2003

Alexander Pope's opus magnum as Palladian monument

Cassandra C. Pauley

University of South Florida

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd

Part of the American Studies Commons

Scholar Commons Citation

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
ALEXANDER POPE’S OPUS MAGNUM AS PALLADIAN MONUMENT

by

CASSANDRA C. PAULEY

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Pat Rogers, Ph.D., Litt. D.
William Heim, Ph.D.
Laura Runge, Ph.D.
Sape Zylstra, Ph.D.

Date of Approval:
April 4, 2003

Keywords: Moral Essays, poetry,
eighteenth-century, architecture, reconciliation

© Copyright 2003, Cassandra C. Pauley
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures .......................................................................................... ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract ......................................................................................................... iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface ........................................................................................................... v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1 - Clearing the Site and Laying the Foundation .......................... 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2 - The Architectural Background ............................................. 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3 - Arcuated Articulation .......................................................... 48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4 - Best Intentions ...................................................................... 56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5 - Order from Confusion ......................................................... 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6 - Seesaw or Fulcrum? .............................................................. 79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7 - Strife and a Wife: To a Lady .............................................. 100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8 - A Proper Study: To Cobham ............................................... 135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 9 - Between the Ends: To Bathurst ........................................... 167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 10 - Building Bridges: To Burlington ....................................... 199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 11 - Carrying the Dome ............................................................. 235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited ................................................................................................. 244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About the Author ....................................................................................... End Page</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1 – Man in Proportion ..............................................................239
Figure 2 – Palladio and Pope in Four Books...........................................240
Figure 3 – Index to the “Ethic Epistles” (1734).................................241
Figure 4 – Arches in Elevation .............................................................242
Figure 5 – Pendentive to Dome...........................................................243
Alexander Pope’s Opus Magnum as Palladian Monument

Cassandra C. Pauley

ABSTRACT

The overarching goal of this study is to suggest that Alexander Pope did not abandon his project for a “system of ethics in the Horatian way,” but rather that in his final days he did find a way to unite the parts at hand into a viable whole. Constructing such an argument, however, requires a similar building up from the parts, and so the core focus becomes a study on the way the image of an arch can serve as a metaphor for Pope’s reconciliation scheme in his Moral Essays as he “steers betwixt” seeming opposites.

To justify this approach, I note the works of critics who have studied Pope’s use of the sister arts, the works of architectural theorists and historians, as well the works of critics who focus on various reconciliatory strategies. Perhaps more importantly, I look back to Pope’s correspondence and Joseph Spence’s record to establish not only Pope’s interest in architecture, but also his actual architectural endeavors.

From this foundation, I relate Pope’s intentions for his opus magnum and indicate the connections that can be drawn between the four epistles of Essay on Man and the four epistles that Pope selected to comprise the “death-bed” edition of his ethic work, namely To a Lady, To Cobham, To
Bathurst, and To Burlington. Finally, I examine Pope’s method of reconciling the extremes he presents by exemplum in the Moral Essays by comparing the personal and societal pressures that form the basis of Pope’s satire to the vertical and lateral thrusts that enable an arch to stand, even as they threaten its destruction should the forces become unbalanced.

From such an architectural perspective, one can trace Pope’s conception of man in his middle state as he makes the transition from the abstract plan established in Essay on Man, through the pendentive formed by the arches of the Moral Essays, and ultimately to the ideal state of existence that is represented by the dome. The final result can be conceived of as no less than a monument to Pope’s life and art.
Preface

As this study develops in a way similar to that of the epistles that make up Alexander Pope’s *Moral Essays*—that is, the argument develops incrementally over the first two-thirds of the work, is then confirmed with illustrations from the poems, and finally ends with what might be construed as a compliment to its dedicatee—it might be helpful to have an overview before proceeding. The core focus is on the image of an arch as a metaphor for Pope’s reconciliation scheme in his *Moral Essays* as he “steers betwixt” seeming opposites. However, from that fundamental structure a model can be developed that will unite parts into a whole. Specifically, by conceiving of these epistles as arches, or more specifically, as elevations of arches (in that they are illustrations of the plan Pope set out in his *Essay on Man*), one can see that Pope’s *opus magnum* was not a failed and forgotten project at all, but rather that Pope did achieve a reasonable completion of this effort. In fact, when seen through this architectural metaphor, Pope’s *opus magnum* can be seen as no less than a monument to his enduring legacy.

Please note, too, that in referencing sources, I have cited primary texts parenthetically, but have moved secondary sources and contextual notes to footnotes.
Chapter 1- Clearing the Site and Laying the Foundation

“Here I am, like Socrates, distributing my Morality among my friends, just as I am dying” the Rev. Joseph Spence records Pope as saying, as the poet sorted out presentation copies of his “Ethic Epistles” to give to his friends just weeks before his death (Correspondence, IV: 525). Pope was not just distributing his morality, nor even a new set of poems, however; he was actually trying to recover his life’s goal in his final days. He was trying to resurrect his opus magnum, a project he had seemingly abandoned a decade after it had begun.

While Pope was able to effect an approximation of this great work by pairing four epistles with his Essay on Man, some especially written for the occasion and others revised to fit it, critics have often discounted the finish of the “finished” product, if even conceding there was one. Perhaps some of the fault lies with Pope, himself, for having publicized his ever-changing grand scheme in various forms over a number of years, but I think a reading of the four epistles he did ultimately settle upon can put the success of his opus magnum in a new light.

Pope first mentioned his plan for “a system of ethics in the Horatian way” in a letter to Jonathan Swift dated November 28, 1729, partially in response to Lord Bolingbroke’s enthusiastic letter to Swift wherein he essentially leaked Pope’s plan. To Burlington was the first of the four epistles
published, and despite the fact that a revised edition of the poem proved to be integral to what would later be called the *Moral Essays*, it was initially planned to accompany one of Burlington’s editions of Palladio’s works.

While the number of epistles Pope planned for inclusion in Book II of his ethic work varied over the years, it is actually most fitting that Pope settled on four epistles to elaborate the four sections of *Essay on Man*. In fact, Pope’s repeated use of four sections in his works implies an understanding of four as representing completeness—wholeness—and the concept of the whole was an important one in Pope’s work. One of his most important revisions included adding a fourth book to *The Dunciad*, and his *Pastorals* quite naturally, but not incidentally, were written to correspond to the four seasons. Furthermore, while Pope described “three distinct tours in poetry; the design, the language, and the versification,” Spence comments that “he afterwards seemed to add a fourth, the expression; or manner of painting the humours, characters, and things that fall within your design.”

Pope further characterized his work in reference to the number four when he outlined for Spence a four-part development of his body of work, explaining:

> My works are now all well laid out. The first division of them, contains all that I wrote under twenty-six; which may be called my Juvenilia.—The second; my translations from different authors, under the same period.—The

third; my own works since.—And the fourth; my Translations and Imitations.²

In addition, Pope would undoubtedly have been aware of the numerological aspects of the number four, and a numerological significance might be instructive to the works under consideration here, as well, since four is the number of the builder, of construction, and of system and order. The number four is also said to symbolize the act of putting ideas into form, and this would accord well with a work that was conceived of a system of ethics meant to set man in order with the universe. The architectural overtones cannot be overlooked, either.

As Annemarie Schimmel and Franz Carl Endres note, Rome was called “Roma quadrata” because of its shape, and thus “the square became the symbol of [. . .] a civic center.”³ Moreover, Schimmel insists that “[f]our is inseparably connected with the first known order in the world, and thus points to the change from nature to civilization by arranging a confusing multiplicity of manifestations into fixed forms.”⁴ This, too, supports the contention that architecture is the defining feature of civilization, and Pythagoreans similarly ascribed meaning to the number four in spatial terms. As Schimmel notes, for Pythagoreans, four was the ideal number, and its connection to the material world was expressed by the fact that “the fourth

² Spence, 1964, 162.
⁴ Schimmel 86.
solid body, the cube, was regarded as belonging to the earth.”5 The square, too, was considered to be a perfect and self-contained geometrical figure, and thus the number four became associated with perfection.

Vincent Foster Hopper takes this idea of perfection one step further, writing: “Four might be said to represent the archetypal pattern for the macrocosm which the microcosm naturally reproduces.”6 Such a pattern is evident throughout Pope’s works, and so this, taken together with the fact that there are four cardinal virtues, might well lead one to argue that there can be no better number to represent Pope, his goals and his works.7 Likewise, one could argue that despite Pope’s intentions to write many more “ethic epistles” than he ultimately completed, the four that he did write and which he selected to include in the Moral Essays may have been less a function of compromise than a realization that they were all that were needed.

Interestingly, Leonardo da Vinci’s famous image of Vitruvian Man represents man’s proportions by way of both a circle and a square, but Renaissance occultist Cornelius Agrippa also produced images of man inside

5 Schimmel 90.
6 Vincent Foster Hopper, Medieval Number Symbolism (New York: Cooper Square, 1969) 31.
7 In Book I of The Dunciad, Pope notes the corruption of even these primary moral virtues by the Goddess of Dulness as the “Four guardian Virtues, round, support her Throne” (l. 44). Here Fortitude removes the fear that might result from criticism and want, Temperance rationalizes the privation of hack writers, Prudence simply warns of punishment and Justice balances truth with gold.
the square form as representative of perfect proportion [Figure 1]. In Agrippa’s drawings, the diagonal lines which divide the square intersect at man’s navel, and thus represent man as the center of the material world. Hence, the number four has numerological meanings that accord with nearly every aspect of Pope’s *opus magnum*, in that Pope’s work is concerned not only with man and his relation to the universe, himself, society and his material world in general, but also to proportion. In the chapters to come, we will see how a square becomes a cube and transitions into a dome as Pope’s monument rises from its plan and reaches for its highest goal.

Although my focus is on the pendentive structure that correlates to man’s middle state—the transitional structure that allows a circular dome to cover a square form—the plan still serves as the guide for its construction. Thus, we find an even more important aspect to the number four that is relevant here, and that deals with the correlation between Palladio’s *I quattro libri dell’architettura* and Pope’s *Essay on Man*.

Elise Knapp has written an interesting article focusing not only on Palladio’s influence on Pope, but how Pope’s *Essay on Man* mirrors many of the themes, and even the structure, of Palladio’s work. She writes:

Analysis of Palladio’s *I quattro libri dell’architettura*, or *Four Books of Architecture*, and Pope’s *Essay on Man* in their full social and intellectual contexts reveals their shared philosophical and moral assumptions. Full understanding of Palladio’s achievement and of Pope’s extended exposure to his ideas suggest that the *Four Books of Architecture* and *An Essay on Man* are historically and thematically linked. Further the comparison provides heightened awareness of Pope’s belief that the essence of art lies in design and perception.
of relationships that often transcend boundaries of genre.\textsuperscript{8}

This passage makes two interesting points. Not only can Pope and Palladio’s works be related to each other, but Pope’s sensitivity to the idea of sister arts in general can justify a reading of his works that would look for architectural allusions or even architectural intentions.

Knapp argues that F.W. Bateson, editor of the Twickenham Edition of Pope’s \textit{Epistles to Several Persons (Moral Essays)}, misses the integral relationships between morality, architecture and gardening that were common to Palladio and Pope when he writes that \textit{To Burlington} was “something of a hotch-potch, one third philosophy, one third gardening, and one third architectural compliment” (\textit{TE} III.ii, xxvi). In fact, I think Knapp might extend her argument to say that \textit{To Burlington} was one hundred percent morality, with architecture and gardening serving central illustrative roles.

“Pope read his Palladio well,” Knapp continues, asserting that his \textit{Essay on Man} is “essentially Palladian in aesthetic theory,” and in that way unites key elements such as “use of past knowledge and practice, concept of harmony, and moral purpose” to effect a work’s goal.\textsuperscript{9} Indeed in the “Design” which prefaced the 1734 edition of his \textit{Essay on Man}, Pope sets out just such an aesthetic and ethical purpose, endeavoring “to bring opposing


\textsuperscript{9} Knapp 73.
views of man’s nature together into a harmonious system,” and, says Knapp, an “[e]xamination of Palladio’s *Four Books.* reveals a purpose strikingly similar.” Palladio’s preface puts forth his moral purpose, as well, establishing his thesis that social progress is reflected in building, that utility is a key concern, that the ancients provided the best models, and ultimately, that the purpose of architecture was to effect man’s happiness on earth. As Knapp says, “Palladio’s subject, like Pope’s, is man” not buildings.¹⁰

Both Palladio’s and Pope’s text are organized hierarchically and progressively. A chart best illustrates the striking similarities between them [Figure 2]. While Palladio’s books progress from materials, to private houses, to public buildings and on to temples, Pope’s epistles progress from man’s part in the universal scheme, to man as an individual, then to man in society, and ultimately to man’s highest state of happiness.

According to Knapp, “Pope’s man, at his final level, is the equivalent of Palladio’s temple. Both works assume a harmonious, unified creation. Palladio builds with wood and stone, Pope with elements of the psyche.”¹¹ As a result, Knapp concludes, “Pope’s *Essay* grows into a splendid Palladian edifice reflecting the design of creation itself, with man at its center.”¹² Yet it only grows by way of the *Moral Essays.*

¹⁰ Knapp 73.
¹¹ Knapp 74.
¹² Knapp 75.
If we take a closer look at Pope’s “Design,” we will see that his aesthetic and ethic intentions were two-fold. The first and last paragraphs distinguish between these two aims:

Having proposed to write some pieces on Human Life and Manners, such as (to use my lord Bacon’s expression) *come home to Men’s Business and Bosoms*, I thought it more satisfactory to begin with considering Man in the abstract, his *Nature* and his *State*: since, to prove any moral duty, to enforce any moral precept, or to examine the perfection or imperfection of any creature whatsoever, it is necessary first to know what *condition* and *relation* it is placed in, and what is the proper *end* and *purpose* of its *being*. [. . .]

[. . .] What is now published, is only to be considered as a *general Map* of *Man*, marking out no more than the *greater parts*, their *extent*, their *limits*, and their *connection*, but leaving the particular to be more fully delineated in the charts which are to follow. Consequently, these Epistles in their progress (if I have health and leisure to make any progress) will be less dry, and more susceptible of poetical ornament. I am here only opening the *fountains*, and clearing the passage. To deduce the *rivers*, to flow them in their course, and to observe their effects, may be a task more agreeable. (*TE III.i: 7-8*)

Herein lies the crux of the first part of my study. While some critics, perhaps as a result of following Bateson’s wayward lead, suggest that Pope intended *To Cobham* to serve as the “scale map” for the remaining epistles that would make up Book II of Pope’s ethic system, this “Design” clearly indicates that it is the *Essay on Man* that serves as the plan of the works that will come later. The term “Design” is not used carelessly, either, as it also
mirrors the architectural significance of the word “plan.” Commonly called blueprints today, architectural plans provide a general two-dimensional schematic or an abstract overview of the arrangement of a building’s parts, and one might argue that much of the criticism of Pope’s *Essay on Man* that focuses on its relative abstraction might be mitigated if the poem is considered as merely a schematic for a larger, more illustrative work of which it is a part, namely Pope’s *opus magnum*.

Accordingly, I suggest that while the *Moral Essays* fail to complete Pope’s declared intentions for his *opus magnum*, they nevertheless present adequate elaborations—for my purposes, elevations—of the four epistles of the *Essay on Man* which serves as the plan. Just as architectural elevations record the artistic details of a building, the epistles that make up Pope’s *Moral Essays* illustrate with concrete detail the abstractions first laid out in the *Essay on Man*, and taken together, these two works can be seen to create a sort of Palladian edifice, as Knapp suggests, or they can at least offer a perspective rendering of Pope’s *opus magnum*. Consequently, the first key to raising this structure from the plan Pope presents in *Essay on Man* entails a discussion of how each elevation is created.

Considering that each epistle of the *Moral Essays* deals with the reconciliation of seeming contraries, I thought it would be helpful to find an image that would adequately reflect Pope’s proposed reconciliation strategy, and I found the image of an arch to be most apt. Furthermore, if one conceives of these epistles as elevations of arches, or as arches themselves, Pope’s *opus magnum* begins to take on a shape that unites parts into a
whole. Indeed, such a reading supports a contention that the *opus magnum*—as comprised of the *Essay on Man* and the *Moral Essays* together—was not only completed, but that it can serve as a graphic representation of Pope’s ultimate goal, namely, a legacy of moral poetry that will lead man to his highest happiness. Thus, my goal is to describe how the image of an arch aids in understanding the epistles that make up the *Moral Essays*, how the epistles of the *Moral Essays* relate to the epistles of the *Essay on Man*, and ultimately how the two works, functioning together, can be “read” as an architectural model that serves as a fitting monument to Pope’s life and work.

One must note that the epistles under consideration here have quite a complicated composition, publishing, grouping and even naming history. Miriam Leranbaum covers the topic in depth in a book-length treatment of Pope’s grand scheme, but Pat Rogers and Julian Ferraro also provide excellent histories. Bateson devotes pages to the topic, as well. Not only are Pope’s epistles grouped differently in differently named editions, but their ordering in these various editions has come under some criticism. One must consider the value of Pope’s specified ordering—*To Cobham, To a Lady, To* 

Bathurst and To Burlington—as it might represent more accurately the way in which he wished to present his opus magnum, but Pat Rogers and Frederic Bogel have both argued convincingly for ordering the epistles in accordance with their composition dates rather than their publishing dates, or even by the order in which Pope supposedly organized them. They say that reading To Burlington first, followed by To Bathurst, then To Cobham and finally To a Lady will allow the reader to get a better grasp of Pope’s development over the course of his later career, to make connections between the events that make up the topic satire of the works, etc.14 Still other critics have made convincing arguments about why To Burlington makes for the most suitable ending, even if others suggest it might make for the most skewed one, considering the increasing pessimism of Pope’s later writings.

Nevertheless, those critics who do accept Pope’s ordering never seem to question the placement of To Cobham first, followed by To a Lady, and so the third component of my study is to argue in favor of a whole new order: reading them in reverse order of how they were composed, or in the sequence of To a Lady, To Cobham, To Bathurst and To Burlington. Reading in this way, with To a Lady first, not only better elucidates Pope’s plan, but also prevents a misreading of both To Cobham and To a Lady that often results when they are read in their “traditional” order, just as reading the epistles without reference to the Essay on Man, particularly To Cobham, can result in misreading.

To see how Pope’s opus magnum takes shape, however, we must first lay a foundation that establishes Pope’s interest in architecture.
Chapter 2 - The Architectural Background

While Pope has been called the “public relations officer” and even the “evangelist” of the Palladian movement, Morris Brownell disclaims any suggestion that Pope was limited to a strictly Palladian outlook. In much the same way as Pope maintained a political ambiguity that has provided much fodder for critics, he kept his architectural options open, too. Broadly speaking, the Whigs were associated with promoting Palladianism and the Tories aligned with one of their own, James Gibbs, and his more refined Baroque style, but Pope appreciated the architecture of both schools and studiously avoided the confusion that resulted from the merger between architecture and politics in his time.

Indeed, the diversity of his taste is evident throughout his letters where he writes appreciatively of Elizabethan houses, Gothic ruins and the like. Two long letters are especially illustrative of Pope’s sensitivity to such matters. The first is an undated letter of 1718 addressed to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu detailing Pope’s stay at Stanton Harcourt, where he completed much of the work on his Homer translations. The other, dated June 22, 1724, is addressed to Martha Blount, wherein Pope describes his

stay at Sherborne. Both record minute architectural details and the overall impressions those details evoke, and while many visitors to stately homes recorded their reactions to the gardens, art and architecture they experienced during their stays, few could match the intimacy of the recollections Pope provides in these letters.

Of Stanton Harcourt, Pope writes:

You must expect nothing regular in my description of a House that seems to be built before Rules were in fashion. The whole is so disjointed, & the parts so detachd from each other, and yet so joining again one can’t tell how; [. . .] A Stranger would be grievously disappointed who should ever think to get into this house the right way. One would expect, after entering thro the Porch, to be let into the Hall: Alas nothing less—you find yourself in a Brewhouse. From the Parlor you think to step into the Drawing room, but upon opening the iron-nail’d door, you are convinced by a flight of birds about your ears & a cloud of dust in your eyes, that tis the Pigeon-house. [. . .] Our best Room above [. . .] has Hangings of the finest work in the world, those I mean by which Arachne spins out of her own bowels. Indeed the roof is so decayd, that after a favourable Shower of rain we may (with God’s blessing) expect a crop of Mushromes between the chinks of the floors.

Pope further explains:

[W]hat ingagd me in the description was a generous principle to preserve the memory of a thing that must itself soon fall to ruin [. . .] Indeed I owe this old house the same sort of gratitude that we do to an old friend, that harbors us in his declining condition, nay even in his last extremities. I have found this an excellent place for Retirement and Study [. . .] You will not wonder I have translated a great deal of Homer in this Retreat; Any one that sees it will own, I could not have chosen a fitter or more likely place to converse with the Dead. (Correspondence, I: 506-7)
While Malcolm Kelsall compares this old house to Old Cotta’s meager manor house in *To Bathurst*, age alone will not result in a shambles, as Sherborne shows. While a description of the grounds occupy the bulk of this later letter, Pope also makes an interesting comparison between Sherborne and other great houses—and most notably, the way these buildings reflect the value of their owners. Pope writes:

> When I have been describing this agreeable Seat, I cannot make the reflection I’ve often done upon contemplating the beautiful Villa’s of Other Noblemen, rais’d upon the Spoils of plundered nations, or aggrandiz’d by the wealth of the Publick. I cannot ask myself the question, ‘What Else has this man to be lik’d? What else has he cultivated or improv’d? What good, or what desireable thing appears of him, without these walls?’

(*Correspondence, II: 237*)

Pope’s “polite tourism” was limited by his physical condition, and perhaps this fact made the homes of friends more comfortable for him, but it must be said that he was fortunate in that his friends had some of the finest estates in England. Each of the dedicatees of the epistles in the *Moral Essays* extended their homes to Pope, from the Blount’s Mapledurham and Burlington’s Chiswick to Cobham’s Stowe and Bathurst’s Cirencester. All were readily accessible to him, and Pope’s activities there extended from visiting to taking a hand in their ongoing elaborations.\(^\text{16}\) As further testament to his interest in a variety of architectural styles, Pope is even said to have had a hand in designing “Alfred’s Hall,” the sham ruins at

---

Cirencester. In any event, as Brownell exclaims, Pope “is by no means the whitewasher of Burlington’s gate pictured in [Hogarth’s] satiric engraving, ‘Taste.’”

One might even look to Pope’s architectural interests as a mirror to the debate of whether he was an artist first and a moralist second, or vice versa, but despite his appreciation of art of all styles, Pope’s primary interest in the Palladian movement derives from his belief that the most important aspect of architecture is its connection to virtue. As Brownell explains, for Pope, the primary value of architecture is as “an index of the moral character of the builders, the architect, or the entire nation; and his judgments of builders, buildings, and architects depend as much on ethical as aesthetic principles.”

Accordingly, Paul Fussell suggests that Pope was not alone in considering architecture as an index to morality. As he writes:

The humanist mind responds with more excitement to the constructions of man than to the creations of nature. Presented with a tree or a shrub, it tends to lose interest quickly, but presented with a work of architecture, it experiences something which begins in curiosity and often ends in moral ecstasy.

---

17 See Peter Martin, Pursing Innocent Pleasures: The Gardening World of Alexander Pope (Hamden: Archon, 1984). Here Martin discusses Bathurst’s work at Cirencester and Pope’s collaboration in his plans. He also notes Bathurst’s frustration with Pope, who “instead of admiring (as he ought to do) what is already executed” was instead “every day drawing me a plan for some new building other, and then is violently angry that is not set up the next morning” (89).

18 Brownell, 1977, 294.

19 Brownell, 1977, 294.

Despite his contemptuous tone, Fussell does have it right when he goes on to say that for many people in the eighteenth-century “architectural imagery is closely allied with moral ideas.” He further explains that during this time, anyone who was anyone, or anyone who even knew anyone who was anyone, simply had to be conversant with architectural topics. Not only were architectural treatises hot properties for publishers, but building was booming, too.

