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THE TRADITION OF THE MOCK-HEROIC EPIC: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF «MAC FLECKNOE» AND «THE RAPE OF THE LOCK»

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Satire has long been referred to as a «sacred weapon».[1] But is satire the «weapon» which serves the «sacred» purpose by reforming morals? The answer should be sought for both in the origin as well as in the intention of the satire.

The historical contexts of the greatest satires suggest that most frequently incidents and situations that actually exist in real life, comprise the most basic source of satire. The alienation between a great poet and a «dull» one because of politics and literary quarrels or the ridiculous incident of the «rape of the lock» which strains the relations between two outstanding families stand out as fine examples of such situations. The result is a form of writing which originates in the vice or folly of society and expresses an honest indignation at what should be restored or corrected.

With a cool, detached point of view, the satirist perceives the gap between what might be and what really is and consequently aims at the restoration of moral order. Refusing to accept the order of his surrounding world, he intends to protest either by exposing in gentle satire or by condemning in more bitter versions. In both cases the satirist employs the process of ridiculing by means of reducing and exaggerating. This very quality of destruction in satire is convincingly played off against the element of mockery. In order to moralize, therefore the satirist must ridicule and mock and he does so by difusing a tone of urbane amusement through irony.[2] Motivated by moral outrage, he becomes actively hostile at the state of immorality which he scorns and condemns, through an ironic view of the world. Thus, irony becomes an attitude towards the universe, a superiority that expresses his condemnation of the present order.

The literary mode of irony is best exemplified in a specific type of satire, the mock-heroic epic. Depicting the trivial in the lofty style

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1. James Sutherland, *English Satire,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958, p. 153.

2. A. E. Dyson, The Crazy Fabric, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966, p. 1.

of epic actually exposes some defect by means of the form of irony. In a mock-heroic epic, the satirical point is centered around the disparity between subject matter and style. The satirist subverts the ugly by diminishing it through a direct juxtaposition with the grand style of the epic. In the great eighteenth century mock-heroic epics, the process of diminution which becomes even greater with the use of the epic style, aims at a revelation of truth about the undesirable. Driven by the favorite idea of the time that «ridicule is the test of truth»,[3] the eighteenth century satirist is out to expose and in turn reveal a situation as it really is. In «Mac Flecknoe», Dryden blends a critical attitude with sharp humor aiming his attack against Thomas Shadwell. Alienated from Shadwell by politics and literary quarrels, Dryden is alive to the victim's folly.

The genesis of the poem is that Shadwell considers himself the successor of Ben Jonson whereas his plays are often clumsy, inferior to Jonson's. This perception leads Dryden to an abnormal sensitivity to the gap between what might be and what really is. The poet juxtaposes the two views in an attempt to persuade the reader to see the folly of Shadwell's self-proclaimed genius.

The analogy of the juxtaposition between Shadwell's imaginary and real ability is expressed through the mock-heroic style. It is the obvious discrepancy between subject and style that makes the satirical point in the poem. In using the grand and solemn tone of the epic to treat an inferior writer, Dryden creates a comic ambivalence in that the poem points to positive virtues and thus provokes admiration on the part of the reader. Yet the poem's normally favorable judgement becomes a subversive mechanism: what seems to be praise is mere denigration.[4] The victim's belittlement is schematically presented by Dryden in his conception of Shadwell, a self- proclaimed successor of Jonson, as the son and heir of Flecknoe.

A second example of satirical poetry in the eighteenth century is «The Rape of the Lock»; exuberant in its tone and full of refined wit and imagination, it is a social satire aiming at the mockery of certain pernicious aspects in a high society and the exposure of insincerity in that culture's fashionable mode of love.

The poem originated from an incident that occurred in Pope's

3. Sutherland, p. 153.
4. Sutherland, p. 153.

own circle of friends and acquaintances when Robert, Lord Petre (the baron) cut a lock of Mrs. Arabella Fermor's (Belinda) hair, and Pope was asked by a mutual friend of the Petre and Fermor families to write a jesting poem in order to heal the strained relations that had developed between the two families.

