizarre flattery through which Pope’s self-knowledge can shine through:

There are, who to my Person pay their court,  
I cough like *Horace*, and tho’ lean, am short,  
*Ammon*’s great Son one shoulder had too high,  
Such *Ovid*’s nose, and “Sir! you have an Eye-”  
Go on, obliging Creatures, make me see  
All that disgrac’d my Betters, met in me: (Arb, 115–20)

Pope is not to be won by flattery any more than he is to be hurt by ridicule of his ‘wretched little Carcase’ (Hervey/Montagu, in Barnard 1973: 271) [184–5].

Beyond physique lies personality, and Pope leads us inside to a moment of questioning which links poetic with personal origins: ‘Why did I write what sin to me unknown/Dipt me in Ink, my Parents’, or my own ’ (Arb, 125–6). This parody of baptism, with its overtones of original sin, is immediately redeemed by the image of Pope as the poet who is born, not made: ‘As yet a Child, nor yet a Fool to Fame,/I lisp’d in Numbers, for the Numbers came’ (Arb, 127–8). Poetry comes naturally to Pope, and unlike the pestilential Dunces of the opening lines, Pope ‘left no Calling for this idle trade,/No duty broke, no Father dis-obey’d’ (Arb, 129–30). The ‘idle trade’ suggests that Pope’s ‘Muse’ is not tainted by anything so sordid as money, functioning ‘merely’ for private consumption, seconding the palliative care of Dr Arbuthnot – ‘To help me thro’ this long, Disease, my Life’ (Arb, 132). Pope finds a way of converting the disease/life link which his enemies highlighted into a celebratory union between poetry and medicine, poet and doctor: a sort of self-protecting circle to which we gain privileged access. The circle is widened, as it must be, when Pope goes on to ask ‘But why then publish ’ (Arb, 135). The answer is that the publication that matters has already happened, for Pope’s early friends would all ‘tell me I could write’ (Arb, 136): the list of early critics (Granville, Walsh, Garth, Congreve, Swift and so on) is here arranged in a decorous gallery of supporters who combine private friendship with a sort of publication circle. The request of such friends to publish (in contradistinction to the hack’s imaginary friends at 44) cannot be denied.

Surmounting ‘venal’ critics like Gildon and Dennis by not answering them (151–4), and ‘verbal’ critics such as Theobald and Bentley by converting their pedantic attention to trifles into a sort of curious insect life such as a man of taste might observe in a museum (169–70), Pope leads to the first of the three satiric portraits which, with the contrasting selfportraits, form the argumentative core of the poem. In a vast conditional sentence (beginning ‘were there One’, Arb, 193), Pope sketches a different and more important kind of literary corruption. This ‘One’ has everything going for him, in the same way that Pope has: ‘Blest with each Talent and each Art to please/And born to write, converse, and live with ease’ (Arb, 195–6). His problem is a self-regarding authority which can make no authentic contact with anyone outside himself, especially anyone who resembles himself:

Shou’d such a man, too fond to rule alone,  
Bear, like the Turk, no brother near the throne,  
View him with scornful, yet with jealous eyes,  
And hate for Arts that caus’d himself to rise; (Arb, 197–200)

His critical views are not open (whether positive or negative) but poisonously covert: ‘Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer,/ And without sneering, teach the rest to sneer’ (Arb, 201–2); like the Dunces whose open enmity is better than false friendship, and unlike Pope, this ‘One’ is compromised by combinations of qualities which are mutually corrupting:

Willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike,  
Just hint a fault, and hesitate dislike;  
Alike reserv’d to blame, or to commend,  
A tim’rous foe, and a suspicious friend … (Arb, 203–6)

He is throned (like the hack/spider of 89–94), self-pleasing amid his own flattery: ‘Like*Cato*, give his little Senate laws,/And sit attentive to his own applause’ (Arb, 209–10). The Cato reference hints at the identity which Pope is about to reveal: ‘Who but must laugh, if such a man there be /Who would not weep, if *Atticus* were he!’ (Arb, 213– 14). As with the two other portraits, Pope does not quite reveal identity: Atticus is close enough to ‘Addison’ [18] for the identification to be obvious, yet as Pope has promised in the Advertisement a decent veil is retained. But as Pope’s note to these lines suggest there is a complex argument going on here about publicity, for the portrait was already in controversial circulation as an example of Pope’s ingratitude to friends; Pope is here constructing a sort of reverse self-portrait in which aspects ascribed to his own personality (jealousy, secretiveness, fear) are corralled into an alter ego who can be contrasted with his own self-image to follow. The manner of the lines’ insertion here, as a satiric set-piece, also *exemplifies* the art of satiric characterisation which Pope’s Addison was too timid to engage in.