Taking the lead from surveying books aimed primarily at builders that had proliferated in the seventeenth century, architectural publishing in the eighteenth century saw a plethora of works produced, many of which aimed at creating a coherent theory of architecture. Colen Campbell, with his *Vitruvius Britannicus* in 1715, was the first British architect to publish a work on architecture that was distinct from building. Prior to that, theory was supplied primarily by Italian architects or interpretations of European translations of Italian architects. Campbell's work was followed closely by Leoni's *Palladio* which appeared in 1716, and by 1719 Burlington was on board, commissioning even more works, including a new, more accurate edition of Palladio’s *I quattro libri* by Isaac Ware, and following that with a folio collection of Inigo Jones' works by William Kent. Rudolf Wittkower notes that this last project attracted no fewer than 400 subscriptions, which he

---

21 Fussell 172.
ascribes to its topical interest. One might compare the figure to Pope’s subscription list of 575 for his *Iliad*, which was no less impressive than was Pope’s campaign to attract names.

Other important works include Robert Morris’ *Defense of Ancient Architecture*, published between 1728 and 1751, which affirmed the purity of the neo-Palladian style, and James Gibbs’ *Book of Architecture*, first published in 1728 and then again in 1739, which offered a less dogmatic look at classical standards in British architecture and served essentially as a pattern-book. Sir Henry Wotton’s *Elements of Architecture*, first published in 1654, was still widely read, as well. In fact, Spence records Pope’s comments on Wotton’s three main principles by which one should not only build, but also by which to judge a building—Firmeness, Commoditie and Delight (i.e., that a building should stand up, should suit its purpose and should please the people it serves). For Pope, Wotton’s rules served to delineate the simple connection between art and nature, offering “a sketch or analysis of the first principles of each art with their consequences” wherein each art, like the rules of architecture, “would be reducible to three or four heads.” This was necessary, Pope says, because “[a]rts are taken from nature; and after a thousand vain efforts for improvements, are best when they return to their first simplicity.”

---


23 Spence, 1964, 40.
The interest in theory was matched by an appetite for practical application, too, and while the profession of architecture was just beginning in the eighteenth century, the age was marked by the image of the gentleman architect. Even those who lacked the interest or the means to build for themselves could hardly have failed to notice the resultant transformations on their environment. Pope was influenced no less by the latter than the former, and he records his reactions to the works of these newly-professional architects throughout his letters. Interestingly, the most notable monument of the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire of 1666—London’s Column—served as a negative image for Pope, but he put it to good use in *To Bathurst* where it plays a small, though integral, role.

As for building projects, themselves, Fussell provides a breathless recounting of the architectural activity in London during the eighteenth-century, and in doing so, he makes a key point:

> On all sides eighteenth-century London was being torn up and built anew: here and there stone and brick were still being installed to cover the scars left by the Great Fire of 1666, and all London seemed to be a-building. During the early part of the century the last of Wren’s churches were being finished. The great town houses like Somerset House, Burlington House, Montagu House, and Buckingham House [. . .] were going up and, what is more important, were being avidly inspected, discussed, and criticized. Mansion House was erected, Newgate Prison rebuilt. The Bank of England was being built just down the street from Johnson’s house, and St. Paul’s was

---

24 Spence’s record reveals that Pope even tried his hand at an architectural treatise, explaining: “I once got deep into Graevius, and was taken greatly with it: so far as to write a treatise in latin, collected from the writers in Graevius, on the Old Buildings in Rome” (Spence, 1964, 132).
finally finished in 1710. New squares were laid out, streets were widened, and the London bridges were built or rebuilt: the rebuilding of Westminster Bridge was finished in 1747 [. . .] The newly prosperous middle classes were hastening to erect houses all over London, it seemed, and with a uniformity encouraged by the London Building Acts of 1707 and 1708. During all this activity, Rome never diminished as a focus of architectural interest and imitation.25

Rome was never forgotten, and perhaps this is why the contentious term “the Augustan Age” still manages to stick. Furthermore, Philip Ayres contends that such a discourse was justified by its “success in anchoring the principle of political liberty deep within the nation’s culture and, by way of the plastic arts, in giving civic values visible form,” despite its flaws.26 Ayres also suggests that the tendency to recall images of ancient Rome in the buildings of the period expresses the self-validating identification of this class with antique civic values, something reflected repeatedly in Pope’s Shaftesburian view of the function of a national architecture, already evident in *Windsor Forest* (1713) and still strong in 1731 when, in the *Epistle to Burlington* he evoked what he hoped would be Burlington’s national destiny.27

This eighteenth-century cult of architecture even spawned its own cabal (of sorts), with the creation of the first Grand Lodge of Freemasonry in 1717. Fussell describes British Freemasonry as “a sort of genteel and Deistic parody of the actual guilds of actual masons” and finds in its architectural

25 Fussell 17.
symbolism the projection of a “very orthodox emphasis on self-mastery, restraint, and order.” Fussell even suggests that its Solomonic inspiration is “suggestive of an alliance between images of architecture and ideas of orthodox ethics” and thus “that it was the conservative but not the rigorously pietistic element in the early eighteenth century that decided to invent Freemasonry.” Pope was one of these first Masons, and he also wrote two of the three “notable” eighteenth-century poems that Fussell claims “reveal an obsession with architecture,” namely the *Temple of Fame* and *To Burlington*. Curiously, a line of reasoning that Fussell does not develop is the central Masonic proposition that God is the architect of the universe; hence the Masonic symbol of the letter “G” framed by a square and compass. Simon Varey alludes to this when he writes that “God is not just a creator, but specifically an architect, a designer of universal harmony,” and “that architecture—the art of designing wholes—is a divine activity.” This contention necessarily posits the idea of an ordered universe and suggests that man can be both creative and constructive within his limited range, as well.

Furthermore, Fussell holds that “the general conservative sensibility tends to express its moral and artistic ideas through motifs of architecture,”

---

28 Fussell 174.
29 Fussell 174.
30 Fussell 174.
and he notes that many writers of the period thought architecture was reflective of human dignity. These ideas combine in Pope, Fussell claims, and lead him to an association between architecture and redemption. To illustrate, Fussell points to the *Essay on Man*, where he claims at the “very polemic center,” Pope invokes an architectural image to assure the reader that heaven will allow man to turn his vice into virtue. As Pope writes:

That Virtue’s ends from Vanity’s can raise,
Which seeks no int’rest, no reward but praise;
And build on wants, and on defects of mind,
The joy, the peace, the glory of Mankind.
(Epistle II, ll. 245-8)

Although it seems to me that the words “raise” and “build” do not account for Pope’s strongest architectural imagery, they do have architectural connotations even if they are not specifically framed in that context here. The word “raise” is also important in the *Moral Essays*, even if, again, its meaning is not always directly architectural. In *To Bathurst*, as Wallace Jackson notes, not only do Bathurst and Oxford "raise the sinking heart" (l. 244), but the Man of Ross teaches the "heav’n directed spire to rise" (l. 261). According to Jackson, such use equates this verb with nothing less than "the action of benevolence within the world." The extended implication is that this action is necessarily a constructive one.

Fussell’s argument gets much more interesting, though, when he discusses the metaphorical capacities of the dome, writing:

32 Fussell 174-5.
Of all architectural ideas, the dome most perfectly embodies the tension and paradoxical union of vertical and lateral stresses: each seems entirely reconciled to the other; each is so harmonized by the other that, if the dome is perfect, it creates the illusion that stress and weight have been wholly vanquished, and that stone, by some magical reconciliation of contraries, has been transformed into gas or gossamer, that is, that nature has been transmuted into art.\(^{34}\)

The dome is the ideal and ultimate reconciliation of all opposing forces, a form that seems to defy gravity as it lifts our eyes heaven-ward and protects us through its grace. Consequently, the image of the dome is often thought to carry special significance, as Brownell writes: "According to humanist theory, domes like St. Peter’s or the Pantheon in Rome, and St. Paul’s in London revealed ‘the secret power of Proportion’, ‘a visible echo of a celestial and universally valid harmony.’"\(^{35}\) Moreover, because the dome “often occupies a dominant central place over a square edifice,” Max F. Schulz concludes that the dome is yet “another analogue to the human figure, this one accentuating the glorious ascendancy of the head, as indicative of man’s intellectual grasp of religious faith and of his assumption, erect and alive, of the central place in the scheme of things.”\(^{36}\) For Fussell, the image of the dome suggests that “the human body, a work of literature and a work of architecture [. . .] are all ‘constructed’ in the same dualistic way. ‘Boldness’

\(^{34}\) Fussell 180-81.
\(^{35}\) Brownell 1977, 289.
and ‘regularity,’ two opposing forces, must be brought into a harmonious tension in each.”

We will explore in more detail how this dualism functions in Pope’s works later, but Fussell offers a useful introduction to that discussion when he goes on to say that while “Pope calls these two antithetical forces, the forces of danger and safety, by many different names [. . .] a fruitful opposition between them seems to be his ambition everywhere.” These fruitful oppositions are the key to most of Pope’s poetry. For an example, Fussell points to the dualistic forces at play in *Essay on Criticism* as being analogous to Wit, which propels, and Judgment which restrains. As Pope writes, “For *Wit* and *Judgment* often are at strife, / Tho’ meant each other’s Aid, like *Man* and *Wife*” (ll. 82-3). In the *Essay on Man* these forces are Passion and Reason, or Self-Love and Social Love, says Fussell, and when Pope “talks about architecture in the *Essay on Man*, ‘boldness’ and ‘regularity’ are synonymous with the vertical downward force and the lateral, outward force.” Fussell even hazards a guess that the figure of the dome in the *Essay on Criticism* is an important moment in Pope’s whole attempt to persuade his readers that they depart dangerously from their humanity if they assume that some one exclusive human quality contains the redemptive secret. For Pope, tension, the result of the interplay and opposition of all man’s separate personal forces, is redemption. It is in

37 Fussell 181.
38 Fussell 181.
this sense of ‘stresses and strains’ that man is like a work of architecture.\textsuperscript{39}

Suggesting that man is like a building, however, does not mean that he is easy to read, as Pope emphasizes in \textit{To Cobham} when he writes: “In vain th’ observer eyes the builder’s toil, / But quite mistakes the scaffold for the pile” (ll. 220-21). This is even more apparent in \textit{To a Lady} where the affected character—the scaffolding—completely obscures anything that might lie beneath. Consequently, one must find a way to accommodate these “stresses and strains,” to find a method of reconciliation that will lead to a redemptive balance. Thus, after tracing the idea of counterpoise in such aspects of eighteenth century culture as Newtonian astronomy and the idea of checks and balances in government, Fussell finds an architectural metaphor that reflects Pope’s ultimate aim, concluding that all these ideas are “in essence an imaginative conception like Pope’s sense of the architectural dome.”\textsuperscript{40}

Fussell also draws a correlation between architectural imagery and Locke’s theory of knowledge, as it concerns “the role of rethought, arrangement, will, and order in the self-construction of the human imagination.”\textsuperscript{41} Certainly the quest for knowledge dominates each of the epistles that make up the \textit{Moral Essays}, and it even serves as a unifying theme for the \textit{Moral Essays} as a whole. Moreover, as the quest requires the

\textsuperscript{39} Fussell 182.
\textsuperscript{40} Fussell 182.
\textsuperscript{41} Fussell 189.
will to reconcile extremes, Pope is able to engage the constructive device of satire as he presents a metaphor for planning and raising a moral man as part of a moral society.

Fussell further argues that this idea of construction, rather than creation, is a key to eighteenth century art, especially poetry. M.H. Abrams describes this constructive process as a “rhetorical and Horatian concept of art,” that is, an art characterized by “purposeful procedure, in which the end is foreseen from the beginning, part is fitted to part, and the whole is adapted to the anticipated effect upon the reader.” Pope, himself, had argued that “[m]ost little poems should be written by a plan,” and so Fussell analogizes this process, writing:

As a house is constructed according to plan by the accumulation and interrelationship of pre-existent solid, objective materials, so is a poem; and similarly, as a house will not fall or change its nature radically as a result of alterations, neither will a poem necessarily suffer from carefully contrived revisions. The concept of unpremeditated art has as little place in poems as in architecture: collapse will be the most likely eventuality.

This seems an apt description of Pope’s procedure, especially as it concerns revision, and a Lego building block analogy—which harkens back to the module of the Orders as well as Palladio’s modular plans—is reinforced again by Swift, when he writes: “There is a sort of masonry in poetry, wherein the

43 Fussell 190-91.
pause represents the joints of building: which ought in every line and course to have their disposition varied."

While Pope avoids the sort of poetic engineering that drove the Romantics to distraction, he shares a sensitivity to the analogy between architecture and literature that extends at least as far back as Quintillian, and which was put to good use by Jonson, Dryden and Addison, among others. Pope, too, extends his use of architectural metaphors to literary criticism. For example, he compares Shakespeare’s work to Gothic architecture, suggesting that it might not be as neat, finished or regular as a modern building, but in its way was more elegant. Also, in Chapter IV of *Peri Bathous*, Pope concedes that there must be an “Art of Sinking in Poetry” because “Is there not an Architecture of Vaults and Cellars, as well as of lofty Domes and Pyramids?” Such generalized use of architectural ideas was common, and William Trumbull, writing to Pope in a letter dated April 9, 1708 even confesses his incompetence as a critic of poetry with an architectural analogy. He writes:

> There may possibly be some happy genius’s, who may judge of some of the natural beauties of a Poem, as a man may of the proportions of a building, without having read *Vitruvius*, or knowing any thing of the rules of architecture: but this, tho’ it may sometimes be in the right, must be subject to many mistakes, and is certainly but a superficial knowledge: without entering into the art, the methods, and the particular excellencies of the whole composure, in all the parts of it. (*Correspondence*, I: 45)

Brownell explains the context of Trumbull’s letter this way:

> The eighteenth-century man of taste, like Pope or Trumbull, believed that Vitruvius’s book contained the secrets of Roman architecture. Here could be found the
explanation of the orders, the rules of proportion illustrated by the famous drawing of Vitruvian Man in the third book, the ideals of beauty and utility, and the idea that the rules of architecture are accessible to all educated men.  

Brownell further notes that Vitruvius—the architect to Julius Caesar and Augustus during the expansive building of the Roman Empire and the author of *de Architectura*, which is arguably the first comprehensive treatise on architecture—was brought to the attention of eighteenth-century England by way of Palladio and Inigo Jones. Both Pope and Burlington had sculptures of these two among their possessions: statues of Jones and Palladio marked the entrance to Burlington’s Chiswick House (serving in the unusual capacity of “house porters” according to Richard Hewlings), and busts of these architects in Pope’s library complemented the poet’s collection of portraits of his friends and family. 

The familiar reverence for these figures derives from the sense that they shared similar goals. For Vitruvius, Palladio and Jones, as well as for Pope and Burlington, architecture represented nothing less than civilization itself, and good government required good building. As Rudolf Wittkower writes of Palladio:

> We are probably not wrong in concluding that for him the practice of good architecture was a moral obligation and, more than this [. . .] he regarded architecture as an

---

44 Brownell, 1977, 286.
important discipline of the arts and sciences the union of which embodied the ideal of *virtus*.\(^{46}\)

A similar conception of virtue is evident in *To Burlington* where Pope’s attack is not so much on Timon’s failure to adhere to Palladian rules, but rather on the lack of morality such poor building reflects. By way of his villa, Timon is revealed to be not just ridiculous, but immoral, as well. So when Palladio looks back to Vitruvius as his model, and when Jones looks back to Palladio, they are not merely affirming the connection between art and science that is born out in architecture—the idea that architecture was the original art and science rolled into one—nor simply that architecture was the rule by which civilization could be measured, but all that and more.

For Howard Erskine-Hill, when Palladio looks back to Vitruvius, he also reinforces his own era’s idea of the Renaissance man, that well-rounded person well-versed in all the arts and disciplines. Perhaps more importantly, Palladio’s praise of Vitruvius asserts the importance of public buildings in the life of a country. As Erskine-Hill explains, under Vitruvius, “the original art had now become the supreme art, expressing for present and future the majesty of the empire and the grandeur of Roman history.”\(^{47}\) In short, architecture expresses more than the creativity of the designer or the usefulness of the building; it expresses the political order of a time.


Erskine-Hill extends the arguments made by both Maynard Mack and Fussell when he explores what he calls the “interaction between the metaphor of building and the activity of building” as it held true not just for ancient and Renaissance thinkers, but also for Pope. Considering the architectural analog as “formative of poetic structure,” Erskine-Hill identifies this analog in Pope’s works long before To Burlington.\textsuperscript{48} Even as early as 1711, in An Essay on Criticism, Pope “wishes to affirm that the power of art arises not from correctness or beauty of parts but from [. . .] ‘the joint Force and full Result of all,’” Erskine-Hill writes.\textsuperscript{49} To illustrate, Pope uses both the human face and an image of architecture:

\begin{quote}
In Wit, as Nature, what affects our Hearts,  
Is not th’ exactness of peculiar Parts;  
‘Tis not a Lip or Eye, we Beauty call,  
But the joint Force, and full Result of all.  
Thus when we view some well-proportioned Dome,  
(The World’s just Wonder, and ev’n thine O Rome!)  
No single parts unequally surprize;  
All comes united to the admiring Eyes’  
No monstrous Height, or Breadth, or Length appear;  
The Whole at once is Bold, and Regular. (ll. 247-52)
\end{quote}

Pope here not only recognizes the beauty of proportion in a face and in a dome, but in juxtaposing the two, he points to the tradition of human proportion in architecture that Vitruvius was to make famous with his Vitruvian Man and which Palladio and Henry Wotton, among others, were to carry forward into later centuries. In addition, the striking similarities between Palladio’s conception of the interrelation between parts and wholes

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{48} Erskine-Hill, 1979, 144.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Erskine-Hill, 1979, 148.
\end{itemize}
and Pope’s own life-long attention to the matter, as it appeared throughout his works and as it concerned his body of work, are hardly coincidental. Palladio put it this way in his *I quattro libri dell’architettura*:

> Beauty will derive from a graceful shape and the relationship of the whole to the parts, and of the parts among themselves and to the whole, because building must appear to be like complete and well-defined bodies, of which one member matches another and all the members are necessary for what is required.  

Following Vitruvius, Brownell notes that “Palladio based his rules of proportion on [. . .] a module such as the diameter of a column—each part of a building can be metrically related to every other part, and all the parts to the whole. It is an organic ideal of architecture, based on a mathematical definition of beauty.” This mathematical idea and its harmony of parts derives from the Pythagorean idea of musical harmonic proportion. As Mack notes, this same sort of theory of cosmic harmony formed a large part of Pope’s foundation for the *Essay on Man*. Accordingly, Erskine-Hill considers the importance of musical harmony in Pope’s *Temple of Fame*, as well as the poem’s architectural form; he also contrasts the ways in which architectural ruin, as evident in Pope’s *To Addison*, can be countered by renewal in *Windsor Forest*. As Pope writes in *To Addison*:

> The levell’d Towns with Weeds lie cover’d o’er.
> The hollow Winds thro naked Temples roar:
> Round broken Columns clasping Ivy twin’d;
> O’er Heaps of Ruin stalk’d the stately Hind;

---


51 Brownell, 1977, 287.
The Fox obscene to gaping Tombs retires,  
And savage Howling fill the sacred Quires. (ll. 66-72)

Yet despite the desolation described there, with a proper monarch civilization 
can reign again. Thus, in *Windsor Forest* Pope writes:

    Behold! Augusta’s glitt’ring Spires increase,  
    And Temples rise, the beauteous Works of Peace,  
    I see, I see where two fair Cities bend  
    Their ample Bow, a new *White-Hall* ascend! (ll. 377-80)

So architectural metaphors are important in much of Pope’s work, including 
the *Moral Essays*, but they are not inordinately prevalent. Actually, Pope’s 
use of images from the sister arts of painting and gardening are more 
pervasive, and they have appropriately received more critical attention than 
his interest in building. However, like his interest in gardening, Pope’s 
interest in architecture transcends its poetic utility.

:::

After dismissing Brownell’s study as both conjectural and cursory, 
Anthony Beckles Willson laments that his own study of Pope’s residency at 
Twickenham uncovered scant reliable information on the architecture of 
Pope’s villa. He writes:

    [L]iterary and social appraisals of Pope’s life deal only 
    superficially with the genesis or architecture of the house.  
    No really systematic reconstruction of the Villa or the
earlier building assumed to have formed its core seems to have been attempted.\textsuperscript{52}

Yet despite little critical attention to Pope’s architectural endeavors, Erskine-Hill asserts that Pope was “a real participant” in the post-Inigo Jones revival of English Palladianism, and when he was not busy sketching designs for his own improvements to his house at Twickenham, he was advising friends on theirs. This interest in architecture seemed to be most pervasive during the period in which Pope was translating Homer. Brownell indicates a note to line 67 of Book XV of Pope’s \textit{Iliad} as evidence of Pope’s familiarity with architectural plans, as Pope writes: “The Pleasure in this case is like that of an Architect’s first view of some magnificent Building, who was before well acquainted with the Proportions of it.”\textsuperscript{53} This correlates with the idea of the \textit{Essay on Man} as an architectural plan and explains why this poem and those that make up the \textit{Moral Essays} might only be fully appreciated in comparison with each other.

Two rough sketches of Palladian houses are also included with the Homer manuscripts at the British Library, possibly suggesting that architectural pursuits served as a diversion while Pope was engaged in this difficult task. While Willson remains skeptical that these drawings are of Pope’s villa, citing their position in the manuscript and the fact that the handwriting is not entirely consistent with Pope’s, Peter Martin finds one of

\textsuperscript{52} Anthony Beckles Willson, \textit{Mr. Pope & Others at Cross Deep, Twickenham in the 18th Century} (Twickenham: Anthony Beckles Willson [privately published], 1996) 68-9.

\textsuperscript{53} Brownell, 1977, 284.
the sketches similar enough to Pope’s riverfront façade to assume that the other could be a sketch for the roadside façade, for which there are no extant illustrations.\textsuperscript{54} However, Martin essentially dismisses Pope’s architectural pursuits as “tinkering,” although in doing so, he also concedes a significant point. As he writes:

We must, however, take seriously Pope’s calling himself an architect. He was, as he told Caryll in March, spending a lot of time with masons as well as gardeners, and he took pride in his knowledge of Palladianism with which he could direct what the masons were doing. At one point he complained to Caryll of the “litter” being made by the workmen, “with whom my presence,” he said, “is but too necessary.”\textsuperscript{55}

These letters to John Caryll, the first dated March 3, 1720 (Correspondence, II: 37) and the second dated September 19, 1720 (Correspondence, II: 53) bracket another letter to Robert Digby dated July 20, 1720 wherein Pope makes a clear reference to his studying the work of Burlington’s muse. In concluding the letter, Pope writes: “I now leave you, and return (Wretch that I am!) to Watergruel and Palladio” (Correspondence, II: 50).

In fact, most of what can be traced regarding Pope’s architectural activities derives from the record of his correspondence. For example, in a letter to Charles Jervas dated December 12, 1718, Pope writes:

\begin{quote}

\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{54} It seems especially odd that there are no illustrations of the roadside façade in light of Brownell’s cataloging of the numerous depictions of what he describes as possibly “the most frequently portrayed private house in England” (134). See Morris Brownell, “The Iconography of Pope’s Villa: Images of Poetic Fame,” \textit{The Enduring Legacy: Alexander Pope Tercentenary Essays} (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988).

\textsuperscript{55} Martin, 1984, 42.
I must own, when you talk of Building and Planting, you touch my String; [ . . . ] Alas Sir, do you know whom you talk to? One that had been a Poet, was degraded to a Translator, and at last thro’ meer dulness is turn’d into an Architect. You know Martial’s Censure—Praeonom facito, vel Architectum. However I have one way left, to plan, to elevate, and to surprize (As Bays says.) The next you may expect to hear, is that I am in Debt.