Pope's insight conceived of the peculiarly interesting incident as a fine situation for a mock - heroic, a genre where trivialities are placed in an exalted perspective with aspects that resemble the setting of an epic, thus securing a ludicrous effect. Indeed, in «The Rape of the Lock», Pope plays an elaborate form against a trivial situation. With its planful treatment of epic style, the poem appears to be the culmination of the movement among Augustan writers to achieve the ultimate in satire. Though modern criticism often holds the view that a mock epic is primarily a satire on the epic, «The Rape of the Lock» remains an example of Pope's attempt to turn a dignified genre into witty use without cheapening it. He accomplishes this by ridiculing through incongruity and at the same time providing the reader with the pleasure of recognizing ironical parallels to familiar passages in classic epics. Augustan critics hold that a mock-heroic is a parody of the epic.[5] But in fact Pope's purpose is not to ridicule the heroic genre so much as to expose the triviality of eighteenth century society; to «diminish» a feud that arose from the affair of the lock of hair.

Technically, the poem's original intent is presented in a form of writing that is a combination of satire and epic. Various means of securing a satiric effect attribute a lively comic perception and a feeling of social gesture to the poem. The predominant source of humor, however, remains the mock-heroic as the poem expresses a finely compressed process of «diminution». Indeed, «the intensifying of the mock-heroic references in sharpness is the most brilliant and original thing about 'The Rape of the Lock'. What Pope does is mainly to continue the process of diminution. He makes most things smaller in size and more exquisite in quality, which better fulfills the demands of mockery».[6]

Yet in both poems the «diminishing» process is indirect, permitting

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5. Ian Jack, «A Complete Mock-Heroic: The Rape of the Lock», in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of the Rape of the Lock,* ed. G. C. Rousseau, Englewood Clifts, N. Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1969, p. 39.

6. Geoffrey Tillotson, *The Rape of the Lock and Other Poems,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940, p. 116.

the numerous mock-heroic images to enhance an ironic effect. For example, Flecknoe who plays the role of king, priest and poet, pronounces a panegyric on Shadwell's fitness for the throne of dullness that clearly sets the grounds for irony:

Tis resolved; for nature pleads that he
Should only rule, who most resembles me.
Sh—alone my perfect image bears,
Mature in dullness from his tender years:
Sh—alone, of all my sons, is he
Who stands confirmed in full stupidity.

By reducing Shadwell's name to a four lettered scatological word, Dryden further intesifies the ironic tone of the poem.

A good portion of the ironic attitude derives from the poet's language which is played off as a corrective for Shadwell's frailties. The effect, drawn from the satiric form and device of style juxtaposition, is certainly of comic spirit:

But Sh—'s genuine might admits no ray,
His rising fogs prevail upon the day.
Besides, his goodly fabric fills the eye,
And seem designed for thoughtless majesty

says Flecknoe in his panegyric to Shadwell. It is Dryden's dignified utterance at this point that leads to the exact opposite effects through the use of ironic paired words such as: «thoughtless majesty».

Thus, aesthetically, the poet achieves a balance between a lofty style and a personal critical attitude which produces the effect of keen enjoyment and of pleasure slightly overcoming its application to the victim.

Dryden resorts to an abundance of allusions to English and Roman history and literature; thus he presents his victim in such a way as to reveal his own worth in comparison to the value of other literary figures. The result is a continual denigration of Shadwell. Heywood and Shirley, for example, popular playwrights at one time but out of style at present, are characterized as the prefigures of Shadwell. Even more intensely ironic is the comparison between Shadwell and Arion, a legendary Greek poet, who returning home by the sea, is saved by a dolphin through the charm of his music:

Methinks I see the new Arion sail,

The lute still trembling underneath thy nail.
At thy well sharpened thumb from shore to shore
The treble squeaks for fear, the basses roar;
Echoes from kissing alley Sh—call,
And Sh—they resound from Aston Hall.

The passage is a fine example of the dignity of utterance that Dryden uses in order to raise his victim to a dignity that he cannot sustain.

The biblical allusions such as the one in the lines:

And coarsely clad in Norwick drugget, came
To teach the nations in their greater name,

contribute to the incongruity of the low scene. The parallel between Flecknoe as the forerunner of Shadwell and John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus adds a dimension of ironic intensity.