Sandwiched between this portrait and the next is a segment contrasting Pope’s position with Addison’s. Pope established his contrary kingdom precisely in the absence of clubbish courts:

I sought no homage from the Race that write;  
I kept, like Asian Monarchs, from their sight:  
Poems I heeded (now be-rym’d so long)  
No more than Thou, great GEORGE! a Birth-day Song. (Arb, 219–22)

Pope’s ‘*Asian* Monarchs’ are greater, nearer God’s invisibility, than Addison’s jealous ‘*Turk’* (Arb, 218), and the further ironic comparison with George II, a supremely insolent piece of chumminess, pointedly conjoins the false and empty world of routine panegyric (the fulsome odes the Poet Laureate, Cibber, was supposed to produce each year for the philistine George) with the flattery which Pope has already rejected.

Flattery is for patrons, and in the ‘Bufo’ section (231–48) Pope changes the register into amused condescension towards the desperate scramble for reward which the patronage system engendered. Another throned figure (‘Proud, as *Apollo* on his forked hill,/Sate full-blown *Bufo*, puff’d by ev’ry quill’; Arb, 231–2), the bloated Bufo is ‘Fed with soft Dedication all day long’ in a glorious transformation of the written word into pre-digested baby-food. Bufo (the latin name means ‘Toad’, for Pope is stepping up his abusiveness) likes it, in a more dangerous way than Addison. Bufo is a caricature of noble patrons who modelled their largesse on the Roman noble Maecenas who gave Horace the Sabine farm on which he could display his independence. For Pope, whose Twickenham version of the Sabine farm had been won not from patronage but from the Homer translation, this reciprocity no longer applied and the description of one’s patron as a latterday Maecenas was simply a cheap cliché (‘*Horace* and he went hand in hand in song’, Arb, 234). Again, the language is one of politeness and poetic aspiration, but what the poets really want is cash, or food: the poets ‘first his Judgment ask’d, and then a Place’ (Arb, 237–244). As this picture has become more bodily in accent (the patron gets fed on dedication while the aspiring ‘Bards’ lack real food) than that of Atticus, so the importance of the scene is greater: Atticus was confined to his ‘little senate’, but Bufo thinks he’s Apollo, god of poetry, and moreover is capable of wielding patronage in the political sense of being able to award a ‘place’, a safe government job.

Again, the portrait is designed to offer discriminations. Bufo’s comic situation should recall to mind Pope’s at the start of the poem: but whereas Pope is harassed by those importuning him for help (‘My Friendship, and a Prologue, and ten Pound’, Arb, 48), Bufo thrives on it. Patrons have their uses, for they may draw the crowd from Pope (‘May Dunce by Dunce be whistled off my hands!’, Arb, 254), and tend to leave alone true poets (Dryden, 245–8, and Gay, 256–60). Closing another door, Pope leavesBufo to his role and depicts himself as enjoying the greater ease of independence: ‘Above a Patron, tho’ I condescend/ Sometimes to call a Minister my Friend’, as he puts it with mock grandeur (Arb, 265–6). Against the concealed contention between poet and patron, Pope suggests that he is so comfortable with his own relation to poetry and criticism that he need not have the relation at all – he ‘Can sleep without a Poem in my head,/Nor know, if *Dennis* be alive or dead’ (Arb, 269–70). This is a pose, of course – Pope knew perfectly well that Dennis had died very recently, but affects not to have noticed – but it is important here to establish the primacy of ordinary living as the basis for verse. ‘Heav’ns! was I born for nothing but to write ’ , he queries (Arb, 272), echoing his earlier image of himself as lisping in numbers, but now suggesting that the born poet needs to do more than simply reel off verses. Silence has its virtues, and Pope cannot ‘chuse but smile’ at those who imagine every new poem must be by him – poor critics, who pay him the wrong sort of compliment again with their rumours and guesses (275–82). From this position of untouchable retirement Pope swivels towards more serious exponents of libellous misrepresentation, in the public repudiation and truth-telling he unleashes upon ‘Sporus’.

The third portrait intensifies images from the other two. ‘Sporus’ was a boy castrated, dressed as a woman and ‘married’ by the Emperor Nero; in 1735 he is Lord Hervey, supporter of Walpole, confidant of the Queen, and a flamboyant bisexual. He is also many of the things Pope was alleged to be – insect-like, venomous, impotent, scandalous, dirty: in the *Verses* Pope figures as a ‘fretful *Porcupine*’, ‘angry little Monster’, a wasp, and (in a barbed quotation from Pope’s own*Epistle to Burlingto*n) ‘a puny Insect shiv’ring at a Breeze’ (Barnard 1973: 271). ‘Sporus’ is a clear attempt to alienate all the unfavourable qualities ascribed to Pope into a demonic alter ego who destabilises poetry, politics, gender, and self. Arbuthnot vainly suggests that satire is harmless in the case of so insubstantial a thing as Sporus – ‘“Who breaks a Butterfly upon a Wheel ”’ (Arb, 308); but Pope takes the butterfly image and works it up and down with icy efficiency in order to prove the covert toxicity of the creature – the decorative, ineffectual nature of the insect is itself offensive:

Yet let me flap this Bug with gilded wings,  
This painted Child of Dirt that stinks and stings;  
Whose Buzz the Witty and the Fair annoys,  
Yet Wit ne’er tastes, and Beauty ne’er enjoys,  
So well-bred Spaniels civilly delight  
In mumbling of the Game they dare not bite. (Arb, 309–14)

Sporus is an insect without a sting or bite, whether satiric or sexual; civility becomes a meretricious way of avoiding engagement and expression. Hervey wore make-up, but had no teeth: surface flamboyance and inner impotence are superbly caught in these images. ‘Mumbling’ also suggests poor literary utterance, and in the following lines Pope takes an image which Hervey and Montagu had contrived for Pope, reverses it, aligns it with Milton and shows which combatant can really write. Hervey/ Montagu:

When God created Thee, one would believe,  
He said the same, as*to the Snake of Eve*;  
To Human Race Antipathy declare,  
*‘Twixt them and thee be everlasting War.* (Barnard 1973: 271)

Pope turns this ‘antipathy’ around:

Whether in florid Impotence he speaks,  
And, as the Prompter breathes, the Puppet squeaks;  
Or at the Ear of Eve, familiar Toad,  
Half Froth, half Venom, spits himself abroad,  
In Puns, or Politicks, or Tales, or Lyes,  
Or Spite, or Smut, or Rymes, or Blasphemies. (Arb, 317–22)

As a politician, Hervey tells Queen Caroline (‘Eve’) what Walpole (‘the Prompter’) wants her to hear; as a poet, he ‘spits himself abroad’, in an egotistical display of toothless but poisonous lather (‘Half Froth, half Venom’) in which blasphemy is the same as rhyme and puns the same as politics. Nothing has stable identity, not even gender:

His Wit all see-saw between *that* and *this,*  
Now high, now low, now Master up, now Miss,  
And he himself one vile Antithesis.  
Amphibious Thing! that acting either Part,  
The trifling Head, or the corrupted Heart!  
Fop at the Toilet, Flatt’rer at the Board,  
Now trips a Lady, and now struts a Lord.  
*Eve*’s Tempter thus the Rabbins have exprest,  
A Cherub’s face, a Reptile all the rest;  
Beauty that shocks you, Parts that none will trust,  
Wit that can creep, and Pride that licks the dust. (Arb, 323–33)

Hervey’s sexual identity is all performance and gesture, and no authentic essence (‘Now trips a Lady, and now struts a Lord’); his mind and writing are like a couplet gone wrong (‘His Wit all see-saw … Now Master up, now Miss’), and the ‘vile Antithesis’ which Pope gives as ‘he himself’ comes *outside* the couplet to which it notionally belongs, in a third rhyming line, as if Hervey’s contradictions cannot be balanced out within a couplet pattern but engender an overloaded triplet [182– 4].

It is against this summation that Pope sets the record of his entire career, with a series of defiant, discriminating negatives:

Not Fortune’s Worshipper, nor Fashion’s Fool,  
Not Lucre’s Madman, nor Ambition’s Tool,  
Not proud, nor servile, be one Poet’s praise  
That, if he pleas’d, he pleas’d by manly ways; (Arb, 334–7)

After the gender ambivalences of Sporus we are given Pope’s ‘manly ways’, and manly ways indicate an heroic poetry which considers flattery shameful, truth superior to ‘Fancy’s Maze’, Virtue better than Fame. Pope defines himself against the whole range of corrupt social practices into which Sporus pours his energies (362–7).

Yet Pope has more still to offer, and seeks in the last fifty lines to modulate his voice once again into something more apparently private. The other author of the Verses was Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and Pope devotes a mere two lines to her, and not even really lines of attack but selfinculpation: ‘Yet soft by Nature, more a Dupe than Wit,/*Sapho* can tell you how this Man was bit’ (Arb, 368–9). Perhaps answering the contention that Pope was ‘No more for loving made, than to be lov’d’ (Barnard 1973: 271), this is a quite unexpected and dangerous admission, as if Pope publishes the fact that Lady Mary could embarrass him by revealing some of their earlier flirtatious relations (‘bit’ here means something like ‘smitten’ or ‘cheated’); it translates the lovelessness ascribed to Pope in the Verses into a reminder to Lady Mary of that earlier relationship, an exposure of thegrief attached to it, and a self-portrait of the supposedly venomous satirist as ‘soft by Nature’. It is this last aspect with which Pope ends the poem. Answering the charge that his birth was ‘obscure’, Pope chooses the calmest of tones to give an idealised portrait of his father, a patriot of ‘gentle Blood (part shed in Honour’s Cause,/While yet in *Britain* Honour had Applause)’ (Arb, 388–9), who kept out of all controversy (‘The good Man walk’d innoxious thro’ his Age’, Arb, 395), in a true indication of ‘gentle Blood’. The elegiac depiction of his dying mother, nursed with all imaginable piety, returns us to the domestic scene, an independence which is not loneliness, the door shut against the world, but open to the sympathetic reader.