(Correspondence, II: 23)

This letter comes not long after Pope has taken up residence at Twickenham, and it alludes to a jocular warning from Bathurst some months earlier (a warning Mack contends convinced Pope to move to Twickenham rather than to build in town) wherein Bathurst writes that “the noise of saws and hammers [. . .] is apt to melt money” and that “Neither Aristotle nor Descartes can find a method to hinder the noise from having that effect” (Correspondence, I: 488). Such sounds surrounded Pope for quite some time, however, as his immersion in home improvement was only then getting underway. He continues his letter to Jervas:

The History of my Transplantation and Settlement which you desire, would require a volume, were I to enumerate the many projects, difficulties, vicissitudes, and various fates attending that important part of my Life: Much more should I describe the many Draughts, Elevations, Profiles, Perspectives, &tc. of every Palace and Garden propos’d, intended, and happily raised, by the strength of that Faculty wherein all great Genius’s excel, Imagination. (Correspondence, II: 24)

Pope makes a brief note on suburban life before he offers his opinion on the most important aspect of a home, its hospitality. As he writes:

At last, the Gods and Fate have fix’d me on the borders of the Thames, in the Districts of Richmond and Twickenham. It is here I have passed an entire Year of my life, without any fix’d abode in London, or more than casting a transitory glance [. . .] on the pomps of the
Town. It is here I hope to receive you [. . .]. For you my Structures rise; for you my Colonades extend their Wings; for you my Groves aspire [. . .]. And to say truth, I hope Posterity [. . .] will look upon it as one of the principal Motives of my Architecture, that it was a Mansion prepar’d to receive you, against your own should fall to dust [. . .]. (Correspondence, II: 24)

Thus, Pope moves from poet, to translator, to architect and gardener, and finally to what he would probably have felt was the ultimate human role, to host.

Pope was not always well-balanced when it came to his improvements, however, as he wrote to Burlington in March of 1733:

The Zeal of my Portico has eaten me up, so that I cannot be from home to day; I sent yesterday & missed of you. I cannot proceed in my Stucco-ing, till I see your Lordship & have your directions about the Upper Cornish of my house, & the Moldings & members of the Entablature. I therefore beg you to throw away one hour upon me at Twitn’am as soon as is not inconvenient. I need not say how impudent your Kindness has long made me, you see I think it extends to ye Smallest Trifles.
(Correspondence, III: 356)

The work on the portico extended for some time, too. Although Sherburn notes unspecified improvements to the villa that took up much of Pope’s time in 1720, it is not until March of 1720 that Sherburn suggests the portico was perhaps underway. The first specific mention of the portico comes in a letter to Digby dated May 1, 1720 where Pope writes:

My Building rises high enough to attract the eye and curiosity of the Passenger from the River, where, upon beholding a Mixture of Beauty and Ruin, he enquires what House is falling, or what Church is rising? So little taste have our common Tritons of Vitruvius: whatever delight the true, unseen, poetical Gods of the River may take, in reflecting on their Streams my Tuscan porticos, or Ionic Pilasters. (Correspondence, II: 44)
Yet the work drags on as letters to Burlington suggest. Pope is anxious to have Burlington’s approval of the final design, and writes in a letter dated September 19, 1732:

My Portico is in hand, [. . .] but I will not proceed till I have your Lordship’s Sanction of it. The Basement, if continued no further on the Sides than the Pillars, would be too thin & want a flight of Steps to spread it: which would spoil a Design I have, to make that Basement include a Cold Bath & a fall of Water. Your opinion of this, as it stands, with relation to its connection to the rest of the Front, will greatly oblige me.

*(Correspondence, III: 314)*

Although Burlington’s response arrives in October of 1732 with the curt reply “I have considered your front, and am of opinion that my friend Kent has done all that can be, considering the place” *(Correspondence, III: 322)*, by November 6, Pope’s missive to him had become:

I am very impatient to be building my Portico, but Mr Kent admonishes me to defer ye Brickwork & Plaistering till Spring, which I grieve to comply with.

*(Correspondence, III: 329)*

Grievously or not, Pope seems to have complied, and early in 1733, he sent Burlington the last bill for stone in accordance with, as Pope reminds him,

the Commands you layd upon me, that there should be nothing Durable in my building which I was not to owe to Chiswick. I am sure there will be nothing in it Beautiful besides, nor (I believe) in this nation, but what is owed to the Lord of Chiswick. – We now stand still for Materials—“

*(Correspondence, III: 341)*

This surely seemed like yet another annoyance, and meanwhile the zeal was so consuming that Pope felt the need to apologize for his inattentiveness to Caryll, as he wrote to him on March 8: “You would excuse
my delay in answering yours if you knew how I have been employed. I’m now building a portico, in which I hope you will sit like Nestor on a stone at the gate, and converse delightfully with us, one of these days” (Correspondence, III: 353).

Not until more than a year later, in a letter dated April, 19, 1734, does Pope write to Caryll: “My last employment has been to stucco over the rest of my palace, which you may now more truly style Little Whitehall than when last you saw it” (Correspondence, III: 406). Even as late as April 13, 1736, Pope writes to William Fortescue: “I cannot leave this place at this Important Time, when Every Hour of my being here gives it a new Improvement” (Correspondence, IV: 10). It must have been some sort of zeal, indeed, that could carry Pope through roughly fifteen years of nearly non-stop improvements!56 Yet the reason he directed so much attention to this ordeal might be found in a letter to Ralph Allen dated October 10, 1738, as Pope writes: “I can pray for no greater blessing for a friend, than that he may Love his own Home” (Correspondence, IV: 134).

Pope’s ideas for architectural endeavors extended beyond the bounds of his own property and to the projects of his friends, as well. He offered his services as a draftsman to Caryll regarding a design for a staircase, as he writes in a letter dated February 28, 1734:

56 Willson speculates that Pope and his mother actually lived in a set of cottages on adjacent land during the period of initial construction, which would make the process somewhat less inconvenient.
Your staircase, I think as you do, must be *in claro oscur*o with pillars and niches only painted. In order to which, if you’ll send me a drawing of the feet and inches of each side with the outline and shape of the wall to be filled up I will make you a draught. *(Correspondence, III: 402)*

This followed a letter to Fortescue dated September 2, 1731, wherein Pope might wish he had had a draft to work with. As he writes:

> I partake in the contentment you now taste in your domestick Employments. As to your Building, I heartily wish you had sent me a plan of it, in which I might possibly be of more Service to you than by barely sending you the Proportions you desire. It is not easy to answer your question of the Doors & Windows, the Dimension of them being to b[e] suited to the Size & Height of the Room, which you do not tell me. But in general both Doors & Windows should be a double Square, & the Solid of the Walls between window & window rather more than the Opening: no harm in exceeding in the Solids to near twice the dimension of the windows. If the Window be large (above 3 foot broad) the Doors need to be no larger; but if the Windows be less, make the door rather above 3 feet wide: the height just double to whatever be the width. . . . *(Correspondence, III: 225)*

Pope was able to provide a general rule in this case, if not a measured plan or elevation, but in the same letter he did include a nice little diagram of proper pruning, urging Fortescue to “cut thus / not thus | much less thus \” when managing his hedges *(Correspondence, III: 224)*.

As for Pope’s own garden, a multitude has been said, and similar attention has been paid to his grotto, but perhaps a bit more could be said about the house. Erskine-Hill notes the importance of Pope’s portico and the Tuscan columns he used, although he does not elaborate on the choice but just comments that the Tuscan is even more rustic than the Doric. He also notes the attention to symmetry and even goes so far as to compare the
wings of Pope’s Colonnades to the epistle form. This seems a bit of a stretch even to me, but Pope’s Palladian revisions to his house at Twickenham are telling. His use of the Tuscan columns for the portico might have been a result of economy if nothing else, but the fact that Pope added a portico was important. In classical architecture, porticos only appeared on temples, but Palladio turned porticoes into status symbols, and perhaps that fact offers one explanation for why Pope seemed to agonize about getting Burlington’s approval of his plans before moving forward with that project. If the portico was to reflect Pope’s status, it had to be just right.

As for the essential features of a villa, we can look to John Summerson who describes the neo-Palladian model as such:

The English type is square or nearly square in plan, with a symmetrical arrangement of rooms on both axes. The front and back facades are divided into three, the central part having a portico (pilasterwise or in the round), the side parts one window each. The window-rhythm one-three-one is essential to the type. A house of this type has all the formality of a greater house but the window-rhythm renders it totally opposed to the idea of long ranges of intercommunicating rooms. Its accommodation is necessarily modest and its character therefore more in the nature of a retreat than an advertisement of its owner’s standing or ability to entertain.57

That said, it is obvious how far from this ideal Timon’s Villa ranges, but Pope’s own villa matches the description very well. An article in the Newcastle General Magazine of January 1748 outlines the following features:

Over the Front Entrance into this Grotto lies a balustraded Platform and serves the Building both as a Vestibule and

Portico; for a Balcony projecting from the middle Window of the second Story, and supported by Pillars resting upon the Platform, makes so much of it resemble a Portico; but the platform extending without these Pillars, becomes more a Vestibule: Add to this, the Window opening into the Balcony being crowned with a Pediment, give the several Parts and Air of one Figure, or whole, and adds an inexpressible Grace to the front.\textsuperscript{58}

Although this description was written more than three years after Pope’s death, I think he would have appreciated the author’s attention to the way the parts served the whole.

Offering a few more details, Mack describes Pope’s villa and its Palladian elements as

a dwelling of three storeys and some ten or twelve rooms, whose plan and ornamentation recall in a general way the classicism of Inigo Jones, Palladio, and the north Italian villa. It consisted of a central block, with slightly recessed and lowered wings, the north wing fitted with bow windows framed in Ionic pilasters, the center block rising from grotto-entrance in the basement storey to a balustraded platform at the level of the \textit{piano nobile}, then rising again to a balustraded balcony supported on Tuscan pillars at the chamber-level, and so to a highly decorated cornice topped by a hipped roof.\textsuperscript{59}

Mack also notes that the \textit{piano terreno} at Pope’s villa appropriately housed the kitchen, pantries, etc., whereas in \textit{To Burlington}, the corresponding section of Timon’s villa most inappropriately contains the study. Furthermore, Mack contends that these original alterations were made concurrently with Pope’s study of Palladio, indicating that Pope was not only\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{59} Mack, 1969, 16.
aware of Palladio’s “insistence on architectural responsibility,” but was
determined to match it.  

Brownell offers still more detail on Pope’s Palladian renovations, but in
doing so he ignores the possible contributions made by Colen Campbell to
the overall design. Campbell, the Whig who spearheaded the Palladian
revival with his publication of *Vitruvius Britannicus* in 1715, was originally
commissioned to design a house for Pope to be built on one of Burlington’s
sites in the city. When Pope elected to move to Twickenham instead, he
employed the Catholic and Tory Gibbs, Campbell’s rival, to help him with the
construction. Nevertheless, Brownell ultimately remarks on the fact that the
house presented the “essential features of the Anglo-Palladian villa—the
threefold division of the facade, the one-three-one rhythm of the windows,
and the portico” and comments on the rustication of the basement storey
and the quoins which were “characteristic of the exuberance of Gibbs’ style
which offended strict Palladians.”

On this point, however, Brownell
contends that Pope had gotten the approval of both Burlington and Kent as
to the design—and by extension, he had gotten approval for those deviations
from pure Palladianism.

Interestingly, the prized portico also deviated significantly from the
Palladian aesthetic. Willson’s description is most unflattering, as he writes:
“As a composition it is fussy, over embellished and out of scale.” Worse yet,
the portico could not serve as an entry to the house, and according to

---

60 Mack, 1969, 32.
Willson, this is "perhaps, a reflection of the contradictions in Pope’s character, that for all his need to impress the world with his portico, entrance to his house had now to be through the Grotto." Yet in Kelsall’s view, this riverfront entrance was less contradictory than symbolic, and was perhaps even more symbolic than the portico-without-approach in that it offered the opportunity to bypass the house entirely and move directly into the garden which was visible beyond. By also considering Pope’s never executed plans for a landing along the river, Kelsall concludes that the function of the river front was to make a “programmatic statement” (and one that would require a “history of European culture to elaborate”); if one wanted to gain entrance to the house, he could simply use the “practical” (if never depicted) front door on the roadway side. This conflict between the assumed practicality of the roadway side and the emblematic quality of the riverfront façade continues to reflect a sort of contradiction, but Mack is able to resolve it in a most Popean way when he characterizes Pope’s “Twitn’am” as

not quite a Roman villa, though it had a temple of sorts, and a vineyard, and after his mother’s death in 1733, a small obelisk in her memory; not quite the model in miniature of a great peer’s estate, though by his example at Twickenham as well as by his influence with noble friends, Pope exercised a liberalizing influence on English landscaping. It was something betwixt and between.

62 Willson 82.
Certainly the small scale of the house matched Pope's own physical proportions, and I contend that the Tuscan columns on the portico were intended not only to recall the work of the Romans, but also to “put up a front” of a strong, masculine owner when, in fact, the Ionic pilasters on the north elevation were more appropriate for Pope, at least as Serlio analogizes them, being slightly feminized, but also representing a man of learning.65

Apart from the house’s physical properties, Pope never lost sight of its true purpose. While valuing solitude at times, Pope valued friendship even more, and when the house was ready to receive guests in 1721, Pope extended an invitation to George Berkeley to “make trial how you like my Tusculum because I can assure you it is no less yours, & hope you’ll use it as your own Country Villa” (Correspondence, II: 63). Some five years later, in a letter dated August 9, 1726, Pope writes to Hugh Bethel:

I never am unmindful of those I think so well of as your self; their number is not so great as to confound one’s memory. Nor ought you to decline writing to me, upon an imagination that I am much employ’d by other people For tho’ my house is like the house of a Patriarch of old, standing by the highway side and receiving all travellers, nevertheless I seldom go to bed without the reflection, that one’s chief business is to be really at home. (Correspondence, III: 386)

65 John Summerson, The Classical Language of Architecture (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980). Here Summerson catalogs the analogies made about columns and intercolumniation by a variety of architects, including Vitruvius, Scamozzi and Serlio, noting that “Serlio’s recommendations are perhaps the most specific and consistent” (12-3).
As for country villas, John Paul Russo notes that “Horace removed to the Sabine farm out of choice; Pope lived in Twickenham because of the ten-mile rule.”

Although anti-papist laws did prohibit Catholics from owning property, the laws were not always so strictly enforced and Pope at one point considered purchasing the land at Twickenham. Even so, in a letter dated September 21, 1736, Pope wrote to Fortescue:

It gives me pleasure to reflect that you are now at your own Home, and in a Condition of Life which may encourage you to beautify and improve that which may be the Receptacle of your Age, & the End of all your Labors. You can cast a Glympse at Posterity, in your Daughter, & please yourself in the thought of Childrens Children enjoying it: I see nothing but Mrs Vernon, or [a] Sugar-baker, to succeed to my Plantations. However, they will have abundantly recompensed my Care, if they serve to receive amuse, & shelter a few such friends as you [. . .]” (Correspondence, IV: 34).

Pope expressed a similar sentiment to Allen a few weeks later in a letter dated November 6, 1736. Considering the fate of his plantings, Pope writes:

They will indeed out-live me (if they do not die in their Travels from place to place, for my Garden like my Life, seems to me every Year to want Correction & require alteration, I hope at least, for the better.) But I am pleased to think my Trees will afford Shade & Fruit to Others, when I shall want them no more. And it is no sort of grief to me, that those others will not be Things of my own poor Body, but is enough they are Creatures of the same Species, and made by the same hand that made me. (Correspondence, IV: 40).

The lack of a landed legacy did not preclude an adherence to the country-house ethos, however, as Virginia C. Kenny explains:

In the eighteenth century the concept imaginatively affirmed in the country-house poems remained, but it had become a talisman or touchstone by which to order perceptions of man and the world. The use of the image of the estate in metaphor and simile and its analogical application to the ‘whole Oeconomy of the World’ maintained a tension in thought about the nature of society. The image was based on a view of customary society which was fed on nostalgia for a seemingly changeless past.  

Arguing further that art had the ability to codify and thereby ameliorate many of the feelings of uncertainty in the eighteenth century, Kenny writes that the “country-house ethos, as a familiar idealisation of the mores of civil society based on classical precedent, provided such a code,” and that “the house itself was a convenient metonym for structures of order and right use set up to counter the dread of undifferentiated plentitude.”  

Pope did not need to own a great country house to make use of the rich imagery it provided, and while Kelsall cites Pope’s Twickenham as “one among numerous houses of the time to achieve something of a mythic role” (along with Cobham’s Stowe), he adds that  

> Pope’s villa at Twickenham is only a symbolic country house. His few acres of garden are only the sign of an estate; his box-like dwelling the suburban retreat of a man of letters, no house of ‘ancient reverence.’

Still, Kenny finds that Pope “was the consummate example of the literature of the thirties and forties because he lived his role; he removed himself

---

68 Kenny 204.
69 Kelsall 59.
physically from the world and created an Horatian persona from the details of his circumstances.” She further notes that while Pope made a living from pleasing his public, he dedicated his work to politicians and this, from a poet who prided himself on his independence, is practical confirmation that Pope believed in the value of the poet’s role as ethical legislator to society and advisor to men of power or influence.\textsuperscript{70}

This last is no small point. In every aspect of his work, whether architectural or poetic, Pope sought to exert both a creative and a constructive influence on his environment.

That said, there is still something more important that hovers over all else, as the conclusion to the earlier cited letter to Digby makes clear. Having gone on about the wonders of suburbia, his garden, the wonderful weather and the stir his building was causing with the neighbors, Pope writes:

\textbf{The Moment I am writing this, I am surprized with the account of the Death of a Friend of mine; which makes all I have here been talking of a meer Jest! Buildings, Gardens, Writings, Pleasures, Works, of whatever stuff Man can raise! none of them (God knows) capable of advantaging a Creature that is mortal, or of satisfying a Soul that is Immortal!} (\textit{Correspondence}, III: 43)

Building and planting, even poetry, are but the diversions—however high, however virtuous—of man in his middle state.

\textsuperscript{70} Kenny 142.
Chapter 3 - 

Arcuated Articulation

The arch is not only quintessentially Roman—Augustan even—but it also represents Pope’s poetry well. It is graceful, it can span great distances, and it can even be said to serve a social function, in that it was initially used by the Romans to support a social order. Although first employed in social building projects such as aqueducts and bridges, as the Roman Empire expanded and the architecture developed, the triumphal arch became an important marker, too. These monumental arches not only celebrated military conquests, but also symbolically assisted returning soldiers’ reintegration to society by functioning as a sort of *lavacrum*. Thus, in light of the strong social overtones associated with the arch, it makes an ideal metaphor for studying Pope’s works.

We will see how the arch poses a useful image in clarifying Pope’s reconciliation strategy in another chapter, but for now we need to explore how the arch functions. Leland Roth provides an easy to follow description of trabeated and arcuated systems, detailing how they work, as well as their strengths and weaknesses.\(^7\) The first thing that must be noted when talking about arcuated systems is their superior function. Because an arch is made of up of smaller stones packed together, the necessity of finding a single

---

lintel that is both long and strong enough to span the distance between posts in the trabeated system is eliminated. Moreover, the arch can span a much greater distance than can any stone lintel because the vertical (gravitational) forces generated by the wall above the arch are distributed over the arch and converted in the smaller stones—the voussoirs—into lateral diagonal thrusts, with each individual voussoir handling the compressive forces.

The arch is not perfect, however. The lateral forces are significant in this structure, and the problem increases in direct proportion to the vertical force the arch bears. For this reason, the base of the arch must be restrained, either against bedrock or by a thick wall or buttress.

Furthermore, an arch that carries no relieving story will collapse of its own weight. A uniform load spread over the arch, such as a wall, or even a stiffened roadway, relieves the force at the apex or crown. So while the keystone is the element that ultimately forms the arch, it is also its weakest part, as it is the most vulnerable to the vertical forces that bear down upon it. Yet by relieving the force at the keystone, the lateral forces are increased. These are more easily handled, however, and Roth goes on to explain that the lateral forces of arches placed end to end cancel each other out, allowing the interior of adjacent arches to be placed on narrow piers or even columns. Long arcades can be built for this reason, but there must be at each end a thick wall, bedrock or some other form of abutment to receive those “free” lateral forces.

This suggests that the benefit of the arch is primarily structural, and the relative lack of commentary on its use suggests a utilitarian function. Nevertheless, when Romans moved from primarily trabeated to primarily
arcuated forms, they did not leave the Orders behind. Although the arches provided most of the structural support, the five orders still provided the poetry. As Summerson insists, “the orders were architecture,” yet by adding the arch, the Romans “raised the architectural language to a new level. They invented ways of using the orders not merely as ornamental enrichments for their new types of structure but as controls.”  

Without the orders, the arch might be likened to nothing more than “a hole in the wall,” or so William P.P. Longfellow claims. Far from being nothing, however, the arch is an elevation, and as Longfellow goes on to describe it: “Arcuated architecture is then the architecture of surface and mass, as trabeated architecture is that of lines and angles.” From this mass, the arch derives a part of its stability, but Longfellow makes another contention about the arch that needs clarification.

He describes the keystone as “perhaps the best detail contributed by the Roman builders” and finds it “of great aesthetic importance in binding the arch and the order together at the most critical point,” yet Longfellow concludes by arguing that the keystone “has no structural value whatever beyond any other stone in the arch” despite the fact that “all the honor due to the arch has been heaped upon it in language and literature.”

Longfellow overstates the relative unimportance of the keystone a bit,

72 Summerson, 1980, 14.
74 Longfellow 47.
however, because without that final stone, the arch cannot be completed. It is true that the arch’s stability relies on the integrity of the voussoirs that make up the middle third of the arc, but without the key that locks them into place, they would all come tumbling down if the centering (the structural framework used during the construction process) was removed. Once the keystone is placed, however, the arch stands by virtue of the tensile and compressive forces that wedge the voussoirs into close contact with each other.

G.T. Rivoira describes it this way: "The arch and the vault, of which the Romans were so fond, have a thrust; and equilibrium is produced by the counter-thrust." So these opposing forces of tension or compression must be in balance, and as James F. O’Gorman writes, “If one or the other dominates, the building will tear itself apart.” If balance is maintained, however, such a structural system “produces materials at rest that shape useable space.” Such a system can be compared to the societal stability Pope seeks, and the idea of tensile and compressive forces can be seen throughout his poetry, as well, as people are pulled and pushed by other people and by situations in which they find themselves. Pope’s contention is that they must find a way to resist the extremes of these forces and thereby find a balance that will facilitate constructive living.

Perhaps the simplicity of its structure explains why so little has been
written about the arch. In his *Ten Books on Architecture*, Vitruvius wrote
only the following:

[W]hen there are arches composed of voussoirs with
joints radiating to the center, the outermost piers at
these points must be made broader than the others, so
that they may have the strength to resist when the
wedges, under the pressure of the load of the walls, begin
to press along their joints towards the center, and thus to
thrust out the abutments. Hence, if the piers at the ends
are of large dimensions, they will hold the voussoirs
together, and make such works durable.77

Leon Battista Alberti, in his own ten books, writes simply:

I shall mention here a remarkable technique that I have
noticed employed by the ancients, and that deserves
particular praise: the best architects constructed the
openings and vaulted arches of their temples so that even
when all the interior columns had been removed, the
arches of the openings and the vaults of the roof would
still remain and not collapse. All the arches bearing the
weight had been drawn down to the ground with such
admirable and uncommon skill that that the work
remained standing supported by the arches alone. Is it
any wonder that these arches, with the solid earth for
their tie, should be so solid themselves, and stand on
their own for ever?78

77 Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture* Trans. Morris Hicky Morgan (New York:
Dover, 1960) 190.
Alberti offers only a bit more as he speculates on the genesis of the arch.

While he begins with the simple declaration that “an Arch is nothing but a Beam bent,” he finds that he needs to elaborate on what he calls the “Nature of an Arch” as it is formed by its constituent parts:79

I Suppose then, that Men learnt at first to turn Arches from this: They saw that two Beams set with their Heads one against the other, and their Feet set wide, would, if fastened at Top, stand, very firm, by means of the Equalness of their Weight: They were pleased with this Invention, and began to make their Roofs in the same Manner,“ yet in the absence of beams long enough to span the desired space, they “put between the Heads of these two Beams another crossways at the Top [. . .] a Wedge; and as this succeeded very well, they multiplied the Wedges, and thus make a Kind of Arch, whose Figure mightily delighted them. Then transferring the same Method to their Works of Stone, continuing to multiply the Wedges, they made an entire Arch, which must be allowed to be nothing else but a Conjunction of a Number of Wedges, whereof some standing with their Heads below the Arch, are called the Foot of the Arch, those in the Middle above, the Key of the Arch [. . .].