The scenic effect also magnifies the juxtaposition between positive and negative elements and serves as a source of irony. The description of the British monarch during the ceremony of coronation, holding a globe and a scepter as the two symbols of his kingship, intensifies the weakness of Shadwell whose symbol of power is merely a mug of ale.

The symbolism secures a similar ironic attitude:

His temples, last with poppies were o'erspread,
That nodding seemed to consecrate his head...

Here the crown of poppies suggests heaviness and dullness. Indeed, in Dryden's heroic fantasy, Shadwell is the image of Flecknoe, who:

In prose and verse was owned, without dispute,
Through all the realms of nonsense absolute.

The process of Shadwell's denigration then becomes more directly effective, as he, the son of Flecknoe, by law of human nature inherits his father's frailties. During the coronation, Flecknoe, sunk in dullness and oblivion, appears to be in despair and agony about his son's reign. Yet, as if by miracle:

Just at that point of time, if fame not lie,
On his left hand twelve reverend owls did fly.

The twelve owls are substitutes for the twelve vultures whose flight assured Romulus of the destined site of Rome. The episode, an equivalent of the epic device of «deus ex machina», is ironically used to signify

Flecknoe's lack of original power and worth. As such, Flecknoe takes this event to be a good omen of his son's future empire and continues the pronunciation of his panegyric in a prophetic mood. He begins with an invocation of the Heaven's blessings for his son's vast but empty empire. The invocative tone of the panegyric, once again, emphasizes the sharp disparity between the subject and the grand language of the epic poety and therefore, produces the intended irony.

At last, Dryden's fantasy lets Flecknoe sink leaving his mantle to fall symbolically upon the shoulders of Shadwell, who has now inherited «a double portion of his father's art».

In «The Rape of the Lock», Belinda's call for the ravished lock:

Not fierce Othello in so loud a Strain
Roar'd for the Handkerchief that caus'd this Pain,

or the scene where Clarissa hands the fatal scissors to Lord Petre:

(As) Ladies in Romance assist their Knight,
Present the Spear, and arm him for the Fight,

are mock-heroic images that attribute an ironic effect to the poem.

Following the tradition of the mock-heroic epic, Pope as well employs some of the characteristics of the epic poetry, such as: invocations, adaptation of the epic battles and feasts, the grandiose speeches of the heroes, the use of supernatural machinery. A good portion of the poem's extraordinary subtlety derives from the wealth of allusiveness, especially to the classics. For example, popular phrasal patterns which describe the grandeur of certain activities in Roman literature are echoed in «the Rape of the Lock» when the baron plans:

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 End;

A sense of continuity through timelessness is echoed through the lines:

The hungry Judges soon the sentence sign,
And Wretches hang that Jury-men may Dine;
The Merchant from th'Exchange returns in Peace,
And the long Labours of the Toilette cease...

The poet freezes time and develops an energy of return thus presenting a perspective through time.

Pope's many descriptive devices that build up scenes of historic paintings mainly through the use of loosely decorative epithets such as: 'rich Brocade', 'silver Lamps', 'gilded chariots', gives the poem the magnificence and luxury of pictorial beauty that prevails in classic epic poetry.

Yet Pope's most common means of imparting splendour and wonder to his actors and action is his adaptation of epic machinery.[7] Like Homer's gods, Pope's sylphs move easily in and out of the lower world, giving ordinary human impulses a sensous form. Through the presence of these aerial creatures the poem acquires a mythpoeic quality. The sylphs constitute a vision which implies a style combining the socially sophisticated and the heroic. In an analogous manner then, the presence of the sylphs combined with popular country beliefs regarding superhuman powers implies forces greater than the heroes of the poem. It is this particular epic device that most allows for sponteneity and a distinctive imaginative coherence.[8]

In terms of style, it is Pope's «couplet art» that gives his work an authentic mock epic quality. His couplets, tightly unified and subtle in structure and design, achieve a balance between disparate elements which makes the poem a supreme example of mock epic. As one critic says: «To relate the humorous incident of the 'rape', to paint the victim as a beautiful girl slightly flirtatious and amoral, and to underlay the rather wicked gaiety of the poem's surface with serious wit and morality, required a couplet strategy of the highest poetic order».[9]