[T]hat the Arch is the strongest of all, appears not only from Experience, but Reason; for I do not see how it can possibly disunite of itself, unless one Wedge shoves out another, which they are so far from doing, that they assist and support one another. And indeed, if they were to go about any such Violence, they would be prevented by the very Nature of Ponderosity, by which they are pressed downwards, either by some Superstructure, or by that which is in the Wedges themselves. This makes Varro say, that in Arches, the Work on the right Hand is kept up no less by that on the Left, than the Work on the Left is by that on the Right.80

80 Alberti, 1965, 57.
In short, Alberti concludes of the arch: “it supports itself by its own Strength.” Yet one cannot overlook the importance of the “ponderosity” of society in Pope’s work, either.

In the case of Pope’s poetry, his extremes function as abutments, and in the epistles under consideration here, the vertical forces can be seen to correspond with external forces upon the characters depicted. Likewise, lateral forces can be seen to represent the internal conflicts these characters must reconcile, conflicts both resulting from and worsened by the external forces in play [Figure 4]. For example, in *To a Lady*, societal expectations put a strain on women; these women in turn must find a way to reconcile the consequences of such expectations, namely, they must resolve competing desires to seek either pleasure or power from their subjugated circumstance and this results in the dichotomy between affectation (represented by costume) and a true, stable character (represented by nakedness).

The symbolic keystones in these poems are the dedicatees. They represent what can be accomplished when all the forces are properly handled. They make the arch complete, yet these characters are often idealized. They represent the goal for which we are to strive, but as we have seen, the stability of the arch resides in the middle third of the arc. It is this middle third that corresponds to the idea of the middle way, and the idea is the same whether its called the “Horatian mean,” the “golden mean,” or the “via media,” all of which are terms used repeatedly in Popean criticism. Yet

---

81 Alberti, 1965, 57.
while the keystone represents the centermost point of this way, the yellow line down the center of the via media if you will, Pope’s scheme affords a wide shoulder, and so the conception of the middle third takes on even greater significance.

Importantly, in consideration of Pope’s social goals, the voussoirs in many ways can be seen as representative of the individuals who make up society, which is represented by the arch itself. As each voussoir handles the forces that bear upon it, they are all forced into close alignment with their neighbors, relying on the others for support as each provides the other a certain stability. This stability is threatened, however, when any one force overpowers the other, so the inconstancy and inconsistency of each individual that makes up the larger body must be adequately reconciled.
Chapter 4 - Best Intentions

Regarding Miriam Leranbaum’s book on Pope’s *opus magnum*, Claude Rawson writes:

[H]er lucid and methodical study of the *opus magnum* which Pope did not write, but which occupied his thoughts in the last fifteen years of his life, makes it possible to enquire into them in a more informed way than before. The poems Pope did not write claim our attention more than those which Blackmore did. The fact that a book has been written about them will doubtless seem to some a further absurd triumph of what James Reeves attacks [. . .] as Pope’s self-publicising enterprise.  

Indeed, most critics consider Pope’s *opus magnum* to be unfinished at best, and a total failure at worst. Some critics even go so far as to suggest that of course the plan was a failure: it was beyond Pope’s scope. Mack, surprisingly enough, is one of those critics, suggesting that Pope is more an *ad hoc* writer than a systematic one, and asserting that Pope’s temperament was more suited to the “flux, variety and disorderliness of experience” than to *opus magnum* making.  

Yet Mack is not alone in thinking Pope unsuited for such a project. Robert K. Root says that “[o]ne need not regret that Pope never brought to


83 Mack, 1969, 204.
completion his grandiose plan of the *opus magnum,*” because a “comprehensive ethical system such as this would have demanded a more orderly and better disciplined mind than that of Pope. But we can be very glad indeed that we have the poetic badinage of the *Moral Essays,* and the graver poetry for the first epistle of the *Essay on Man*” which Root thinks provides proof enough that “didactic poetry is not a contradiction in terms.”

Well thank goodness for backhanded compliments. Still, the strain of criticism that suggests that Pope was incapable of pulling off such a project runs deep.

For instance, Leslie Stephen writes that Pope was an “agglutinative writer, and composed by sticking together independent fragments. His mode of composition was natural to a mind incapable of sustained and continuous thought” and this, says Stephen, renders his *opus magnum* an impossible task. Yet Stephen does not seem to think Pope capable of much more than the moralizing couplet anyway, which, he says, is “unpleasantly obvious” in the *Moral Essays.* To that add John Paul Russo’s criticism, where he not only asserts that “[s]ystem was antipathetic” to Pope’s “mercurial temperament” but also that Pope’s claim that he desired to write a “system

_____________________

86 Stephen 190.
of ethics in the Horatian way” was “a Popean paradox in itself” because “Horace is among the least systematic of moral or didactic poets.”

Maybe it is true that Pope lacked the temperament (a term preferable to capacity, I think) to effect such a grand plan, and maybe Horace was not systematic (although Pope’s epistles are most assuredly Horatian in tone), but Swift had more faith in his friend’s plan, writing: “I heard you intended four or five Poems addressed to as many friends; and can easily believe they would together make a System with connexion, and a good moral for the conduct of life” (Correspondence, III: 362).

Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, Pope’s veritable compulsion for revision might offer the sort of “retrospective eye” that would make such a task possible despite an ill-suited temperament. Furthermore, one could easily argue that no career was as well-planned as Pope’s up until the very end, when Spence even records him as saying, “I must make a perfect edition of my works; and then shall have nothing to do but to die.” Combining this retrospective vision with the eye Pope kept trained on posterity, it should not seem too far fetched to suggest that Pope’s revisions, reorderings and recuperations were all intended to integrate seemingly disparate parts into a comprehensive whole.

This perfectionism even extended to his correspondence, which Pope went so far as to recall and revise when he decided to publish it—despite the fact that he had claimed the value in correspondence was its spontaneity. In

---

87 Russo 200.
88 Spence, 1964, 177.
letter after letter Pope described his epistolary method as “talking on paper” and being “in dishabille” with his friends, even as offering a “window to the bosom”—and if it proved him a fool it proved him the best sort of fool, an honest one. This redacted and revised approach to candor seems to me to be more representative of a “Popean paradox” than Russo’s charge, but it fully accords with Pope’s desire to leave behind him a body of work that would adequately represent him for posterity. As Bonamy Dobrée writes: Pope’s letters “would be characteristic of his mind [. . .]. After all what the world ought to have was a portrait—that is to say a work of art.”

I suggest that if Pope’s correspondence serves as a work of art—as a portrait in Dobrée’s terms—his opus magnum can likewise be seen to serve as an architectural monument. That said, we can look to the correspondence, as well as Spence’s record, and trace the development of Pope’s idea for his opus magnum.

The first mention comes in a letter dated November 19, 1729 from Bolingbroke to Swift, who explains that he has urged Pope to speak to Swift about his new project, which Pope then describes in his own letter as “a system of Ethics in the Horatian way” (Correspondence, III: 71). Spence

follows up with entries in May and November of 1730 that suggest Pope was still hard at work:

The first epistle is to be to the whole work what a scale is to a book of maps, and in this, I reckon, lies my greatest difficulty—not only in settling and ranging the parts of it aright, but in making them agreeable enough to be read with pleasure.

This was said in May 1730, of what he then used to call his “Moral Epistles,” and what he afterwards called his *Essay on Man*. He at that time intended to have included in one epistle what he afterward addressed to Lord Bolingbroke in four.  

In another entry from that first week in May 1730, however, Spence notes parenthetically that Pope was “speaking coldly of his moral work, and had been pressed to go on with it, on account of the good it might do to mankind” even though he had just commented, “Perhaps we flatter ourselves when we think we can do much good. ‘Tis mighty well if we can just amuse and keep out of harm’s way.” Nevertheless, by November of 1730, Spence notes that Pope was making progress, writing:

Mr. Pope’s poem grows on his hands. The first four or five epistles will be on the general principles, or the of “The Nature of Man,” and the rest will be on moderation, or “The Use of Things.” In the latter part, each class may take up three epistles: one, for instance, against avarice, another against prodigality, and the third on the moderate use of riches; and so of the rest.

These two lines contain the main design that runs through the whole:

*Laugh where we must, be candid where we can;
But vindicate the ways of God to Man.*

---

90 Spence, 1964, 42.
91 Spence, 1964, 57.
Leranbaum remarks that other entries in Spence’s *Anecdotes* during this period also link the *Essay on Man* with the *Moral Essays* as part of a “single moral scheme.” More specifically, a memo from Spence dated the first week in May 1730 indicates a somewhat settled idea about what would be included in the greater plan:

Mr. Pope How wrong ye Greatest men have been in judging of the Cause of Human Actions. Instance fro Machiavel, of concluding in ye general fro particulars (wr Beseigd Forces ought to sally or not?) Instance fro—of judging of a particular fro ye General: (a person fights too soon: bec: he is of a Vindicative temper.) Montaingne hence concludes Pyrrhonicly, That nothing can be known of the Workings of men’s minds: I Essay, lib. 2? (The best in his whole book. There? ye Instance of Tiberius’ growing an open man all at once. That Openness really ye highest piece of Dissimulation.)—New Hypothesis, That a prevailing passion in ye mind is brought with it into ye world, and continues till death (illustrated, by ye Seeds of ye Illness yet is at last to destroy us, being planted in ye body at our births). We should not speak against one large Vice, without speaking against its contrary.—As to your General Design of Providence your two Extremes of a Vice, serve like two opposite biasses to keep up ye Ballance of things. Avarice, lays up (what would be hurtful;) Prodigality, scatters abroad (what may be useful in other hands:) The middle ye point for Virtue: Mr. P has very large (prose) collections on ye Happiness of Contentment. Prodigality (in his piece) flings away all in wrong tastes. (Tis there in particular yet some of ye Gardening Poem will be of Service.) (Lord Bolingbroke has sent Mr. P a long letter on these heads; & has by him what would make 6 or 7 sheets in print toward a Second; & does not know how far it may grow; Mr. Sav:)

The first Epistle? is to be to ye Whole work, what a Scale is to a book of Maps: in this lies ye greatest difficulty: not only in settling all ye parts, but in making them agreeable

---

92 Leranbaum 10.
enough to be read with pleasure. Sr Balaam: The man of Ross: the Standing jest of Heaven, and Sure ye Gods & We are of a mind. The Man possesd of Debts & Taxes clear, Children & Wife—Five hundred pound a year (Publ: Buildings Alms Houses, Walks, Road;) the man of Ross divides ye weekly bread: Public Table twice a week for Strangers &c.—Will give what we desire; Fire, Meat, & Drink—What more? Meat, Drink, & fire. No judging of a piece fro ye Scatter’d parts: ye 3 dots & Hieroglyphic: (not as to ye Great Beauty: but we may see particular beauties in ye parts? That’s very true.)

This neither confirms nor denies Leranbaum’s suggestion that the four essays as written were not necessarily to plan, in that the sections on the Man of Ross and Sir Balaam might actually have started as independent poems and were only later incorporated into To Bathurst, but by August 2, 1731, Bolingbroke had written to Swift that Pope had finished the first three epistles of Essay on Man that would make up the first book of the larger project, that he was intent upon the fourth, and that he was settled as to the plan of the second book.

From 1729 to 1735, Leranbaum writes, “Pope’s plans for the opus magnum shifted and changed, displaying greater or less clarity, broader or narrower scope” but despite the fluidity of the project as a whole each epistle was in large part conceived, written, revised, and eventually printed with others (some never written) in mind. The final, that is the 1735, two-book plan represents a shrunken and somewhat misleading version of Pope’s plans and ambitions.94

94 Leranbaum 37.
That Pope considered the *Essay on Man* and the *Moral Essays* as a collection to be read together is clear from a letter he wrote to Swift dated February 16, 1733:

> [M]y works will in one respect be like the works of Nature, much more to be liked and understood when consider’d in the relation they bear with each other, than when ignorantly look’d upon one by one; and often, those parts which attract most at first sight, will appear to be not the most, but the least considerable.

(*Correspondence, III: 48*)

Four years later, in another letter to Swift dated March 25, 1736, Pope was still hashing out the larger view of his plan, and his perfectionism was showing, as he writes:

> If ever I write more Epistles in Verse, one of them shall be address’d to you. I have long concerted it, and begun it, but I would make what bears your name as finished as my last work ought to be, that is to say, more finished than any of the rest.

As for the plan’s contents, Pope explains that the “subject is large” and as such, will be divided into “four Epistles, which naturally follow the Essay on Man,” and that the satire is to be “exemplify’d by pictures, characters, and examples.” So while the larger *opus magnum* is still in Pope’s mind, the plan he sets out to Swift in this letter could be considered already completed by the four epistles that make up the *Moral Essays*. They correspond not only in number and content, but in style and intention, as well. Moreover, as this letter also finds Pope expounding on the intricacy of his task, one can see that a sense of completion is already becoming evident. Pope writes that his understanding is...
extended rather than diminish’d: I see things more in the whole, more consistent, and more clearly deduced from, and related to, each other. But what I gain on the side of philosophy, I lose on the side of poetry: the flowers are gone. (Correspondence, IV: 5)

While many critics have concurred with Pope’s opinion expressed in this last line, especially as it concerns Essay on Man, one would be hard-pressed to consider any of Pope’s works artless. Nevertheless, the direction of his later poetry does take a philosophical turn, and as Leranbaum contends, “if one had to date the moment when, according to Pope’s self-portrait in Epistle to Arbuthnot, he ‘stoop’d to Truth and moralized his song,’ either November 1729, when he first mentioned the project, or December 1731 when To Burlington was first published, as “a good choice.”95 Geoffrey Tillotson, however, suggests that Pope had always been a “moral” poet, and maintains that when Pope “stoop’d to Truth” he only “stooped to more of it,” and for that matter, he never “wandered far from Fancy’s maze” either.96 However, Tillotson agrees that 1729 marked a turning point in Pope’s work.

On the topic of such a transformation, Pope wrote to Swift in a letter dated April 20, 1733:

I have not the courage [...] to be such a satirist as you [...] but I would be as much, or more, a philosopher. You call your satires, libels: I would rather call my satires, epistles. They will consist more of morality than of wit, and grow graver, which you will call duller. I shall leave it to my antagonists to be witty, if they can, and content

95 Leranbaum 1.
Yet far from finding Pope’s new direction boring, Swift seemed genuinely moved by the depth of his friend’s morality—with one qualification—as he comments: “I have pretence to quarrel with you, because I am not at the head of any one of your Epistles,” but he continues “I am often wondering how you come to excel all mortals on the subject of Morality, even in the poetical way” (Correspondence, IV: 71-2).

Francis Atterbury is on record saying that Pope’s poetry was “All over Morality,”97 and R.W. Rogers dates Pope’s interest in ethically themed poems as early as 1726, but he goes on to suggest that Pope’s work on The Dunciad delayed his practice, at least as far as the opus magnum is concerned. Other critics argue that 1723, the year Bolingbroke returned from exile, was the fateful year that Pope left off dazzle (if he ever did) for didacticism, but while Bolingbroke’s philosophy most certainly made some impact on Pope, it was probably less overpowering than has been suggested.

In any event, Pope’s work on his opus magnum progressed, and by 1733, not only had To Burlington undergone the revisions that would make it a part of the larger scheme, but the first three epistles of Essay on Man and To Bathurst were all published, as well. The year 1734 saw To Cobham and the fourth epistle of the Essay on Man to press, and by 1735 all four epistles that made up Pope’s “death-bed” edition had been published. However,  

while certain affinities were apparent between *To Cobham* and *To a Lady* and between *To Burlington* and *To Bathurst*, the group was not yet considered a group. G. Wilson Knight notes that “the history of these four poems is a tangled web spun not only by Pope to protect them and the *Essay on Man* from hostile critics, but also by Warburton who added his own threads of complication.”

In fact, Pope published the first three epistles of *Essay on Man* not only anonymously, but through a different bookseller (while simultaneously publishing other works in his name and through his regular booksellers) to stave off the sort of criticism that had attended the publication of *To Burlington*. The ruse was a success and even many of Pope’s enemies praised the work, attributing it to different thinkers of the day. Mack reports that “there was a time shortly after publication when the poem was believed to be the work of a divine” (*TE* III.i: xv). Even better, however, Pope’s enemies “committed themselves to praises which they could not decently retract,” Mack writes, offering in illustration the comments of Leonard Welsted, “one of Pope’s oldest and bitterest enemies” who wrote that the unknown author of *Essay on Man* had offered a poem “above all commendation” (*TE* III.i: xvii). The praise was such that Pope wrote to Jonathan Richardson in a letter dated March 2, 1733 that, with respect to the reception granted *To Burlington*: “I see that a glut of praise succeeds to a

---

glut of reproach. I am much overpaid this way now, as I was injured that way before” (Correspondence, III: 352).

The uproar that had cast such a shadow over To Burlington was something Pope simply was not willing to risk on a project that was so close to his heart. He even wrote to John Caryll on September 27, 1732 of his expectation of attack:

> My work is systematical and proceeds in order; yet that does not hinder me from finishing some of the particular parts, which may be published at any time, when I judge particular vices demand them. And I believe you’ll see one or two of these next winter, one especially of the Use of Riches To Bathurst, which seems at present to be the favorite, nay, the only, mistress of mankind, to which all their endeavours are directed, thro’ all the paths of corruption and luxury. My satire will therefore be impartial on both extremes, avarice and profusion. I shall make living examples, which inforce best, and consequently put you once more upon the defence of your friend against the roar and calumny, which I expect, and am ready to suffer in so good a cause. (Correspondence, III: 316)

This hesitation did postpone the publication of To Bathurst for more than a year after its completion. Perhaps, as Mack notes, some of the delay may have been attributed to Pope’s “preference for letting his things ‘lie by’ him for periods of varying length during which the advice of friends could be consulted and second thoughts entertained,” but there was also “the disheartening clamor occasioned by the possibly deliberate mistaking of Timon’s villa for Chandos’ ‘Cannons’ to be taken into account. Pope was not about to enhance the uproar by releasing a new poem that, as he had
promised, carried some real names.” In addition, postponing publication of *To Bathurst* until the *Essay on Man* was ready aided Pope’s distract and deflect scheme.

Nevertheless, the letter to Caryll makes clear that not only was Pope proceeding with his plans, he was proceeding “systematically,” if against all odds. The *Moral Essays* were obviously part of this system in Pope’s mind, and the fact that he told Spence that they might be published as particular vices “demanded” does not distance them from the overall scheme of the *opus magnum*.

---

Consistent with Pope’s practice, the first, anonymous publication of *Essay on Man* was not the fixed and final version, and in the 1734 quarto edition of *Ethic Epistles*, Pope included an index that outlined his larger plan. This index specified Pope’s pairings between the epistles of the first and second books (the *Essay on Man* and the *Moral Essays*, respectively) as he had envisioned them up to that time [Figure 3]. According to this plan, *To Cobham* and *To a Lady* would both illustrate the second epistle and would appear in the order of the “death-bed edition” with *To a Lady* following *To Cobham*. Likewise, *To Burlington* and *To Bathurst* would both illustrate the fourth epistle, as they both at one time bore titles aligning them with the use of riches. However, Pope recalled this index, and the 1734 folio edition from which it was withdrawn was the first to include Pope’s “Design” as a preface.

Regardless of the configuration, there is no doubt that these eight epistles were to relate to each other in one way or another. Leranbaum’s research even points to “notes making cross-references that first appear in the octavo edition of Pope’s *Works*, Volume II, of 1735” which “stress the interdependence of the eight epistles comprising the *Essay on Man* and the *Moral Essays* as we know them.”

Erskine-Hill also notes that these

---

100 Leranbaum 32.
epistles are important not only on their own, but as part of a group, citing Pope’s letter to Swift dated February 16, 1733, wherein Pope writes:

I have declined opening up to you by letter the whole scheme of my present Work, expecting still to do it in a better manner in person: but you will see pretty soon, that the letter to Lord Bathurst is a part of it, and a plain connection between them, if you read them in the order just contrary to that they were publish’d in. I imitate those cunning tradesmen, who show their best silks last: or, [...] my works will in one respect be like the works of Nature, much more to be liked and understood when consider’d in the relation they bear with each other, than when ignorantly look’d upon one by one [...].
(Correspondence, III: 348)

Furthermore, in every publication of the works (despite the differences in title or grouping, or arrangement) there remained links (whether made in titles, title pages, section dividers or tables of contents) connecting the eight epistles considered here.

As for the Moral Essays alone, David B. Morris writes: as “a single cohesive work” it achieves “a significance and power beyond the scope of its individual poems alone.”101 Morris goes on to echo Pope’s earlier letter to Swift, when he writes: “Pope was referring specifically to the Moral Essays when he declared that his individual poems were not self-contained but—‘like the works of Nature’—belong to a larger system.”102 However, Morris also suggests that the Moral Essays can “seem disconnected or unorganized” and that:

102 Morris 180.
Pope adds to our sense of discontinuity [by] supplying long, interruptive footnotes packed with descriptions of living people with more general, composite, fictive portraits. Finally the poems contain some of the most difficult lines Pope ever wrote, as well as extensive passages that approach the clarity and directness of painting. It is not enough to explain these mixtures by observing that _satura_ (the Latin root of _satire_) refers to a farrago or medley. In understanding the _Moral Essays_, we must confront the question of what ‘relation’ draws together Pope’s four separate studies of character and riches into a profound and cohesive vision of human moral life.\(^\text{103}\)

With Morris’ comment in mind, I think no more justification is needed to support the fact that these eight epistles both belong together and work together, but perhaps a consideration of how they differ is in order before we look at how they are arranged and to what end.

According to R.W. Rogers, the _Essay on Man_ was to “provide a general view of man, his nature and his state, in an ideal and rational condition” while the _Moral Essays_ were to “develop the ideas in more detail and to examine reality in the light of this abstract system.”\(^\text{104}\) Accordingly, Pope addressed charges about the limitations of the _Essay on Man_ when he told Spence:

Some wonder why I did not take in the fall of man [. . .] and others how the immortality of the soul came to be omitted. The reason is plain: they both lay out of my subject, which was only to consider man as he is; in his present state, not in his past or future.”\(^\text{105}\)

\(^{103}\) Morris 181.

\(^{104}\) R.W. Rogers, 1955, 50.

\(^{105}\) Spence, 1964, 165.
That is to say, Pope’s subject was simply man in his middle state in both works, but where the *Essay on Man* was more philosophical, the *Moral Essays* were more satirical. Pope predicted such a transition between the two books of his *opus magnum* when, in a letter to Swift dated September 15, 1743, he wrote: “Whether I can proceed in the same grave march like Lucretius, or must descend to the gayeties of Horace, I know not” (*Correspondence*, III: 433).

Douglas White finds no grave march at all, however. He emphasizes the exploratory attitude these works exude and, explicating a line from Pope’s “Design,” offers this:

> If the ideas Pope steered between are *seemingly* opposite, then he evidently felt that they were not necessarily opposite but that some mistake in either the statement of the doctrines or some false conclusion stemming from them made them appear to conflict.\(^{106}\)

This leads White to describe Pope’s method as such: “[H]is manipulations are rather wittily carried on by granting to extreme arguments their premises while denying their conclusions, or by granting their conclusions though denying their premise.”\(^{107}\) The focus is on the wit, not the morality, as White notes the “fluid, cajoling, and frequently almost chatty” tone that suggests a “witty, bantering element,” in the *Moral Essays*.\(^{108}\) Indeed a passage from Spence would seem to support that contention, as he relates Pope saying:


\(^{107}\) White 9.

\(^{108}\) White 10.
As L’Esprit, La Rochefoucauld, and that sort of people prove that all virtues are disguised vices, I would engage to prove all vices to be disguised virtues. Neither, indeed, is true, but this would be a more agreeable subject, and would overturn their whole scheme.  

Yet while White seems to think that Pope was more interested in the manipulation of ideas rather than the morality of the message, the two need not be mutually exclusive. Pope’s letter to Swift dated June 19, 1730 would bear that out, in that he announces: “Yet am I just now writing, (or rather planning) a book to [. . .] put morality in good humor” (Correspondence, III: 117).

On the topic of morality, Morris offers the following: “The great aim of classical moralists like Pope is not to promulgate rules of behavior—the wise will govern their own conduct—but to discover the principles of ethics and of human nature that make intelligent self-mastery possible.” To this end, we can see that the Essay on Man, while dry, does not preach. Rather one might say it explores the situation in which man finds himself. The Moral Essays provide the flesh-and-blood (if by way of velum and ink) illustrations of this exploration. In this way the wise, as Morris calls them, will see the error of others’ ways and moderate their own behavior accordingly.

Meanwhile, Root finds the Moral Essays:

> [P]revailingly pitched lower than the epistles of the Essay on Man. There is less of philosophical argument, more of concrete illustration; and the illustrations are in large part

---

109 Spence, 1964, 40.
110 White 180.
satiric in character. These epistles, indeed, occupy middle ground between the didactic and the satiric.\textsuperscript{111}

Indeed, the conception of the middle ground is crucial to Pope’s poetry, as well as to the relationship between the \textit{Essay on Man} and the \textit{Moral Essays}, but the most striking feature that distinguishes between the two works is their tone. Frederick Keener delineates the difference nicely when he writes:

In \textit{An Essay on Man}, Pope had somewhat peremptorily set forth aprioristic principles. Here he will speak more moderately, less lawgiver than enquirer. Here the ethician will reveal the psychologist, the researcher will trot out his case histories, and here will be demonstrated, in a matter-of-fact way, the practicability of moral philosophy.\textsuperscript{112}

As for the order in which the epistles are to be read, the matter gets trickier. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the compositional order (especially in regard to completion) reads \textit{To Burlington} (1730-1731), \textit{To Bathurst} (1730-1732), \textit{To Cobham} (1730-1733) and \textit{To a Lady} (1732-1734). The publication order goes like this: \textit{To Burlington} (1731), \textit{To Bathurst} (1733), \textit{To Cobham} (1734) and \textit{To a Lady} (1735). Pope’s own ordering for the \textit{Four Ethic Epistles} in 1744, also known as the “death-bed” edition, was: \textit{To Cobham}, \textit{To a Lady}, \textit{To Bathurst} and \textit{To Burlington}.

Warburton may or may not have influenced Pope’s ordering, and he certainly made some significant changes after Pope’s death, not least of which is renaming the group as the \textit{Moral Essays}. This title seems to have

\textsuperscript{111} Root 183.
\textsuperscript{112} Frederick M. Keener, \textit{An Essay on Pope} (New York: Columbia UP, 1974) 74.
stuck despite its apparent irrelevance, since these are epistles rather than essays in every sense of either word, and despite the fact that Pope himself usually referred to them as his “Ethic Epistles.” The only certainty is, as Pat Rogers writes, that “the group of epistles was a fluctuating entity. It had no assured title, and its individual components likewise sometimes bore titles different from those they had formerly carried. Its size went up and down, and the order of items varied.” Or as Mack puts it, “their number and shape” fluctuated “like the pseudopods of a hungry amoeba.”

Naming is not the issue at hand, however, nor is the grouping. Rather it is the order in which to read them that has my attention. Rogers encourages us to break free from “generic tyranny” and resist the arbitrarily imposed retrospective patterning that has been applied to Pope’s later works, instead reading the epistles in conjunction with the Horatian satires chronologically. In that way we can get the fullest and most satisfying reading of both the individual poems and their place in Pope’s oeuvre. Bogel goes even further to argue in favor of a chronological reading. He writes:

To read the Epistles to Several Persons in the order in which they appeared in the 1735 Works is thus to see them as the single exception to the overall pattern of Pope’s career from (at least) 1713 to 1743.

113 Mack, 1985, 81.
114 Mack, 1985, 512.
115 Rogers, 1995, 94.
On the other hand, Bogel also contends that reading the epistles in their compositional order results in what Mack calls a “constructive renunciation” that moves from optimism to pessimism. That is to say, the poetic trajectory of Pope’s final years would suggest not that kings will call forth the wonders Burlington can produce, but rather that the Queen of Dulness will rule over Ripleys. Yet Erskine-Hill maintains that it is “in the placing of Burlington after Bathurst, involving the rejection by Pope of a process of increasing embitterment, that the poet keeps his best silk to the last.”117

If we are to follow my suggestion and read the epistles in the reverse order of their composition, we would have To a Lady appearing first, followed by To Cobham, then To Bathurst and To Burlington, but we would need more justification for such an ordering than an arbitrary reversal. One possible justification would be the correlation between the epistles as presented and the topics covered in each of the epistles in the Essay on Man.

A brief guide to the poem, reduced essentially from Pope’s own ‘Argument’ which precedes each epistle, might be helpful here:

**Epistle I, Of the Nature and State of Man, with respect to the Universe** – Depicts the infinite variety of creation, which includes evil, and man’s place in it. This evil takes three primary forms: 1) that caused by man’s misunderstanding of the hierarchy of creation and his rebellion against his role; 2) natural disasters that ultimately serve the good of nature even if

117 Erskine-Hill, 1979, 154.
they are harmful to man; 3) moral evil, which is essentially the inverse of Reason. Pride still goeth before the fall here, but if man can accept his position, he can achieve happiness within the divine order. Moreover, man is a microcosm of this world and, as such, is composed of elements that must be harmonized. Created with both reason and emotion, man must learn to use his reason to restrain the motivating emotional impulse—Passion—that God instills in him.

**Epistle II, Of the Nature and State of Man, with respect to Himself, as an Individual** – Develops a psychology of man’s nature, namely the theory of the Ruling Passion, to assist man in knowing himself, which is his proper study since knowledge of God is God’s province alone. This Ruling Passion is the element that reconciles the selfishness of man with reason, to establish order and stability in what would otherwise seem an inconstant being. This is a sort of personalized *concordia discors*, further emphasizing man as a reflection of the divine order of the universe.

**Epistle III, Of the Nature and State of Man, with respect to Society** – Shows man as part of a greater system and thus, he can only be happy when his self-love becomes social love. Regeneration and redemption can be found by contributing to society as a whole, and thereby improving it.

**Epistle IV, Of the nature and State of Man, with respect to Happiness** – Defines happiness as a greater social good that does not reside in materiality, or at least not in riches, which can actually be destructive of virtue. This epistle differs from Epistle III primarily in that it demonstrates
ethical order, whereas the previous epistle emphasizes a violation of the social order.

Thus, having established the ideas of *concordia discors* in *Windsor-Forest*, individual judgment in *Essay on Criticism*, and having “read his Palladio well,” Pope is ready to embark on a revised *opus magnum*. From these brief descriptions above, and harkening back to Figure 2, we can see how *To Cobham* is a perfect fit for Epistle II, and how *To Bathurst* can easily be read in light of Epistle III, even if earlier pairings put it with Epistle IV. *To Burlington* does not appear to match the argument right away, but since creating an idealized environment is the aim of architecture, and proper building is *To Burlington*’s major theme, we find that it is a good fit, after all.

The most difficult placement, in fact the only one I think requires much of an argument, is *To a Lady*, but I think after considering the portraits presented there and the hopelessness of the subjects’ situations, it will not be so far of a stretch to align this poem with the first epistle from *Essay on Man* which concerns not only man in his universe, but also the evil in it.

Before we look at the individual poems, however, we need to take a look at the larger theme that unites them, namely the way in which contradictions can be reconciled to help man achieve his goal of self-awareness and knowledge that will enable him to live a virtuous life.
Chapter 6 - **Seesaw or Fulcrum?**

In a letter to Caryll dated August 17, 1713, Pope writes:

> Good God! What an Incongruous Animal is Man? how unsettled is his best part, his soul; and how changing and variable in his frame of body? The constancy of the one, shook by every notion, the temperament of the other, affected by every blast of wind. What an April weather in the mind! In a word, what is Man altogether, but one mighty inconsistency. (*Correspondence,* I: 185-6)

Charges of inconsistency, even hypocrisy, have featured prominently in the criticism of Pope’s works over the years. John Barrell and Harriet Guest simply chalk it up to a “want of method” they find common to eighteenth-century long poems, the “inevitable consequence” of which is frequent contradiction.\(^\text{118}\) Yet while they do charge Pope with contradicting himself, they wisely refrain from directly suggesting that Pope’s works, themselves, lack method. However, apparent contradictions do abound throughout the *Moral Essays,* and Pope complicates matters further by presenting seemingly conflicting processes for making sound moral judgments. All the while, his arguments are reinforced with images that

---

suggest flux and change, insubstantiality and inconstancy. These are the dominant features of the *Moral Essays*.

Pope’s own character was fraught with puzzling contradictions, too. As Morris writes:

> There is the bawdy Pope, the polite Pope, Pope the scholar, Pope the gardener. There is the London wit, the country gentleman [. . .] the gallant, the outsider [. . .] the faithful son, the devoted enemy, the trickster, the philosopher, and the rake.¹¹⁹

As for the inconsistency in Pope’s work, Morris contends that both paradox and refinement are to blame. “Sometimes, because he is a writer so committed to paradox, his thought is irreconcilably divided,” Morris writes, and as “a poet dedicated to the principle of refinement, Pope at times necessarily contradicted his earlier positions and statements.” He continues:

> Yet, it is not sufficient to observe contradictions within Pope’s thought, whether they emerge over time (as his themes develop and ideas alter) or remain fixed and unalterable. We must also try to understand how and why these conflicts appear at different times in different poems.

For insight into this, Morris returns to the concept of refinement, and makes an apt allusion to the idea of an arch as it applies to Pope’s process, writing:

> An understanding of such differences exerts two kinds of pressure: outward, toward history, so that we may see how Pope revises both his own thought and the thinking of his age; and inward, toward detailed literary analysis, so that we may see how Pope develops the resources of his style and vision. Refinement implies both change and consistency, and what remains consistent is no less important than what changes. The unchanged verse or phrase or thought, as it passes through successive stages

---

¹¹⁹ Morris 2-3.
of approval, contributes an invaluable stability to the text, without which change would be invisible.\textsuperscript{120}

Accordingly, distinguishing between flux and stability in the \textit{Moral Essays} is crucial to understanding Pope’s message, and the sorts of vertical and lateral thrusts Morris describes not only affect Pope’s characters in the \textit{Moral Essays}, but they affect his body of work, as well. For Morris, the inconsistencies in Pope’s \textit{Moral Essays}, as regards his theory of character in particular, are “serious enough to reach the point of paradox or self-contradiction.” Moreover, while Pope “rejects the extreme skepticism” of Montaigne, as Morris writes, he nonetheless finds “inconsistency a regulating feature of human character.”\textsuperscript{121} This is an interesting distinction to make, suggesting that what one might think would lead to chaos, actually offers the opportunity for order.

James Noggle takes Morris’ argument a step further, arguing that “Pope’s attitude toward inconsistency is inconsistent.” Working from the assumption that Pope equates inconsistency with all that is wrong with human behavior, Noggle asserts that even Pope’s best critics have difficulty resolving the issue. Perhaps this is because, as Noggel claims, “in Pope the illusion of complexity turns out to be more complex than complexity itself.” To illustrate, Noggel offers an example from \textit{To a Lady} suggesting that Pope’s view of women is “not complex or mixed but double”; it is both sympathetic

\textsuperscript{120} Morris 13.
\textsuperscript{121} Morris 197-98.
and misogynistic, superficial and deep, fair and unfair, all things alike. One might even rightly say that it is sympathetically misogynistic. This idea is similar to Montaigne’s when he writes: “Vices are all alike, in that they are all Vices [. . .] but although they are equally Vices, they are not equal Vices.”

Similarly, Max Novak finds that “negation and its analogues—restraint, control, boundedness, shrinking, etc.—become forms of virtue” in that they are “types of discipline, of action, that restrain self-love” and by so doing allow for an exploration of “shifting boundaries” without lapsing into vice. As Pope writes in Essay on Man, “Virtuous and vicious ev’ry Man must be, / Few in th’ extreme, but all in the degree.” (ll. 231-232). That Pope considers man to be both virtuous and vicious, not virtuous or vicious, is not simply a nuance. From this position, J. Paul Hunter explores the bias against binarism as it is often used to discount the value of the couplet form and argues that to the contrary, binarism is actually responsible for the form’s diversity and depth.

Hunter believes part of the bias arises from an imperfect definition of the term. If binarism means simply two things, or a combination of two

things, or the similarity or differences between two things, it might seem overly simplistic indeed, he argues. However, according to Hunter

*binarism* in this modern popular sense [. . .] is precisely what much eighteenth-century discourse (and most notably couplet discourse) opposes, corrects, or modifies. Proving that the world is not ‘binary,’ despite appearances and prevalent linguistic habit, is what much couplet poetry (and much eighteenth-century philosophical and political discourse) is about.”

He continues:

Early-eighteenth-century couplets do use lots of opposites, and they juxtapose them notably, playing them off against each other as alternative representations. Because by definition they comprise two lines of equal length held together by (among other things) chiming ending, couplets are unusually well positioned to exploit comparisons and contrasts, and it is not surprising that opposites are repeatedly set against one another in the paired lines or (almost as often) in the two halves of a single line divided by a caesura, whose pregnant pause typically signals a sharp contradistinction.”

Likewise, Fussell asserts that a “swarm” of antitheses buzz about Pope’s works, and at every turn the reader is confronted with “this and that, wit and judgment, reason and passion, art and nature, city and country, ancient and modern” ad infinitum.\(^{127}\)

In light of Pope’s prolific use of paradox and seemingly irreconcilable juxtapositions, Knight offers an approach to reading the *Essay on Man* that


\(^{126}\) Hunter, 2000, 115-16.

\(^{127}\) Fussell 115.
not only accounts for what some call its confusion, but in so doing
emphasizes the architectural structure of the work. He writes:

In the *Essay on Man* we have [. . .] at least two
apparently incompatible philosophies being presented in
balance, and yet we are not asked to choose one and
reject the other, but rather to accept both, and build from
them a new totality. The coherence is less logical than
structural, though within the structure itself can be
discovered the inmost secret of creative living, of
virtue.\(^{128}\)

All of these concepts work against each other in some way, or at least they
*oppose* each other, but David Fairer notes that there exists a discourse
between them, and thus there is the possibility of making something new
from that discourse as Knight suggests.

Fairer’s term for this relationship is “oppositional discourse” and he
defines it this way:

[A]n oppositional discourse—essentially inorganic in
nature—prioritises the engagement of opposites with each
other; it keeps conflicting ideas in play, so as to sustain a
field of force within which the mind can work.
Oppositional thinking in this sense thrives on paradox (a
term that Pope critics are happy to use); but [. . .] it
widens this into the more far-reaching conviction that
polarities reaffirm through their mutual contradiction the
validity of the system which sets them in opposition, just
as love and hate reinforce a single shared discourse of
passion in a way that love and indifference can never do.
One pair is a confirmation through reversal, the other a
denial through disengagement. Oppositional thinking
offers the insight that “A” and “not A” presuppose rather
than deny each other, and it is therefore alert for the
moment of *enantiodromia*, when an idea turns
instantaneously into its opposite. But the opposing
terms, by remaining in conflict, do not prevent unity. On

\(^{128}\) Knight 169-70.
the contrary, their sustained antagonism guarantees a unity that articulates the conflict itself.\textsuperscript{129}

In terms of the arch metaphor, opposing terms would be less totally independent free-standing columns than piers which are joined by an arc. Fairer points to Blake’s \textit{Marriage of Heaven and Hell} to illustrate his point, but Blake’s contraries work much the same way as do Pope’s. As Fairer writes, they “do not deny or destroy one another” but neither do they “settle into equilibrium, since a balanced, static state creates no energy.”\textsuperscript{130} Fairer describes the relationship as magnetic attraction and repulsion, writing:

Rather than desiring an equilibrium, or the compromise of a mediating term or middle ground, or a damping down of energies by the moderation of extremes, or the victory of one term over the other, Pope’s oppositional thought, like Blake’s, works to sustain notions of polarity.\textsuperscript{131}

This distinction between Pope’s idea of a golden mean or a \textit{concordia discord} and a static middle point where all conflicts are blended and thus reconciled is crucial to ongoing criticism of Pope, Fairer contends:

In Pope criticism, especially, certain terms tend to be moved around like labeled counters, and as each falls into place an all too familiar picture begins to form. Words such as order, harmony and \textit{concordia discord}—vital concepts in Pope’s writing—can never seem to drag themselves free of other words with which they are simplistically equated: \textit{stasis, balance/equilibrium, and compromise}.\textsuperscript{132}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{130} Fairer, 1990, 171.
\textsuperscript{131} Fairer, 1990, 171.
\textsuperscript{132} Fairer, 1990, 171.
\end{flushleft}
For this reason, Fairer, working through Blake and Heraclitus, seeks to reassess Pope’s use of such terms in a way that reflects their dynamism, rather than any sense of equipoise.

Fairer points to Wallace Jackson, Martin Price, Ronald Paulson and Ralph Cohen as critics who have considered the dialectical elements in Pope’s work, whether it is Jackson’s “contrary fictions” or Paulson’s “enveloping fiction of provocation and response.” He insists, however, that “the tendency persists, even among Pope’s shrewder critics, to assert that whenever Pope juxtaposes extremes he does so in order to work out a compromise or equilibrium between them.” Fairer also accuses Mack of misreading both Pope and Heraclitus when Mack writes:

The Heraclitean concors discordia, where every member of the universal orchestra contributes something and all are reconciled by a Providence that both composes and conducts. Thus the equilibrium of opposites by which God established a cosmos out of the chaos of the elements must be matched in the individual’s life by an equilibrium of passions. (TE III.i: liv-lv)

Fairer further asserts that the term concordia discors is chronically misapplied in Popean criticism, in that it is used to stand for “order in variety” but without the context of its “oppositional element” at work in that very variety. As Fairer reads it, Heraclitean concordia discors is “not ‘concord out of discord,’” but rather is “simultaneously concordant and

133 Fairer, 1990, 172.
135 Fairer, 1990, 173.
discordant.”

“The difference is vital,” writes Fairer, because while “providential reconciliation of disparate elements, the assertion of a grand design which results in an ‘equilibrium’ of astonishing variety and intricacy is certainly traditional, but it is not Heraclitean”.

Nor is it Pope. Reconciliation in Pope’s view does not have a single static goal. Yes, Pope promotes the idea of providential reconciliation by way of *concordia discors*, but that is the ultimate reconciliation, God’s and Nature’s. Man’s reconciliation scheme is the one that most concerns Pope, and it is far more dynamic and flexible. This accords with Fairer’s oppositional theory, and Fairer might conclude that it accords with Heraclitus, too.

For I.R.F. Gordon the “duality of the metrical and syntactical organization” in Pope’s poetry mirrors the “dual aspects of human nature” as “[n]ouns, phrases and clauses are repeatedly coupled together to enact the double-sided quality of the various components of mankind’s nature.” To illustrate, Gordon points to the following passage from *Essay on Man*, adding emphasis to the competing terms:

Chaos of *Thought* and *Passion* all confus’d;
Still by himself *abus’d* or *disabus’d*;
Created *half to rise* and *half to fall*;
Great *lord of all things*, yet a *prey to all*;
*Sole judge of Truth*, in *endless Error hurl’d*:
The *glory*, *jest*, and riddle of the world!
(Epistle II, ll. 13-18)

---

137 Fairer, 1990, 173.
Gordon holds that the conflict between terms—as it might conjure up images of a glorious jest or an error-riddled truth—“results in chaos, confusion and ultimate enigma,” and if the reader looks forward to *The Dunciad* he might be tempted to agree, but for the purposes of Pope’s *opus magnum*, which is my concern here, such conflicts are not meant to suggest hopeless irreconcilability, but rather a hopeful process of coming to grips with man’s unique state.\(^{139}\)

Binarism can be seen in Pope’s skepticism, too—his “perhaps and perhaps not” approach—as well as the competing vertical and lateral forces, but as Hunter claims, the choice is not between one or the other, it is the dynamic relationship between the two that gives Pope’s art its greatest force and meaning. Novak expresses the same idea when he writes that “Pope does not proceed by opposing human forces, but by establishing a range of relation within which such forces can operate [. . .] the ‘middle state.’”\(^{140}\) He continues:

> Pope converts the topos of *concordia discors* into a moveable relation that has both shifting boundaries and changing relations with the boundaries. The limits remain for Pope undiscovered though there is no doubt that they exist. Within the bounds, relations can be complementary, contradictory, or subtly conjoined. Thus Pope’s ‘mean’ is part of his view of nature, of man, and of society.\(^{141}\)

\(^{139}\) Gordon 195.

\(^{140}\) Novak 114.

\(^{141}\) Novak 115.
The distinction for Novak is between relational and relative. Denying that Pope had any fixed conception of either moderation or modesty, Novak insists that virtue and vice, while they might “seem at times to overlap” are never fused. Furthermore, while virtue and vice remain distinct, each extreme can produce both positive and negative effects, and because the two are so well-mixed in man, it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. It is nigh impossible to judge a man’s behavior in such terms. For example, in To Bathurst, Cotta’s avarice causes him to store up his wealth, which in turn makes that wealth available for his son’s generous distribution, but the avarice made possible the prodigality.

There is a limit to the desirable range, however, and while Pope seems to suggest that a degree of inconsistency is no defect, the inconstancy that results from vacillating between extremes can be morally dangerous. Noggle describes this dynamism as “the propensity of our minds to be swayed by passions and opinions,” but far from being negative, this propensity for being swayed is necessary to reach the “chance discovery” that will lead to the “unperturbable calm, the equal mind essential to the virtuous life” that is ataraxia. The extremes, then, set the parameters between which Pope’s characters move, and the moral charge is to find a constructive balance in

---

142 Novak 110.
the middle ground. To do so is morally elevating just as the arc of an arch springs from its extremes and rises toward the central keystone.

This sort of “two-directional imagery,” as Fussell explains, is “the most common method for embodying ethical issues.” Fussell writes: “Once we call it something like the habit of moral antithesis, it is obvious how it naturally works to shape the conventions of Augustan sentence structure and the syntactical and prosodic habits of the heroic couplet.” Fussell finds this dualistic approach clearly illustrated in Pope’s “Design” in the Essay on Man, where Pope writes:

If I could flatter myself that this Essay has any merit, it is in steering betwixt the extremes of doctrines seemingly opposite, in passing over terms utterly unintelligible, and in forming a temperate yet not inconsistent, and a short yet not imperfect system of Ethics. (TE III.i: 7-8)

Pope’s goal seems to be to achieve this, yet not that, but according to Fussell’s reading, the passage suggests that Pope cannot pin down exactly what he wants from his system. A temperate system might seem desirable, but it might actually be inherently inconsistent by being too well-mixed, and if short, it might be imperfect. The idea seems to be to hit upon a middle

144 Fussell 114.
145 Fussell 114.
that is not necessarily a single point. Thus a range of flexibility between intemperate and inconsistent might be closer to what Pope seeks than simply temperate.

Weinbrot considers this “golden mean”—the range between—as the “earthly counterpart to concordia discors” and suggests that this is the norm “the best men should try to put into effect.” Rebecca Ferguson comes to essentially the same conclusion, arguing that while “Providence may be justified in working the ultimate good from man’s extremes” on the personal level the “point of virtue’ must lie in the golden mean.” Then again, Gordon may have it right when he says that man is “suspended like a pendulum,” left hanging in his middle state and that man’s life might be “merely an expanded paradox summed up by the fact that he is ‘born but to die.’” Regardless, whether man is swinging or steering, he should be striving, and that is Pope’s point.

Russo describes it this way:

If there were not strife, there would be dangerous stagnation, moral, political, psychological. Man would become imprisoned within the crystal palace of his own Reason, where Reason itself can be unreasonable. Life lived at its fullest involves the active harmonization of conflicting emotions and ideas, without which man would sink into rigid dogma and intellectual decadence. Man must strive, then, to reconcile and grow from his inherent

148 Gordon 195.
dividedness, as in himself, so, too, through political parties and parliamentary government. He must govern himself through conflict.\textsuperscript{149}

As Pope writes in \textit{Essay on Man}:

\begin{verbatim}
Better for Us, perhaps, it might appear,
Were there all harmony, all virtue here;
That never air or ocean felt the wind;
That never passion dispos’d the mind:
But all subsists by elemental strife;
And Passions are the elements of Life.
(Epistle I: 165-70)
\end{verbatim}

The idea then is not to reach some fixed middle, not some ideal state of permanent resolution where all passion is subsumed, but rather to negotiate this strife by way of Passion and Reason working in concert.