The artistic quality of Pope's heroic couplets abounds in their structural simplicity accompanied by a particular rythm. Many of the couplets are merely expository or narrative:

> *Thrice rung the Bell, the Slipper knock'd the Ground,*
> *And the press'd Watch returned a silver Sound.*
> *Belinda still her downy Pillow prest,*
> *Her Guardian Sylph prolong'd the Balmy Rest.*

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7. Reuben A. Brower, «Am'rous Causes», in *The Rape of the Lock,* ed. John D. Hunt, Nashville, Tennessee: Aurora Publishers, Inc., 1970, p. 193.

8. J. S. Cunningham, «An Introduction to the Rape of the Lock», in *The Rape of the Lock,* ed. John D. Hunt, Nashville, Tennessee: Aurora Publishers, Inc., 1970, p. 245.

9. John A. Jones, *Pope's Couplet Art,* Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1969, p. 81.

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Others stand out as fine examples of a sound pattern with an acoustic effect:

> *He summons strait his Denizens of Air;*
> *The lucid Squadions round the Sails repair.*

Yet, the syntactic directness and simplicity of the couplet serves to secure significant meanings. Thus, through the artistry of this poetic device, the poet achieves an ironic effect by ascribing low actions to characters of noble origin:

> *Say what strange Motive, Goddess cou'd compel*
> *A well-bred Lord t'assault a gentle Belle?*

The syntax in this couplet is direct enough to make the antithesis between character and action apparent, as it starts out with a kind of deception and ends up with an incongruous assault.[10]

Whereas Dryden's satiric motives are personal revenge and criticism of a public nuisance, Pope's concern is the juxtaposition of contrasting worlds in eighteenth century society. His dexterity in juxtaposing these modes is mainly based on the form of burlesque which is the most successful reconciliation of Classicism and Rationalism.[11] He uses a weighty, allusive style, the style of epic poetry in order to treat such a trivial matter as the feud caused by a lock of hair. The ironic point lies in the discrepancy between style and subject matter. Pope uses the lofty style to indict the trivial qualities of a world of shallowness and insincerity. He portrays a miniature world of 'belles' and 'beaux' who live by an elaborate set of rules. Within this world is framed the card game, a crisis, where kings and queens battles and seductions exist as a 'game within a game'.[12] In «Mac Flecknoe», though Dryden definitely takes a critical attitude toward Shadwell, he is not exactly aiming at any improvement of humanity or any remodeling of society; he is rather severely replying to Shadwell's sharp attack on his poems «Absalom and Achitophel» and «The Medal». Though a severe satire, «Mac Flecknoe» does not bear the bitterness and anger of the Juvenalian satire.

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10. Jones, p. 84.

11. Austin Warren, «The Rape of the Lock as Burlesque», in *Critics on Pope*, ed. Judith O'Neill, Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1968, p. 80.

12. Martin Price, «View Points», in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Rape of the Lock*, ed. G. C. Rousseau, Englewood Cliffs, N. Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1969, p. 108.

It comes closer to the values of the Horatian satire, in that it aims to attack by enormous good humor and effectively produces the results of keen enjoyment on the part of the reader. Dryden's aim is not to correct or even moralize but to ridicule by attacking severely.

On the other hand, Pope, though also avoiding the bitterness and anger of the Juvenalian satire attempts to moralize rather than merely to expose as is the case with Dryden. In «Mac Flecknoe» the satiric point is made through one mode of action that of exposure. Whereas the management of Pope's narrative is portrayed through a scale of levels which reveal a manifold action. There seems to be four levels of mock-heroic action in the poem.

The first is the surface level of Belinda's existence. The reader is given a detailed study of the maiden's activities: the way she awakes and prepares herself for this «momentous» day, the way she exalts too proudly over her victory over the Baron, and the way she eventually expresses her polite, though strong indignation over the «rape».