In the following passage from \textit{To Bathurst}, Pope actually uses the word “reconcil’d,” and Fairer submits that since he does this only four times over the course of his entire career—including in the Homer translations—that special attention should be given to it. Pope writes:

\begin{verbatim}
Hear then the truth: "Tis Heav’n each Passion sends,
And diff’rent men directs to diff’rent ends.
Extremes in Nature equal good produce,
Extremes in Man concur to gen’ral use.
Ask we what makes one keep, and one bestow?
That Pow’r who bids the Ocean ebb and flow,
Bids seed-time, harvest, equal course maintain,
Thro’ reconcil’d extremes of drought and rain,
Builds Life on Death, on Change Duration founds,
And gives th’ eternal wheels to know their rounds.
(ll. 161-70)
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{149} Russo 204.
Pope here suggests that the good cannot exist without the bad, that virtue cannot exist divorced from vice because they define each other. Working from this passage, Fairer makes a most excellent point:

Pope is establishing opposite forces in directional terms (the ebb and flow of the sea in the natural world, hoarding and dividing in the human economy); and, Pope implies, just as life and death admit no intermediary, neither do these forces, which create an order through their opposition. The reconciliation is not an equilibrium: the sea does not ebb and flow with the purpose of achieving a perfect moment of poise at the turning of the tide; the extremes of drought and rain are not compromised in an everlasting gentle shower. Meaning, in other words, is not to be found at some point between the terms—oppositional discourse does not centre meaning, or provide for meaning-as-resolution, in this kind of way. [...] The phrase ‘reconcil’d extremes’ here does not signal a coming-to-terms [...] but the assertion of a wider perspective of meaning [...] a larger meaning expressed in the opposition of forces. Typically Popeian is the chiasmus of line 169, where the building and founding do not stabilize the terms they embrace, but achieve an interdependence of opposites (Life/Death, Change/Duration).¹⁵⁰

Fairer’s contention that “an everlasting gentle shower” is not the ideal reconciliation between drought and rain brings to mind Pope’s parody in Chapter X of Peri Bathous. Here Pope proffered the trope he called “The Antithesis, or Seesaw” by way of which “Contraries and Oppositions are balanced in such a way, as to cause a reader to remain suspended between them, to his exceeding delight and recreation.” Fortunately, as Rogers

¹⁵⁰ Fairer, 1990, 174-75.
observes, “Pope himself never fell victim to this functionless mode of opposing things.”

Instead, Rogers argues, Pope often presents a “pseudo-antithesis” by using an antithetical style to “assert an equivalence rather than an antimony.” As he explains, “The alternatives set out on either side of the caesura ought to be contradictory: the sad reality is that they are not contradictory at all.” An example of this “pseudo-antithesis” is seen in To a Lady, where Pope writes: “A Fop their Passion, but their Prize a Sot, / Alive, ridiculous, and dead, forgot!” (ll. 247-48). It is clear that in the first half of this couplet the Fop and the Sot are one, and while the second line might well record the truth that women are both ridiculous while alive and forgotten after death, Pope’s strategy seems to offer these women a choice, if one from a decidedly meager lot. Similarly, Pope’s use of “or” often functions more like “and,” reflecting not a choice between two things, but both things at once.

Likewise, while Fairer also records alternative ways of ‘reconciling’—such as through fusing, equilibrium and mediation through a third term—he asserts that reconciling through a single interrelated discourse suggests true Heraclitean thinking. The truth can be found not in one side of the equation, but in the equation itself, and perhaps most importantly, in the relationship

152 Rogers, 1993, 9.
that equation expresses. Such an approach mirrors not only the couplet form, but the arch, as well.

Furthermore, Fairer answers the charge that Pope is inconsistent by suggesting that Pope “often raises compromising possibilities before shying away from or disrupting them and achieving far more complex kinds of reconciliation” and this disruption is what invites the charge. So where Barrell and Guest find that To Bathurst fails as a poem because it fails to harmonize contradictions, Fairer’s use of Heraclitus’ definition of harmony might lead to a different conclusion. In Fragment 10, Heraclitus writes:

Things grasped together:—things whole, things not whole; being brought together, being separated; consonant, dissonant. Out of all things one thing, and out of one thing all things.

“Nothing could be further from a reassuring ‘order in variety’ than this ‘forcing together’ of Heraclitean concordia discors,” writes Fairer, and the “dynamic order expressed in the grasping hand exemplifies the conception of harmony as sustaining rather than denying opposing elements.” The idea of grasping is also reminiscent of Pope’s words in To Cobham, where he writes that “half our knowledge we must snatch, not take” (l. 34).

Furthermore, the idea that “What opposes unites [. . .] and all things come about by strife,” as presented in Heraclitus’ Fragment 8, is mirrored in the Essay on Man when Pope writes: “All subsists by elemental strife.” Yet Fairer argues that a more exact translation of Heraclitus’ phrase would be “the counter-thrust brings together,” and he notes that musical harmony is

---

neither a concord nor a balance of sounds, but rather a “complex principle of continuous adjustment.”\textsuperscript{154}

This suggests not a discrete and separate whole, but rather a relationship between elements, and the arch metaphor is particularly useful in conceptualizing this sort of reconciliation. Not only does the arch stand by thrust and counter-thrust, but in handling those forces, the arch is constantly vibrating with life. Moreover, the arch is like a physical, architectural manifestation of \textit{concordia discors} in that—despite its many stones—it ultimately forms a single entity, unlike the separate and discrete elements of post and lintel construction. Thus, as Fairer asserts, “With the Heraclitean model before us, we can begin to recognize ways in which Pope, like Blake, continually exploits the bracing push and pull of conflicting forces. It is more than a mere fascination for the paradoxical, rather an encounter within a gravitational field where polarities refuse to disengage.”\textsuperscript{155}

Clearly the equal blending of opposites is not what Pope has in mind when he suggests reconciliation, and Rogers offers a reason why: “For the Augustans, the primal fear was not that things would fall apart, but that everything would somehow merge.”\textsuperscript{156} Yet Fairer, again, takes this further to suggest that for Pope both falling apart and merging are “equally negative ideas, since each involves a denial of relationship.” Fairer concludes with a call for literary criticism to “free itself from that sterile opposition” that sees

\textsuperscript{154} Fairer, 1990, 177.
\textsuperscript{155} Fairer, 1990, 178.
\textsuperscript{156} Rogers, 1975, 128.
Blake as a poet of “energy” and Pope as a poet of “static, hierarchical ‘order’ of Augustan thought” and to “recognize a dynamic concept of order in which ‘opposition’ expresses an interdependence of principle.”

Notwithstanding such interdependence, the idea of irreconcilability persists, especially when confronted with some of the colorful characters in To Cobham such as Helluo, the Frugal Crone, and Wharton. Morris argues that

Pope’s studies of character in the Moral Essay might be understood as reflecting a version of Aristotle’s schema for identifying virtue as a midpoint between opposite extremes. Inconsistency is Pope’s midpoint of virtue, bordered on opposite extremes by inconstancy (which has no center) and by inertia or contraction or immobility [. . .] Not only are individuals threatened by their own interior self-contradiction and radical inconstancy but also by its opposite—by the rigid, mechanical, obsessive sameness that fixes character in an unchanging inertia. Static, rigid immobility of character accounts for many of the comic failures satirized in the Moral Essays.¹⁵⁸

So Helluo and the Frugal Crone, for instance, are comic failures (and I think Morris means failures as people, rather than as characters) because they have failed to integrate their personalities by negotiating the extremes. All are stuck at one end of the spectrum. The portrait of Wharton presents a slightly different failure to reconcile, however. He swings between extremes, but never finds a middle way and thus, according to Morris, he “manages almost to erase or to annihilate his own character by a process of self-

¹⁵⁷ Fairer, 1990, 184.
¹⁵⁸ Morris 201.
cancellation in which every trait or attribute seems linked with its opposite.

As Pope writes:

> A constant Bounty which no friend has made;
> An angel Tongue, which no man can persuade;
> A Fool, with more of Wit than half mankind,
> Too quick for Thought, for Action too refin’d:
> A Tyrant to the wife his heart approves;
> A Rebel to the very King he loves;
> He dies, sad out-cast of each church and state,
> And (harder still) flagitious, yet not great! (ll. 198-205)

Moreover, while Wharton is “a fabric of unresolved paradox,” he finds his female match in Atossa, from *To a Lady*:

> Full sixty years the World has been her Trade,
> The wisest Fool much Time has ever made.
> From loveless youth to unrespected age,
> No Passion gratify’d except her Rage.
> So much the Fury still out-ran the Wit,
> The Pleasure miss’d her, and the Scandal hit.

> Strange! by the Means defeated of the Ends,
> By Spirit robb’d of Pow’r, by Warmth of Friends,
> By Wealth of Follow’rs! without one distress
> Sick of herself thro’ very selfishness!
> Atossa, curs’d with ev’ry granted pray’r,
> Childless with all her Children, wants an Heir. (ll. 123-48)

According to Morris, “Wharton and Atossa are studies of internal contradiction [...] every virtue mimics its opposite vice, and each achievement proves the reverse of what is desired.”

In the face of such a total failure of reconciliation, what is one to do? Keener offers one alternative by insinuating that what Pope could not reconcile, he could at least juxtapose, and there is always the reliable *concordia discors* to reconcile what man cannot. As Weinbrot, explains: “God

---

159 Morris 202.
is the one source of constancy” and through Providence he can provide one method of reconciliation, but as Weinbrot wryly suggests “God tends to work in a leisurely fashion.” However, Morris also asserts that the oppositions that plague the sketches of Wharton and Atossa do not necessarily lead to an inevitable cancellation. Indeed, Morris finds that such a view of human character “allows for a perpetual self-modifying movement [. . .] that is nonetheless stabilized and centered in virtue.”

This again recalls the image of an arch and suggests the centering of virtue that will be seen in the dedicatees of the poems to come. It also reinforces Pope’s contention that despite the fact that Nature’s own rhythm will eventually set all aright, man must still strive diligently to reconcile the forces that bear upon him in his limited existence. If he fails, he fails, but at least he has the comfort of knowing that any mistakes he makes will recede with time, just as his sandcastles are washed away by the tide.

160 Weinbrot 183.
161 Morris 211.
Chapter 7 - **Strife and a Wife: To a Lady**

All Nature is but Art, unknown to thee;
All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see;
All Discord, Harmony, not understood;
   All partial Evil, universal Good:
   *(Essay on Man, Epistle I, ll. 289-92)*

Pope’s *Epistle to a Lady*, first published in 1735 but considered here in its 1744 configuration, was the last of the four *Moral Essays* to see print, but in many ways it makes sense to consider it first in Pope’s grand scheme. As previously discussed, most critics place a reading of *To a Lady* after *To Cobham* and suggest that both illustrate the second epistle of the *Essay on Man*, but while *To Cobham* is heavily weighted with examples of male identity, it is not exclusive to the “knowledge and characters of men” as a single sex. Sketches of Narcissa and the frugal Crone interrupt the portraits of Wharton and Helluo, and others. So Pope uses the term “men” in *To Cobham* to represent all of humankind, but that then raises the question of why Pope would next devote a poem to the “Characters of Women” which he explains in a note to the title treats “of this Sex only as contradistinguished from the other” (*TE* III.ii: 46). In the “Argument” that prefaced the poem in versions after 1735, Pope writes of women’s characters:

That these are yet more inconsistent and incomprehensible than those of Men, of which Instances are given even from such Characters as are plainest, and
most strongly mark’d; as in the *Affected*, Ver. 7, &c. The *Soft-natur’d*. 29. the *Cunning*, 45. the *Whimsical*, 53. the *Wits* and *Refiners*, 87. the *Stupid* and *Silly*, 101. How Contrarieties run thro’ them all.

But tho’ the *Particular Characters* of this Sex are more various than those of Men, the *General Characteristick*, as to the *Ruling Passion*, is more uniform and confin’d. (TE III.ii: 45)

Perhaps Pope simply wants to further distinguish the ruling passions of women from those of men, but neither Narcissa nor the frugal Crone exhibit the two ruling passions set aside for women in *To a Lady*, namely love of pleasure and love of sway. Narcissa’s Ruling Passion is vanity, and the crone’s is frugality. Therefore, if we read *To a Lady* second in succession, especially with the earlier pattern in mind, we are likely to be confused by Narcissa and the crone because they fail to fit that pattern. Likewise, in *To Cobham*, Pope writes that in the Ruling Passion even women are “no dissemblers,” so to follow that with a statement on the utter incomprehensibility of women, whether their passions are identified or not, would make little sense (l. 177). However, if we were to read *To a Lady* first, we could get an introduction to the incomprehensible mysteries of life, to the evil that is inherent even in the good, and finally, to a way that the material and the spiritual can function together to achieve harmony even through discord.

This is the crux of my argument that supports not only a reading of *To a Lady* first in the series, but the pairing of this epistle with the first, rather than the second, epistle of *Essay on Man*. While none of the pairings
between the *Essay on Man* and the *Moral Essays* are perfect, *To a Lady* offers a more complete rendering of the first epistle of *Essay on Man* than does *To Bathurst* or *To Burlington* in regard to epistles three and four respectively, and even *To Cobham* offers only a partial illustration of the second epistle, despite the fact that it is the only epistle of the *Moral Essays* that is always referenced as part of Pope’s larger scheme.

Subsequently, with *To a Lady* we can see women as representative of the incomprehensibility of the universe, its infinite variety and even its evil. I suggest that women represent evil because in so many ways in this epistle, they represent nothing. Jackson makes a similar argument when he says that Pope’s women have no character because they have *too much* character.\(^{162}\) They are all extremes, and as such, they are self-negating. In the image of the arch, they are all abutments with no spanning arc to join them; they are all ends and no middle. Thus, the fallen woman is like a fallen arch, but with a keystone, the arch can be rebuilt.

In this case, Martha Blount serves as the keystone that will hold it all together. Although she is an unnamed dedicatee, Martha receives the compliment of the poem when she exhibits an integration of masculine and feminine traits. This might be considered the materialization of the feminine, or the humanization of cosmic forces. Having successfully integrated masculine and feminine traits, Martha is able to function well despite the

---

\(^{162}\) Jackson 90.
forces that bear upon her. Those women who have failed at this task, however, bear a much different fate.

Perhaps it is important to further clarify here what I mean when I say that women represent evil. In the first epistle of Essay on Man Pope outlines three types of evil, each of which finds a correlation in the portraits of To a Lady. Not only are women evil by negation—having no characters and even “No-meaning”—they also represent role rebellion, as evidenced in the first portraits of the Countess on the one hand and her several affected identities on the other; Silia’s sudden storms and Atossa’s fury correlate with the evil of natural disasters; and Simo’s mate is anything but alone in representing the failure of Reason, the mark of moral evil.

This “elemental” view of women is not limited to Silia or Atossa’s tempests, however. Pastora is an earth mother of sorts, and Sappho seems to rise from primordial muck like an iridescent fly. The only consistency between them is their inconsistency. They are fickle and flighty; they are nearly impossible to discern, much less to capture; and they are so insubstantial as to be non-meaning beings, or even non-beings. What better way could Pope describe the unintelligibility of the universe and the void that is evil?

One way of understanding the complexity of a subject is to simplify it. Pope, in the early sketches, attempts to simplify women, to read them not just in the roles in which they have presented themselves, but initially as even more elemental types—as simply “black, brown, or fair” (l. 4). Yet the mystery of a woman’s character defies type, and so Pope finally suggests
that the best woman integrates qualities typically thought of as masculine to make but “a softer Man” (l. 273). This reconciliation between masculine and feminine, material and spiritual, is best conceptualized with the image of an arch. While the terms seem like absolute opposites, the traits that form the abutment provide the necessary foundation from which the arch can spring. Following that metaphor, in *To a Lady*, the primary vertical thrust in play is society’s expectations for women. This force contributes to the lateral thrusts that result in the self-negation seen in all the women’s portraits, except for Martha’s, as they vacillate between the two ruling passions.

:::

The poem is structured much like those of the other *Moral Essays*, in that it is nominally conversational (if one-sided, considering Martha’s almost absolute silence over the course of 292 lines) and the poem develops from an initial interaction with the dedicatee. In this case, *To a Lady* shares an additional similarity with *To Cobham* in that it opens with an opinion attributed to, and closes with a compliment to, the dedicatee. Pope progresses from short portraits to longer ones, and moves from the particular to the general as all women become just one woman in the extended portrait of Atossa, where Pope writes: “Scarce once herself, by turns all Womankind!” (l. 116).
With such broad types and types that overlap until they merge, it would seem that discerning the characters of women would be quick work, or perhaps no work at all, as Pope remarks in the opening couplet that there is “Nothing so true” as Martha Blount’s assertion that “Most Women have no Characters at all” (l. 1-2). Even if we grant that some, if not all, might have characters, about two-thirds into the poem we find that two ruling passions—the love of pleasure and of sway—so dominate the sex that that they “almost divide the kind” (l. 208). Yet in the very next passage we find that nature gives the first and experience results in the second, to the end that women “seek the second not to lose the first” (l. 214). So there is really but one true ruling passion for women, the nature-given love of pleasure, but because of the external forces, namely the fact that women cannot secure their own pleasure but must rely on others to provide it, they end up in a vicious cycle of self-negation. This cycle can be broken, but first we need to look at the contrarities that propel it.

Initially it seems that Pope’s suggestions for understanding women are so inadequate that one must simply surrender to the complexity. This leads Carol Virginia Pohli to argue that Pope has focused as much on the “difficulties of knowing” as on “the complexities of femaleness.”\(^{163}\) While much the same can be said of the theme in To Cobham, it is important to note that the difficulty of knowing women mirrors the difficulty in knowing

the universe, not least because the women described in *To a Lady* are presented as reflections of a painter, as the world is much a reflection of the cosmos. Moreover, by illustrating the particular difficulties in coming to know and understand women, Pope sets up a foundation for turning to self-awareness in *To Cobham*.

This attention to individual character was reflected in the literature of the eighteenth-century, from biographies to chapbooks, and it even formed the basis for a new form, the novel. The idea of individual character was also prominent in the writings of philosophers such as Locke, and it was especially important to his theory of consciousness. Accordingly, Felicity Nussbaum argues that character and identity in the eighteenth-century are virtually indistinguishable, writing:

Identity, like character, comes to mean both sameness and also, in the eighteenth century, an individuation that distinguishes the ways the individual is itself only and is a consciousness that reflects on itself. Identity implies permanence and sameness over time [. . .] in spite of the changes that it tolerates or excites.\(^\text{164}\)

What Nussbaum is saying, I think, is that in the eighteenth-century, character came to mean the qualities and traits of an individual, and that character was considered to be as much formed by the individual as inherent in her. Moreover, a stability of character was to be desired because it made people’s behavior more predictable.

Yet Pope finds none of this constancy in his women characters, unless it is to suggest that they are predictably unpredictable. Perhaps this is what gives rise to Pohli’s position that there is “a submerged conflict in Pope’s work between his moral confidence or didacticism and his suspicions that reasonable judgments may not be possible.”

Furthermore, many critics argue that the apparent contradictions in the characters of women, including those of his idealized dedicatee, undercut the moral authority of the poem.

Quite to the contrary, I believe these very contradictions, are the key to not only this epistle, but to all the *Moral Essays*. For Pope, the idea is not to hit upon some perfect center or blend, but rather to reconcile extremes in a dynamic way. This is why the arch is such an apt metaphor; each of the voussoirs are actively alive, moderating the stresses while simultaneously solidifying the structure, and the keystone makes it possible. In this case, the example Martha Blount provides will enable other women to function more effectively.

However, an earlier article by Nussbaum takes a contrary position. Nussbaum claims that Pope uses Martha against her own kind, presenting her as a “representative of the female audience who are to be convinced of the unmitigated immorality of the sex,” and in so doing engages her on the side of the misogynistic (in Nussbaum’s estimation) male speaker. On the other hand, it is possible that this sort of engagement is the first indication

165 Pohli 211.
we have of Pope reconciling the masculine and the feminine by conflating them. It is true that Pope introduces his thesis with the off-handed and perhaps unthinking comment he attributes to Martha, namely that women have no character. In light of that, Nussbaum’s contention is that Pope expects his readers to assume that if a woman would say such a thing about her own sex, it must be true. Other critics have taken similarly based views, and a few point to Pope’s word choice to complicate matters, suggesting that since this is a comment that Martha “let fall,” one of two things might be true: 1) the statement is no less than a truism; or 2) that a woman could only accidentally happen upon such knowledge.

As unflattering as that might be, perhaps more problematic is Pope’s quickness to marginalize Martha’s contributions to the conversation. It could appear that Martha is merely the impetus for Pope’s explication, not central to it, but I think that is too limited a view to take. Yet this is still not the biggest problem Pope poses for Martha. Her idealized portrait complicates matters even further because as Pope proceeds throughout the poem by contradicting himself, he sets up what would seem to be an impossible, irreconcilable morass from which Martha must somehow cobble together a character.

Hence we see how a fault on one hand becomes a fairness on the other, and we see that Pope remains understanding, if still critical. While he allows that a trait might not be admirable, he understands that it might well be necessary for survival. Still, the why behind the what eludes him. Pope genuinely cannot grasp the nature of women; he seems to wonder whether
experience or societal pressures are to blame for the confusion, or if a simple lack of character, itself, is the culprit.

Feminist critics also lament the fact that Pope seems to conflate the internal with the external when it comes to women’s characters, but I suspect Pope’s mode of representation is partially to blame for the apparent misogyny of the work since Pope is reflecting on reflections of form, not interactions with the personalities themselves. However these complications in separating internal and external traits are further exacerbated by the introduction of costuming, which adds yet another layer of affectation that further obscures whatever true identity might lie hidden within these women. As Pope writes: “How many Pictures of one Nymph we view, / All how unlike each other, all how true!” (ll. 5-6). With so many “looks,” Pope can certainly be excused for not being able to pin down a firm identity, and the portraits of the mutable women that follow make all too clear the difficulty Pope has in coming to know the truth about them.

For Fairer, this “truth” is at best a relative term. Writing of the “chiaroscuro of truth-falsehood and good-bad” Fairer argues that Pope relies on the imagination to reconcile all conflicts.167 This study might be seen as an earlier take on the theory of Heraclitean oppositional discourse he proposes later, but here Fairer sees imagination as providing the impetus for seeing the meaning between seemingly contradictory ideas, concluding that if the imagination is properly tethered by reason, it can bridge

167 David Fairer, Pope’s Imagination (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984) 93.
inconsistencies and pin down inconstancy. He writes: “[I]f imagination ignores truth, then it can be delusive, destructive, and frustrating; but when art and truth are in alliance, ‘ever new’ imagination is there also.”¹⁶⁸ This is not so radically different from oppositional discourse, however, in that imagination and reason—or passion and reason—are seen as contradictory, even though the interaction between them not only tempers the extremes of each, but actually creates new meaning.

Accordingly, art and truth are seen as contradictory, as art is inherently deceptive in depicting an image rather than reality itself, but art without a foundation in truth is not “true” art. This is why Fairer takes issue with Martin Price’s characterization of the poem, wherein he concludes that Pope’s theme is “bad” art. Price argues that the “mock order of false art” symbolizes moral failure, and compares the “colorist” style of painting described in To a Lady (a style that emphasizes color over line) to the poor architecture in To Burlington (where arcs of triumph are turned into garden gates). Specifically, Price writes:

>[T]he very grotesqueness of bad art has a fascination, for in the failure or misdirection of intention the ambitions of art are made all the more conspicuous [. . .]. Running through the poem is an implicit analogy between the variability and ostentation of vain women and the broken light and color of dazzling but superficial painting.¹⁶⁹

For Fairer, though, the very suggestion of good and bad is “too black-and-white” since the colorist approach is most appropriate for recording the

¹⁶⁸ Fairer, 1984, 111.
restlessness of Pope’s women. Pope, he argues, is not setting out a contrast to great art in the manner of Rubens (over Poussin), but rather is genuinely trying to find an appropriate medium. Pope’s art, then, is representative of the truth.