A second level is the war between the sexes. The often open verbal conflict between Belinda and the Baron in particular, and between «beaux» and «belles» in general, holds the reader's attention throughout the poem. Both sides lose, for the Baron violates the rules of the «game» by using force. Belinda is wrongly angry at the game's objective, for as Clarissa so aptly points out: «She who scorns a man, must die a maid».

On another level, the poem progresses psychologically. At first, Belinda is fancy-free, surrounded by the sylphs whose power depends on her remaining fancy-free. When a lover lurks at her heart, however, the sylphs are helpless, and her lock, as well as the lock of chastity is given up. What she does not realize at the time is that «...the engaging of her affections is the purpose for which the rituals of courtship exist, and it is therefore prudism in Belinda to affect such horror at the event».[13] At this point Ariel the sylph is replaced by Umbriel the gnome, for gnomes are reincarnations of women who were prudes.

The final and most important level, is that of the general social criticism which provides the background of the poem. Pope's main target is bourgeois society of the early eighteenth century. Social commentary throughout the poem is aimed almost entirely at the ludicrous

13. Maynard Mack, «Mock Heroicism in 'The Rape of the Lock'», in *The Rape of the Lock,* ed. John D. Hunt, Nashville, Tennessee: Aurora Publishers, Inc., 1969, p. 156.

social standards set up by a fashionable society. In one critic's words: «...the primary quality of Belinda is spiritual shallowness, an incapacity for moral awareness. She has transformed all spiritual exercises and emblems into a coquette's self-display and self-adoration. All of it is done with a frivolous heedlessness».[14] Again, confusion of values is the theme.

While Pope feels that the beauty of the fashionable world can be, with the proper taste and grace, overwhelming, he despairs that this potential is often abused without discretion:

> *But the social mockery of «The Rape of the Lock» is not simple, does not make a pat contribution to single-mindedness. Its world is vast and complicated. It draws no lines of cleavage between its 'seriousness' and its mockery. Pope, fierce and tender by turns, knows not whether to laugh or weep over the poem...The criticism the poem provides is sometimes more a picture than a criticism. It is so elaborate, shifting, constellated, That the intellect is baffled by the aesthetic scene and emotions.*[15]

One of Pope's main complaints is that not only is the world of these 'beautiful people' a miserable failure but that it also presents ethical and moral judgements which are woefully awry. The poem conflates values that are both lofty and trivial in order to reflect the entanglement of this society's state of mind. An eighteenth century fashionable society of «beaux» and «belles» is portrayed as the very society which places too high values upon trivialities such as the «lock» and its subsequent «rape».

Thus, although both satirists employ the same tradition of mock-heroic epic, they slightly differ in the aim and consequently in the final outcome of their satire. The one's aim is a mere exposure whereas the other's is a moral condemnation. Dryden's ironic vision of the world, a world in which «dullness» is the norm, stems from his desire to vex

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14. Price, p. 238.
15. Tillotson, p. 155.

rather than reform.[16] Of course, this is not to say that Pope's intention is to reform; yet, his satirical poetry is underlined by a corrective effect definitely more obvious than anything in «Mac Flecknoe». In «The Rape of the Lock», underneath the level of exposure of a superficially «polished»[17] society of the eighteenth century, lies a sense of discouragement for the factors that lead to the folly of such a society. In his attempt to expose and attack, Dryden makes his satiric point piercing through sharp wit and lucidity of mock-epic style, all of which suggest a good natured contempt.

Yet, through the mock-heroic structure, Pope does present a picture of a confused moral world. He can emphasize the epic proportions to which this society has magnified its trifles as well as their real triviality. Furthermore, by the contrast between the misplacement of values by a society and the separate world of heroic activity, Pope shows that deplorable conditions exist which, even the most glittering civilization must not deny or ignore. It is precisely this integration which provides «The Rape of the Lock» with the implicit moral which made the Augustans greatly appreciate the poem.

Despite the difference in the degree to which the two satirists employ the mode of the mock-heroic epic, in both cases the satires center around diminution and ridicule, which are most effectively expressed by the mock-epic style. The result is satire which serves its purpose either by simply exposing or by exposing and moralizing.

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16. George Wasserman, *John Dryden,* New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1964, p. 99.

17. Dyson, p. 1.

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