Steven Shankman also sees the fruit born when art and truth are in alliance, and he claims that “the paradoxical truth about women is that they are untrue in the sense that they are not constant.” Such inconstancy is at the heart of the poem, but Shankman considers the portraits Pope paints to represent the extremes of behavior as mere foils for Martha’s constancy. Shankman writes that the women in the portraits “do not have character, ethos, in the Aristotelian sense” because they are portrayed as “wildly fluctuating between extremes.”

Pope seems patronizing, however, when he attributes half a woman’s charm to her changeability after having spent the entire poem criticizing such inconstancy. He fares no better, either, when he suggests that even Martha, purportedly the ideal woman, remains a contradiction like the rest of her sex. Interestingly, Shankman suggests that the term “contradiction” loses its pejorative context when it is subsumed in Martha, as “Heav’n’s last best work” but if that is the case, the perspective comes too late to convince many readers.

171 Shankman 177.
Perhaps it fails to be convincing because Pope’s portraits of inconstancy are so powerful. From single couplets to more developed sketches, these portraits depict women on the edges of reality. For example, the first set of portraits depict a single lady in the role of no fewer than five characters. First up is Arcadia’s Countess in ermine, ostensibly the real self, then the rural vision of Pastora, followed by lusty Fannia and naked Leda, Mary Magdalene and Saint Cecilia. As Pope writes:

Arcadia’s Countess, here, in ermin’d pride,  
Is there, Pastora by a fountain side.  
Here Fannia, leering on her own good man,  
And there, a naked Leda with a swan.  
Let then the Fair one beautifully cry,  
In Magdalen’s loose hair and lifted eye,  
Or drest in smiles of sweet Cecilia shine,  
With simp’ring Angels, Palms, and Harps divine;  
Whether the Charmer sinner it, or saint it,  
If Folly grows romantic, I must paint it. (ll. 7-16)

Having a portrait painted in the costume of an historical or mythological character was customary in the eighteenth-century, and Pope admits as much in his note on the lines when he writes that they are “Attitudes in which several ladies affected to be drawn, and sometimes one lady in them all.” However, while Pope also takes the opportunity in that note to suggest that he is not revealing the names or roles of any actual women, the portraits he alludes to are similar to those seen at Wilton, which Pope visited in 1724. There a portrait of the Earl of Pembroke’s first wife, Margaret Sawyer, has her pictured in a Pastora-like pose, complete with lamb.
Regardless of the model, however, the fact that people affected roles for portraits suggests at the very least a fantasy rebellion from their actual roles. Perhaps, too, such poses were an attempt to define some aspect of character by taking on the characteristics of another. Pope even seems to suggest that a change in costume represents a change in fundamental character. If nothing else, Pope’s portrayal of a single woman in multiple poses suggests his sensitivity to the expectations that demanded diverse roles from women—from lady of the manor to lady of the field and from temptress to victim.

Interestingly, these portraits progress in pairs by way of opposition, but they are not simply two-sided; the effect is more like flipping a two-headed coin, with the impossible task of determining which side is up—that is, if the coin ever stopped spinning. Although he has already shown us six of these representations, Pope takes a moment to describe how difficult it is to catch even affected characters, as he writes:

Come then, the colours and the ground prepare!
Dip in the Rainbow, trick her off in Air,
Chuse a firm Cloud, before it fall, and in it
Catch, ere she change, the Cynthia of this minute.
(ll. 17-20)

This sort of fleeting imagery is seen to varying degrees in all the *Moral Essays*, but in this poem the unstable media only serves to further destabilize the subject. Felicity Rosslyn suggests that for Pope there is "a perverse law at work by which effort avails nothing, and the ephemeral subject the artist
pursues is most itself when it escapes him." This ephemeral quality is also seen in Pope’s successive use of the short “i” which reinforces a sense of lightness and an insubstantiality.

The inconstancy of character is further developed as the portraits continue. As Pope set out in his “Argument,” the poem will explore the various female types, from the “Affected” through to the “Stupid and Silly.” The first portraits are obviously affectations, but so too is the portrait of Rufa that follows. Rufa seems to care more for her looks than for Locke, with the book being little more than a prop to accompany her to the park, but it is in the Swiftian portrait of Sappho where appearance and reality are most at odds. As Pope writes:

Rufa, whose eye quick-glancing o’er the Park,
Attracts each light gay meteor of a Spark,
Agrees as ill with Rufa studying Locke,
As Sappho’s diamonds with her dirty smock, (ll. 21-24)


173 Bateson’s note on line 20 points back to Tillotson’s contention in the Twickenham Edition of *Rape of the Lock* that Pope associated the short “i” with fairies and “daintiness in general” (*TE* III.ii: 50).
Next comes Silia whose contradiction is the result of an internal weakness, rather than an affectation. She does not just appear soft-natured; she is genuinely weak, as Pope writes:

How soft is Silia! Fearful to offend,
The Frail one’s advocate, the Weak one’s friend:
To her, Calista prov’d her conduct nice,
And good Simplicius asks of her advice (ll. 29-32)

However, while she is associated with frailty and an eagerness to please, her passion is powerful once unleashed, even if the reason behind it is trivial:

Sudden, she storms! She raves! You tip the wink,
But spare your censure; Silia does not drink.
All eyes may see from what the change arose,
All eyes may see—a Pimple on her nose. (l. 33-36)

This unpredictability is almost volcanic in its sudden eruption, but because the eruption is spurred only by vanity, Silia still lacks substance. It almost seems that Pope would be more understanding if her rage were the result of intoxication, but her sudden change simply suggests again how capricious all women are. For example, Papilla wants a park, but curses the trees when she gets one, and the portrait of the cunning Calypso offers even more complications, yet Pope explains:

Ladies, like variegated Tulips, show,
‘Tis to their Changes half their charms we owe;
Their happy Spots the nice admirer take,
Fine by defect, and delicately weak.

So while both Silia’s and Papilla’s tantrums are criticized, their mutability is what makes them intriguing. This might suggest that Pope acknowledges some sense of awe arising from their very instability, perhaps even a
seductive danger. To further develop such an idea, Pope describes Calypso and her mysterious charms, writing:

Aw’d without Virtue, without Beauty charm’d;
Her Tongue bewitch’d as odly as her Eyes,
Less Wit than Mimic, more a Wit than wise:
Strange graces still, and stranger flights she had,
Was just not ugly, and was just not mad:
Yet ne’er so sure our passion to create,
As when she touch’d the brink of all we hate. (ll. 46-52)

For Rosslyn, this indicates that Pope realizes the eroticism of “moral disorientation,” but there is also a sense of *concordia discors* in Calypso; she has so successfully integrated her inherent contradictions that she can seem desirable despite having no identifiable desirable trait. Still she is defined negatively; she is only what she is not. There is no assertion of character, personality or will; she is not pretty, just not ugly. She is not Wit nor wise nor even a Mimic, but closer to the last than to the first. Which would make her what, exactly? Pope will not tell us, but Bogel suggests that Calypso is complicated because the portrait reflects not only the subject, but the viewer, and as such serves as “a self-portrait, a record of the poet’s reactions.” If this is the case, then Calypso would also be the first portrait to reconcile the masculine and the feminine in its conflation of subject and viewer. Bogel continues:

The witty painter of feminine follies, has begun to construct portraits of more complex women in which both subject and object, satirist and victim, play increasingly complex and interrelated roles.

---

174 Rosslyn, 1990, 186.
Or perhaps it is simply Calypso’s complexity that makes her desirable. This she shares with Narcissa and Flavia, who according to Bogel illustrate Pope’s tripartite development:

Both portraits fall into a three-part structure: a witty and distanced account of follies and contradictions; a brief questioning of motives; and a deeper vision of contradiction that sees inconsistency as self-defeat and particular faults as part of a shared heritage of human fallibility.¹⁷⁵

These three-part structures also suggest the three sections of an arch, but far from finding a home in the middle third, the “tolerably mild” Narcissa spans the entire structure, moving between extremes without a hitch. Her whimsy belies an inability to moderate her behavior, however, and because she lacks an awareness of her motivations, even making a widow happy cannot count in her favor since her good deed is done only on a lark. This lack of self-awareness is a theme that is seen again in *To Cobham* and *To Bathurst* and it is implied in *To Burlington*. Likewise, the idea of reconciling actions with motives and developing self-awareness is a central concern in *To Cobham*, perhaps providing another rationale for placing it second in the series. Here, however, Pope simply focuses on the contradictions Narcissa’s whimsy inspires. According to Bogel, this is the mystery of her character. Noting the oppositions in the third section of the portrait (the contrast between conscience and passion, atheism and religion, etc.), Bogel writes:

The effect is to relate the turns and counterturns of mere whimsy to larger issues of conduct and belief, to connect

¹⁷⁵ Bogel 93.
Narcissa’s idiosyncratic behavior with a more general human want of consistency.

The effect, he claims, makes Narcissa “an emblem of the unstable self faced with a life of moral choices.”\textsuperscript{176} The implication is that a successful negotiation of extremes requires a thoughtful integration, not a willy-nilly, hit-or-miss, approach to life, and yet Pope himself has offered the hit-or-miss technique as the only one available for creating these portraits in the first place. This does not undermine Pope’s argument, however, because an understanding of the universe is beyond man’s grasp, and he can only do the best he can, whereas the self-awareness that Narcissa lacks is the first human goal.

Philomede fares even worse than Narcissa because while she, too, fails to control her passions, she compounds her sin by also being a hypocrite. Pope charges:

\begin{quote}
So Philomede, lect’ring all mankind
On the soft Passion, and the Taste refin’d.
Th’ Address, the Delicacy—stoops at once,
And makes her hearty meal upon a Dunce. (ll. 83-86)
\end{quote}

Yet, as Bogel notes, Philomede differs from Narcissa, and Flavia, too, in that she is not a victim of herself. She is not divided between mind and body, and Bogel sees this distinction as a “necessary perspective on Narcissa and Flavia, and on the direction of the poem as a whole.”\textsuperscript{177} This disconnect between body and mind also suggests a disconnect between material and

\textsuperscript{176} Bogel 94.
\textsuperscript{177} Bogel 95.
spiritual. Without one to serve as a ballast to the other, self-destruction is all but assured.

Flavia, then, completes the trio. Like Philomede, she has a voracious appetite, but she is no hypocrite. Nevertheless, as a “Wit” she exemplifies extremes that are subject to no moderating force, and excess is the only rule she follows. As Pope describes her:

Flavia’s a Wit, has too much sense to Pray,
To Toast our wants and wishes, is her way;
Nor asks of God, but of her Stars to give
The mighty blessing, “while we live, to live.”
Then all for Death, that Opiate of the soul!
Lucretia’s dagger, Rosamonda’s bowl.
Say, what can cause such impotence of mind?
A Spark too fickle, or a Spouse too kind.
Wise Wretch! With Pleasures too refin’d to please,
With too much Spirit to be e’er at ease,
With too much Quickness ever to be taught,
With too much Thinking to have common Thought:
Who purchase Pain with all that Joy can give,
And die of nothing but a Rage to live. (ll. 87-100)

That Flavia elects to follow the least rational of options, such as according more power to astrology than to God, is perhaps a symptom of what might today be diagnosed as bipolar disorder, but she clearly has a “thinking problem.” Ironically, Flavia’s tragedy is the result of being plagued by positive attributes! She is wise, spirited and quick—all good things—but they are taken to such an extreme that they negate themselves and leave her with nothing but a hunger for happiness. As Bogel puts it, while Narcissa and Flavia share inherent contradictions, the paradoxes Flavia confronts leave her as emblematic of the “tragic irony of self-defeat” rather than the simple, and “humorous irony of self-contradiction” seen in Narcissa. The
tragic tone continues with Simo’s mate, whose self-medicated depression knows as few bounds as Flavia’s mania.

Or who in sweet vicissitude appears
Of Mirth and Opium, Ratafie and Tears,
The daily Anodyne, and nightly Draught,
To kill those foes to Fair ones, Time and Thought.
(ll. 109-12).

The psychic pain culminates in a portrait of the volatile Atossa. While most critics consider Atossa to be modeled on the Duchess of Marlborough, Bateson speculates that the Duchess of Buckinghamshire was the target, and he describes her as “an arrogant, quarrelsome, eccentric woman [. . . though] not without energy, intelligence, and public spirit” (TE III.ii: 59). These admirable qualities are nowhere to be found in Atossa, however. As the subject of Pope’s wrath, she gets the most development, but she still lacks character.

Reuben Brower finds Atossa to be the most “morally frightening” of Pope’s women. Noting the stress Pope places on the theme of a “warfare upon earth,” as well as Atossa’s “Rage,” “Fury,” “Hate,” “Violence,” and “death”—and all this combined with the swift motion and sense of destruction such seen in words such as “Eddy,” “whisks,” “turn” and “storm”—Brower seems horrified by what he calls “a complex impression of a monster of feminine violence.”178 To me, Atossa’s description reads more like a recipe for disaster.

Yet when Bogel looks back to the opening of the poem and compares it to the opening of Atossa’s portrait, an even more frightening possibility arises. Where Pope began describing how true, yet unalike, the portraits are, he now presents Atossa as “Scarce once herself, by turns all woman kind” (l. 116). She is not just everywoman, but also represents all that is inherently contradictory in every woman’s character.

In fact, while harkening back to the beginning, Bogel notes that what had seemed “merely a glib generalization”—that women have no characters at all—now “has grown into the perception that the self-defeat, characterlessness, and squandered powers are more the rule than the exception” and that Atossa represents the chaos of a life that lacks a stable core to direct its energies. More importantly, writes Bogel, “Pope displays an awareness that the frantic and discordant in Atossa’s nature speaks to us all.”

After this first set of portraits, Pope turns back to Martha to reiterate the difficulties involved in pinning down this thing called “character.” With the painterly metaphor once more in play, Pope presciently describes the impressionist approach, asserting that a “firm hand” and an “unerring line” are useless here. Rather the artist needs: “Some wand’ring touches, some reflected light, / Some flying stroke alone can hit ‘em right” (ll. 153-154). Although readers who insist on a misogynistic bent might conjure up images of Picasso’s women, I think a fairer reading would suggest Cézanne.

179 Bogel 99.
Interestingly, the “light” or truth here is reflected, not directed, and the character of the sitter can only be hit upon, not caught entirely. This, too, is an idea explored in *To Cobham* where Pope likens man’s quest for knowledge to bird hunting and suggests that we can only snatch at truth. Either way, one had better have quick judgment to make any sense of these women.

Here Martha reemerges to defend her sex asserting that Cloe would fit Pope’s implied qualifications for the ideal character of woman, “With ev’ry pleasing, ev’ry prudent part” (l. 159), but for one, Pope counters: “she wants a Heart” (l. 160). Martha is mistaken to think that Cloe is ideal, because where Atossa feels too much, Cloe feels too little. Unlike the previous portraits Pope has presented, Cloe has control over both passion and vanity, but she exhibits too much control: “She speaks, behaves, and acts just as she ought” he writes (l. 161). For Pope, the ideal woman is the best of both sides, both passionate and prudent as the case may require. Prudence, or reason, must temper passion, while passion inspires reason.

However, artifice can further complicate matters, and while the portrait of the Queen officially introduces the idea late in the poem, it has been in effect since the opening portraits with their costumed themes. As lateral forces, affectation or artifice and nakedness (the lack of artifice) are part and parcel of pleasure and sway, respectively. The problems posed by artifice, the reshaping of reality or the disguising of truth, are clarified in Pope’s interjections about the difficulty of “painting” these portraits. While attempting to “fix” a character, Pope notes the impossibility of the task, or at least the impossibility of his medium, which requires a rainbow for a pallet.
and a firm cloud for canvas. Accordingly, Pope must allow that the fix will never be in, and instead he must focus his attention on the process of knowing. Again, this sets the stage for all the epistles to come.

Reiterating the idea of chance and inaccuracy, Pope writes: “For how should equal Colours do the knack? / Chameleons who can paint in white and black?” (ll. 155-6). Moreover, having moved from the reflected light of impressionism to the flying strokes of expressionism, one wonders what sort of surety the artist can present in his work. Pope suggests little or none, and he, too, seems bound by the same limits, so the possibility arises that whatever advice he has to offer must also surely fail. The message here is simply that women are “Chameleons,” and any attempt to capture them will fail, for even if we do get a good hit with a stroke of luck, the chameleon will simply climb to a different section of the color wheel.

To illustrate, Pope points to the portrait of the Queen, which specifies the failure of art in leading to truth:

One certain Portrait may (I grant) be seen,  
Which Heav’n has varnish’d out, and made a Queen:  
The same for ever! And describ’d by all  
With Truth and Goodness, as with Crown and Ball:  
Poets heap Virtues, Painters Gems at Will,  
And show their zeal, and hide their want of skill.  
‘Tis well – but, Artists! Who can paint or write,  
To draw the Naked is your true delight.  
That Robe of Quality so struts and swells,  
None see what Parts of Nature it conceals.  
(ll. 181-190)

The attention given to the Queen’s robe leads Nussbaum to conclude that the "truth of character for both sexes is internal, the exterior is a falsification or a
disguise.” Additionally, the artifice of the Queen’s portrait suggests traits that may not be true, especially the trait of stability, which exists primarily because we are judging a static portrait, rather than a dynamic human being.

While Nussbaum suggests that Pope’s structure reinforces his contention that artifice increases as beauty fades, faded beauty or not, Pope still seeks to strip the Queen of her artifice—of her robe—and paint her naked so that the truth may literally be dis-covered. Bare simplicity is now the key to finding truth, or as Pope writes: “‘Tis from a Handmaid we must take a Helen” (l. 194). Furthermore, this seemingly impenetrable barrier to knowing women is reinforced when Pope writes that they are “Bred to disguise” (l. 203). Pope’s verb choice seems to suggest that disguise is so valuable a trait for women to have that it has been isolated, cultivated and purposefully passed on.

Here arises another problem for Pope to ponder: If art cannot reveal the truth, indeed, if it actually serves to mask it, then what is the purpose of the portraits? What do fictional portraits in a fictional gallery, painted by reflected light and reflecting only incomplete or artificial and infinitely mutable characters have to offer in the way of understanding anything? Pope’s answer is suggested as he explores the two ruling passions he claims are predominant in women. Pope explains:

    The Love of Pleasure, and the Love of Sway.
    That, Nature gives; and when the lesson taught
    Is but to please can Pleasure seem a fault?

180 Nussbaum, 1987, 149.
Experience, this: by Man’s Oppression curst,
They seek the second not to lose the first. (ll. 210-214)

The answer, then, is that both these qualities are partially inherent
and partially learned, which is one way to reconcile the matter. Women love
pleasure, which is their innate character (and thus is not chosen), but to
have pleasure they must develop the ability to manipulate others into
providing it for them (which offers them no choice). Or perhaps the opposite
is true, as Pope writes: “Pow’r all their end, but Beauty all the means,” in
which case Pope’s criticism of women’s attention to their appearance would
seem unduly harsh (l. 220).

Perhaps worst of all is that these ruling passions are really no more
than pursuits—the hope for pleasure, the plan for power—not the thing itself.
As Pope describes the goal:

Pleasures the sex, as children Birds, pursue,
Still out of reach, yet never out of view,
Sure if they catch, to spoil the Toy at most,
To covet flying, and regret when lost. (ll. 231-234)

And more:

See how the World its Veterans rewards!
A Youth of Flocks, an old Age of Cards,
Fair to no purpose, artful to no end,
Young without Lovers, old without a Friend,
A Fop their Passion, but their Prize a Sot,
Alive, ridiculous, and dead, forgot! (ll. 243-248).

So it is this damned-if-she-does and damned-if-she-doesn’t pursuit of the
love of a passion—available only through artifice—that provides the key to a
woman’s character. Such is the vicious circle that leads from self-negation to
utter collapse and precludes the sort of equilibrium that might stabilize the self.

That is not to say that there is no equilibrium in the poem, but even the balance of opposing forces fails to provide a reconciliation strategy for these individuals. Accordingly, Thomas R. Edwards, Jr., finds that while Pope keeps “the opposing elements—positive social perspective and sorrowful understanding of time’s indifference—in equilibrium, the equilibrium becomes more and more difficult to sustain.”182 To support this contention, Edwards looks back to the opening address to Martha, arguing that Pope “sets a tone of teasing mock-wonder at female inconsistency that persists in the earlier satiric portraits [. . .]. But as the poem proceeds, inconsistency seems more disturbing.”183 Despite their superficial differences, all Pope’s women have the same fate:

Beauties, like Tyrants, old and friendless grown,
Yet hate Repose, and dread to be alone,
Worn out in public, weary ev’ry eye,
Nor leave one sigh behind them when they die
(ll. 227-30)

And further:

At last, to follies Youth could scarce defend,
It grows their Age’s prudence to pretend;
Asham’d to own they gave delight before
Reduc’d to feign it, when they give no more;
As Hags hold Sabbaths, less for joy than spight,
So these their merry, miserable Night;
Still round and round the Ghosts of Beauty glide,

183 Edwards 74.
And haunt the places where their Honour dy’d.
(ll. 235-42)

This haunting reflects what Edwards calls the human impulse to resist change, writing: “Women are inconstant and unprincipled, Pope has said, but at the climax of To a Lady he comes to see them in a new light. They have a kind of character, in their pathetically stubborn ‘rage to live,’ to maintain personality with all its defects against the attack of time.”¹⁸⁴

With that bleak summary, Pope can begin his panegyric to Martha which is allegedly the point of the poem. We learn that Martha, unlike other women, has a sense of constancy—“Oh! Blest with Temper, whose unclouded ray / Can make to morrow cheerful as to day” (l. 257-58)—and that she eschews “feminine” power:

She, who ne’er answers till a Husband cools,
Or, if she rules him, never shows she rules;
Charms by accepting, by submitting sways,
Yet has her humour most, when she obeys
(ll. 262-264)

As Paul Baines writes, “For a woman self-command is also, of course, self-surrender” and yet, in the best kinds of contrarieties, “The exchanges and mingling do not take place simply in columns of male and female qualities, rigidly divided, but replace and displace each other. Losing the

¹⁸⁴ Edwards 74.
'Your/Our’ markers in a limited field of interchange.”\textsuperscript{185} Again we see the image of an arch as the “columns” of qualities ascend and curve in to meet each other, and we also see that whereas woman can be happiest when she surrenders to her place, Pope’s larger message is that man, too, must surrender to his role in his middle state. Nevertheless, this does not explain why Martha seems to be praised for being manipulative and deceitful while Pope’s other women are condemned on the same charges.

Ellen Pollak speculates that the difference derives from the fact that Martha “plays by the system” and thus “reaps the rewards.”\textsuperscript{186} Curiously, Martha is praised for everything for which the others have been criticized, but this might explain why Pope writes: “And yet believe me, good as well as ill, / Woman’s at best a Contradiction still” (ll. 269-70). Pope’s portrait of Martha does offer evidence he has been unable to present before, however. As he writes:

\begin{quote}
Heav’n, when it strives to polish all it can
Its last best work, but forms a softer Man;
Picks from each sex, to make the Fav’rite blest,
Your love of Pleasure, our desire of Rest,
Blends, in exception to all gen’ral rules,
Your Taste of Follies, with our Scorn of Fools,
Reserve with Frankness, Art with Truth ally’d,
Courage with Softness, Modesty with Pride,
Fix’d Principles, with Fancy ever new;
Shakes all together, and produces—You.
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{186} Ellen Pollak, “Pope and Sexual Difference: Woman as Part and Counterpart in the ‘Epistle to a Lady,’” \textit{Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900} 24.3 (Summer 1984): 461-81; 468.
However idealized, Martha here illustrates a balance between the extremes Pope has criticized before, even as she embodies them all. This idea is reflected in Patricia Meyer Spacks’ contention that coherence comes from the “movement toward understanding which can absorb all incoherencies into their meaning.”

Rebecca Parkin, too, takes a similar view when she suggests that Pope’s “interpenetrating paradoxes” create the complexity of the work, but Pollak disagrees with both, finding neither complexity nor understanding. In fact, she claims that Pope puts forth only the illusion of complexity and suggests that there is really no reconciling to be done because

the difference that they entertain is false, so that the opposing terms they postulate can readily be mutually exchanged. The illusion of complexity (the illusion of a difference where there is none) is actually a sophisticated rhetorical strategy for obscuring an ideological simplicity, for bifurcating a premise that is singular and not, as Parkin argues, ‘polysemantic.’

Translation: Pope is just ripping women, Martha included, and what is worse, he assumes she is too stupid to feel the fist for the compliment, or so Pollak seems to suggest. It makes one wonder who has the more limited view of women.

Felicity Rosslyn takes a different tack, writing:

---


188 Pollak 471.
The vibrant tension held between opposed extremes that Pope finds here in Martha, could equally well be called the mark of a fine poem; indeed to look no farther, could be called the mark of this epistle, which constantly adapts its form to the challenging vagaries of its subject.\textsuperscript{189}

Rosslyn alludes to the function of the arch when she asserts that tension is responsible for holding the poem and its pieces together, but Taylor Corse comes even closer to describing the sort of reconciliation at work in the poem.

Corse argues that far from uniting what critics generally consider the “divided virtues” of “womanly softness and manly strength,” Martha’s reconciliation of them actually demonstrates that they are “united virtues,” that in terms of \textit{concordia discors} all virtues are one.\textsuperscript{190} After listing several of the dualities present in \textit{To a Lady}, Corse asserts that

Pope does not insist on a necessary dichotomy between these various forces, any more than he insists on a necessary dichotomy between men and women. On the contrary, his vision of woman as a ‘softer Man’ reflects his deep concern with reconciliation in general, and with the complex whole created by the harmonization of opposites.\textsuperscript{191}

Thus, to summarize, Pope at first denies that women have character, then grants that they must, but finds it well-secured behind walls of artifice and deception; he imagines what motivates them, gives up that ghost, and

\textsuperscript{190} Taylor Corse, “‘Heaven’s Last Best Work”: Pope’s \textit{Epistle to a Lady}” \textit{Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900} 27.3 (Summer 1987): 413-25; 415.
\textsuperscript{191} Corse 418.
turns to Martha only to find her fundamentally no different from the rest—
except for the fact that she has managed to integrate some masculine
qualities into her personality. This integration, however, allows Martha a sort
of constancy that provides not only stability, but also predictability, which is
a valuable commodity, indeed. For example, Pope writes:

Oh! blest with Temper, whose unclouded ray
Can make to morrow cheerful as to day;

Spleen, Vapours, or Small-pox, above them all,
And Mistress of herself, tho’ China fall. (ll. 257-268)

Consequently, the stage is set for us to evaluate these masculine
characteristics in To Cobham. Considering the variety of shared themes and
strategies, the transition is a natural one. As Leranbaum notes:

Both poems begin by describing individuals as
contradictory, inconsistent, changeable, and irrational;
stress the vast difficulties inherent in the effort to
comprehend and judge human character; next invoke the
Ruling Passion as the only principle capable of explaining
character; and finally insist on the force and strength of
its influence “ev’n at life’s expense.”

Although Leranbaum suggests that To a Lady is best read as a progression of
To Cobham, she does allow that To a Lady concludes by “focusing on the
theme of virtue as a balance between two extremes or Vices—a theme that
the following moral essays [. . .] use centrally.” This includes To Cobham
where the struggle is not to reconcile external and internal forces, but the
competing lateral forces of the Ruling Passion itself, as Pope’s theory seems
to simultaneously explain and give rise to man’s apparent inconsistencies.

——

192 Leranbaum 80.
193 Leranbaum 80.
In contrast to the reconciliation of contradictions between appearance and reality that are the focus of *To Cobham*, the contradictions in the women of *To a Lady* are deeply internalized, and thus are not so easily reconciled. Indeed, the inability to rely on reconciling mere appearances in the face of a seemingly Pyrrhonic and ubiquitous inconstancy in *To a Lady* leads Noggle to write that Pope “finds feminine self-contradiction even in the positive, concluding character of Martha Blount” despite the fact that his correspondence regarding Martha sometimes took a different tack.\(^{194}\)

Pointing to Pope’s note on line 269, that Martha is “The Picture of an estimable Woman, with the best kinds of contrarieties,” Noggle notes that in a letter to Bethel dated November 2, 1736, nearly a year after *To a Lady* was published, Pope writes of Martha: “her Virtues & her Weaknesses go hand in hand; I don’t know which are greater: but every one who is her friend on account of the first must fret at the latter” (*Correspondence*, IV: 40). Noggle claims that this puts Martha firmly in the “complex feminine world of mingled virtue and inconstancy described by the poem,” and yet he finds that Pope is still “most often disposed to assert her distinctive virtue.”\(^{195}\) To illustrate, Noggle cites a letter to Swift dated February 16, 1733, when Pope was working on *To a Lady*, wherein Pope writes: “Your Lady friend is *Semper Eadem*, and I have written an Epistle to her on that qualification in a female character” (*Correspondence*, III: 349). This spurs Noggle to write:

\(^{194}\) Noggle, 2001, 176.
\(^{195}\) Noggle, 2001, 176.
The facetiousness here—the poem in fact *denies* all women ‘that qualification’ of constancy—should not obscure the fact that Pope habitually referred to Martha in his letters as ‘always the same.’

For Noggle, however, this makes the final assertion of Martha’s contrariety all the more puzzling.

Character requires consistency, yet the women in *To a Lady*—even Martha in her reconciling role—fail to achieve it, and according to Noggle, Pope

perpetuates this view in part as a response to the ‘Stoic’s paradox’ [. . .]. Though ‘Contradiction’ has been seen as the source of vice [. . .] he concludes now that contradiction characterizes ‘good as well as ill.’ We find virtue mysteriously: we may neither resolve contradiction by a Stoic act of will nor simply condone it in all its forms.

Perhaps it is this impossibility that gives rise to feminist critics’ condemnations. Nussbaum, for one, claims that Martha’s compliment is too little too late: “the unexampled portrait of Martha Blount does not ease or negate the moral earnestness of the earlier portraits; it intensifies the disdain the narrator affects toward the sex.”

Likewise, Pollak argues that heaven’s best work is not good enough because Martha remains on the low end of the totem and “indeed in his very reverence for her ‘difference’ from the inferior sameness of the ‘other women’ he reinscribes her status both as object and

196 Noggle, 2001, 177-76.
197 Noggle, 2001, 178.

133
inferior.” Noggle counters that Pope’s praise of Martha “indeed sets her among the women whose virtue he had mocked, as an object, as passive, as contradictory, as soft, and most significantly, as another portrait, another product of his own feminized art” but that he does so “as part of his larger effort to discover a value in inconstancy even as he sees it in the source of all vice. In fact, Noggle continues:

He does so in order to see the inconstant world as it is—both sunsets and the moon are traditional symbols of inconstancy, after all—and through such a vision he reasserts his own worldly, undogmatic, sophisticated persona, superior to the inconstancy around him but only because he lets it define his values and affections as well as his authority to attack the vicious.

As a result, Noggle concludes that

Pope’s feminism, or his sympathetic identification with the feminine and with inconstancy or contrariety, derives from his antifeminism, or his recognition that immorality consists in inconstancy that is essentially feminine and feminizing—and his blending of these two attitudes into a potently contradictory one constitutes his most subtle work not just regarding women but as a moralist in general.

Accordingly, Rosslyn writes that the portrait of Martha “enables Pope to do what the anti-feminine satirists have never done before, to discover that men and women are not irreconcilable opposites after all.” Nor are man and his universe, apparently.

---

199 Pollak 110.
200 Noggle, 2001, 179.
201 Rosslyn, 1990, 113.
Chapter 8 - **A Proper Study: To Cobham**

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
The proper study of Mankind is Man.
Plac’d on this isthmus of a middle state,
A being darkly wise, and rudely great:
(*Essay on Man*, Epistle II, ll. 1-4)

Having explored the inexplicable in *To a Lady*, Pope turns his attention to what he calls the “proper study,” the study of mankind. Aligning *To Cobham* with the second epistle from *Essay on Man* is hardly groundbreaking. Pope himself conceived of these two together, and even while noting some affinity with the fourth epistle, almost all critics agree that *To Cobham* is intended to illustrate the utility of the Ruling Passion as Pope had introduced it in the *Essay on Man*. To critics who charge that *To Cobham* develops only a single strand of the second epistle of *Essay on Man*, one can answer that such is the case for all of the *Moral Essays*, but they do develop the key strands, and so on the whole, they can be said to be illustrative of the epistles that make up the *Essay on Man*.

First published in January 1734, *To Cobham* endured repeated revisions in subsequent editions, which is almost a trademark of Pope’s work. Pope’s compositional method sometimes seems representative of the Lego building block school, where he snaps together and breaks apart the passages of his poems and reconfigures them for different effects, but in the
case of the 1744 text (or the “death-bed” edition), Bateson’s tracing reveals a reconstruction of an earlier version (TE III.ii: 4). By looking back to and working from the 1735(a) edition—the edition in which the four epistles under consideration here were first published together as the “Ethic Epistles”—Pope seems to reinforce the importance of the group as an entity, as well as the role of To Cobham within that group.

Like To a Lady, this epistle is framed as a conversation, but the dedicatee does not do much talking. While the first few lines are crucial to establishing Cobham as a pragmatist with an interest in observing human nature (however fruitless such observations may prove), we do not see him again until the poem’s closing lines, where the final compliment paid to his (albeit projected) dying words distinguishes him from men of meaner motives.

Pope also handles contradictions in To Cobham in much the same way as he handled them in To a Lady. While societal expectations are responsible for the vertical thrust in To a Lady, resulting in the individual women’s inability to realize their true characters, the thrust that inspires To Cobham is the difficulty of knowing oneself and others. Accordingly, “how to know” is the overarching theme. This search for knowledge is further informed by the lateral thrusts of identifying motivations and observing actions, but the stakes here are higher. Man must find some method of reconciling motivation and action, and he must find a way to restrain his Passion with
Reason, because the failure to do so will result in nothing less than “a monstrous, immoral human being,” as Donald B. Clark contends.202

Pope begins by presenting the seemingly chaotic nature of man, as he is beset by inconsistency and inconstancy that results in contradictions of character. From this perspective we can see that if a man is like a work of architecture, and can therefore be read as a building (as we have seen Fussell imply earlier), then To Cobham points out how difficult that reading is. Like the affected characters in To a Lady, the scaffolding might obscure the pile. Nevertheless, following the poem’s “Argument,” the Ruling Passion not only influences the ways in which men “build” character, but more importantly, it alone can “reconcile the seeming or real inconsistency” of a man’s actions. As such it functions as a sort of individualized concordia discors, representing the microcosm of the man within the macrocosm of mankind.

To illustrate the workings of this theory, Pope must first provide examples of chaotic and contradictory behavior that so confound us. Recalling Pope’s letter to Caryll, in which he writes, “Good God! What an Incongruous Animal is Man?” we know this task will not be nearly as difficult as finding a way to order the chaos. Yet only after having established that framework can Pope present an example of how the Ruling Passion illuminates the darkness and clarifies man’s seemingly inconsistent actions.

Pope’s success in this regard is qualified at best, and many critics find the Ruling Passion theory either insufficiently developed or insufficient to unify the poem, if not both. Perhaps it is for this reason that of the four, this epistle is the least able to stand alone outside the framework of the *opus magnum*, and perhaps that is why it has garnered far less critical attention than the other epistles in this group. Leranbaum even argues that *To Cobham* “is not—nor was it meant to be—entirely self-sufficient and convincing without a reading of the *Essay*.” While she maintains that the work functions as a unified poem—despite “a complex set of injunctions, qualifications, and objections”—Leranbaum also reiterates that it assumes a familiarity with Pope’s theory of the Ruling Passion, and further asserts that it is “in accordance with the *opus magnum* plans” that *To Cobham* demonstrates “only the utility of the principle.”

Explication of the theory gets short shrift, indeed, as Pope writes:

In this one Passion man can strength enjoy,  
As Fits give vigour, just when they destroy.  
Time, that on all things lays his lenient hand,  
Yet tames not this; it sticks to our last stand.  
Consistent in our follies and our sins,  
Here honest Nature ends as she begins.  (ll. 222-27)

Yet Pope’s failure to fully explain the complexity of the Ruling Passion is less important than the theory’s failure to be predictive. As Leranbaum writes: “No man’s behavior can be a model from any other man’s; no man’s behavior can be examined in part” and “not until his death can we have sufficient evidence of the strength and consistency of the particular Ruling Passion.”

---

203 Leranbaum 69.
Passion that sways any particular individual.” So what good is it? For Leranbaum, it serves a mighty purpose, indeed, and that is to prove that man cannot ever know. As she explains, “In combination with all the other qualifications of its usefulness, this last one effectively enforces the effort—begun in the Essay on Man—to undermine man’s aspirations to divine omniscience.” So while this epistle may focus on the process of knowing by way of the Ruling Passion, knowing is not the ultimate goal; rather striving to achieve a sense of self-awareness that will allow one to restrain Passion with Reason, and also to be a fair judge of others, is the best for which man—in this middle state—can hope.

Achieving this self-awareness is no easy task, and Pope details the difficulties that must be overcome. These include not only our own biases and self-deceptions, but also the instability that is apparently inherent in human nature, and the deception of others, as well. The portraits Pope uses to illustrate these difficulties are decidedly unflattering, revealing men as they are, not as they should be. With both masked and malleable motives, men are shown to act on impulse and on urges as individual as the personalities, themselves. As Leranbaum characterizes them, these men are “restless, obstinate, contradictory” and even “perverse.” Worse yet, they lack any awareness of their flaws.

In light of this, it is difficult to understand how some critics can claim that Pope’s portraits of women in To a Lady are uniquely derogatory. Both

\[\text{Leranbaum 68.}\]
poems offer a “warts and all” view of their subjects (save the dedicatees, of course), and *To a Lady* might even contain more raillery than rage, but there is at least one other considerable difference. Where *To a Lady* confirmed the difficulty in knowing not only the universe, but also others in it, *To Cobham* focuses on the difficulty of not only knowing others, but also of knowing oneself. Sadly, the Ruling Passion seems to have little to offer toward that end because in all the sketches presented, the passion is apparently unknown to its bearer. This is particularly true of Wharton, who gets the only extended sketch.

For Leranbaum, this portrait serves two ends; it allows Pope to mock Wharton while simultaneously vindicating his theory. She writes:

Wharton is so very singular, seemingly capricious and contradictory that [...] if the principle of the Ruling Passion is successfully applied to him, its worth will have been triumphantly demonstrated. Wharton is the epitome of the kind of wildly inconsistent behavior that in the earlier portion of the poem was isolated as unfathomable by conventional theories of character.\(^{205}\)

The sheer length and thoroughness of the portrait also suggests that no aspects of character have been suppressed or glossed over in this analysis, and as the whole of Wharton’s life is reviewed, Wharton is made “plain.” The reader comes to realize that it is Wharton’s lust for praise that has driven him the whole way, as Pope writes:

Tho’ wond’ring Senates hung on all he spoke,  
The Club must hail him master of the joke.  

Enough if all around him but admire,

\(^{205}\) Leranbaum 67.
And now the Punk applaud, and now the Fryer.

Thus with each gift of nature and of art,
And wanting nothing but an honest heart;
Grown all to all, from no one vice exempt,
And most contemptible, to shun contempt;

A Fool, with more of Wit than half mankind,
Too quick for Thought, for Action too refin’d;
A Tyrant to the wife his heart approves;
A Rebel to the very king he loves;

Ask you why Wharton broke thro’ ev’ry rule?
’Twas all for fear the Knaves should call him Fool.
(ll. 184-207)

Never mind the comparison with To a Lady’s Atossa, if, as Fussell claims, a man is like a building, To Burlington offers a better analog: Wharton is the walking, talking embodiment of Timon’s villa—he is too, too much!

Yet while Wharton’s ruling passion might have driven him to his end, Noggle believes the Ruling Passion actually prevents Wharton from achieving what it is intended to allow. In this way, the Ruling Passion forces its own failure, as Noggle explains:

Far from allowing him to achieve the “perfect Tranquillity” to which the wise man aspires, Wharton’s ruling passion is just what prevents him from doing so. In Wharton’s case, the ruling passion appears to have the unbreakable power to prevent its subject from ever recognizing that he has it—reflecting the Essay on Man’s rather different emphasis on the ruling passion not as explanatory but as essentially deceptive: “The ruling Passion, be it what it will, / The ruling Passion conquers Reason still” (ll. 148-9). Similarly, in Cobham’s illustration of it, Wharton “turns repentant, and his God adores / With the same spirit that he drinks and whores” (ll. 188-9): to do each contradictory activity “with the same spirit,” he must fail to recognize he is doing so. There seems something necessarily self-thwarting about the ruling passion, rendering it more uncanny than self-stabilizing in the eudaemonistic sense: “His Passion still, to covet gen’ral
praise, / His life, to forfeit it a thousand ways’ (ll. 196-7). While discovering Wharton’s ruling passion shows that the problem of interpreting others may be solved, it does not address the ancient dilemma of locating and mastering one’s true inner self: rather it intensifies Pope’s skepticism about this possibility.\(^{206}\)

This “perfect Tranquillity” though—the architectural equivalent of which is the dome—is never achievable by a single man while he is stuck in his middle state, and it is the vacillation between extremes, not the reconciliatory theory of the Ruling Passion that is to blame in regard to Wharton’s wild behavior. In reality, man might be seen as little more than a caryatid who carries the load of the material world on his shoulders, but if he is able to properly direct the thrusts which bear down upon him, he might be in a position to strive for a higher knowledge.

This point of higher knowledge is represented by the keystone at the apex of the arch and corresponds to Aristotle’s middle point of virtue, but it can only be approached by way of extremes. So Noggle’s argument that the Ruling Passion is in itself deceptive misses the point. I also think Noggle weakens his argument when he suggests that the sketch of Wharton is really a secret, self-loathing self-portrait of Pope, but his point on the impossibility of Wharton’s plight must stand. Moreover, Noggle introduces the skeptical strain that so often appears in other critics’ study of this work.

\(^{206}\) Noggle, 2001, 165.
Both Christopher Fox and John Sitter explore the skeptical mode in *To Cobham* and both argue that the poem takes the form of an argument between the poem’s dedicatee and Pope’s persona. Cobham claims that men can be known by observation, while Pope, in the role of skeptic, disagrees. Noting Sextus’ use of a set of scales to represent the operative principle of the Skeptic system, that of “opposing to every proposition an equal proposition” and adding that Montaigne can be seen balancing the scales throughout his *Apology*, Fox suggests that Pope employs a set of scales of his own in *To Cobham*. Pope uses these scales “to balance Cobham’s position and to criticize received ways of reading human character” says Fox.  

For example, Pope writes:

> Not always Actions show the man: we find  
> Who does a kindness, is not therefore kind;  
> Perhaps Prosperity becalm’d his breast,  
> Perhaps the Wind just shifted from the east. (ll. 61-4)

Not only does Pope “balance the scales” by suggesting alternative reasons for an apparently kind action, but he also utilizes another of Sextus’ strategies, that of the “non-assertion.” More specifically, by suggesting a possible reason—“Perhaps prosperity” or “Perhaps the wind”—Pope is simultaneously acknowledging the very opposite: perhaps not. As Pope continues [emphasis added]:

> But grant that Actions best discover man:  
> Take the most strong, and sort them as you can.

---

The few that glare each character must mark,
You balance not the many in the dark.
What will you do with such as disagree?
Suppress them, half, or call them Policy?
Must then at once (the character to save)
The plain rough Hero turn a crafty Knave?
Alas! In truth the man chang’d his mind,
Perhaps was sick, in love, or had not din’d.
Ask why from Britain Caesar would retreat?
Caesar himself might whisper he was beat.
Why risk the world’s great empire for a Punk?
Caesar perhaps might answer he was drunk.
But, sage historians! ‘tis your task to prove
One action Conduct; one heroic Love.
(ll. 71-86)

While Thomas Stumpf argues, those “sage historians” are to blame for endowing Caesar “with such an impossible ‘character’ to begin with,” the fact remains that we are confounded when confronted with the task of reconciling a man’s actions with his motives because there are too many possibilities to consider. Furthermore, as these endless possibilities preclude any certainty of judgment, such inconstancy of character becomes undesirable. This might explain why sage historians feel compelled to create a sense of consistency (where none may truly exist) by imparting noble motives (where none can actually be proved), as Pope writes: “‘tis your task to prove / One action Conduct; one, heroic Love.” Even Caesar would probably fail to live up to our expectations for him, if he, rather than historians, offered the reasons behind his actions. Likewise, Pope explains:

In vain the Sage, with retrospective eye,
Would from th’ apparent What conclude the Why,
Infer the Motive from the Deed, and show,


144
That what we chanc’d was what we meant to do.
(ll. 51-4)

Not only do actions fail to reveal motives, but motives also fail to predict actions. Neither does a long reputation for good deeds preclude one from acting on chance, by impulse, or for nefarious reasons in any specific instance. How else would one account for an otherwise right-acting man acting inappropriately? Status and role are not good indicators of character either, although they are often the standard used. As Pope writes:

’Tis from high Life high Characters are drawn;
A Saint in Crape is twice a Saint in Lawn;
A judge is just, a Chanc’lor juster still;
A Gownman, learn’d; a Bishop, what you will;
Wise, if a Minister; but, if a King,
More wise, more learn’d, more just, more ev’rything.
(ll. 87-92)

We are no doubt justified in expecting right actions from those in positions of responsibility, but Stumpf claims that Pope shifts the satire here “from a condemnation of those who expect consistency [to] those who fail to provide it.”\(^{209}\) Pope simultaneously ridicules the gap between the morality people expect from those in power and the actual moral debasement of those same people. The higher we go on the social ladder, the more we expect, yet by the time we reach the level of the King, we are ready to expect a god. Of course, as a member of the Opposition (however nominally), Pope would likely see such characters from high life as low-lifes, indeed.

Still, while Pope would certainly maintain that people in high places should have high standards, he warns against evaluating anyone’s actions

\(^{209}\) Stumpf 352.
based on their position. He also suggests how social or familial expectations can encourage character roles and mistaken evaluations. With a series rivaling the Occupational Outlook Handbook, Pope deflates the supposed correlations between role and character, as he writes:

Boastful and rough, your first son is a 'Squire;  
The next a Tradesman, meek, and much a lyar;  
Tom struts a Soldier, open, bold, and brave;  
Will sneaks a Scriv’ner, and exceeding knave:  
Is he a Churchman? Then he’s fond of pow’r:  
A Quaker? sly: A Presbyterian? sow’r:  
A smart Free-thinker? all things in an hour. (ll. 103-109)

A victim of stereotyping, himself, and debarred from the formal ranks of power and privilege by virtue of being both a Catholic and a cripple (though a phenomenally successful outcast nonetheless), Pope might be expected to be especially sensitive to these sorts of gross judgments. Noggle, though, sees these flat characterizations a bit differently. Claiming that Pope endorses clichés even as he dispenses with them, Noggle holds:

[T]he final reference to the ‘freethinker’ finally collapses skeptical and typed characterizations, inasmuch as the figure’s typed attribute, extreme inconstancy, is the same one Pope has used to cast doubt on the interpretation of character by type [and thus] Pope’s skepticism leads him to a fertile confusion.\textsuperscript{210}

If the freethinker is what he is, he cannot be what he is? So it seems. If stereotypes are undercut by inconstancy, then how does one type such inconstancy? Wrestling this idea into submission, however, will not solve the problem Pope poses because as difficult as it might be matching motive to behavior and assigning value to a person, another factor complicates matters.

\textsuperscript{210} Noggle, 2001, 164.
even further—namely, man’s own inner inconsistencies or even inconstancy.

As Pope writes:

That each from other differs, first confess;
Next, that he varies from himself no less:
Add Nature’s, Custom’s Reason’s, Passion’s strife,
And all Opinion’s colours cast on life.
(ll. 19-22)

This sort of inconsistency also appears in Montaigne’s writings, but according to Noggle, Pope disagreed with the Pyrrhonism of Montaigne’s position. While Pope would certainly agree that knowledge is difficult to come by, I do not think he would suggest that all knowledge is, itself, uncertain.

Notwithstanding Pope’s probable rejection of Pyrrhonism, Noggle asserts that skepticism still gives Pope “the assurance that he is avoiding simplistic assessments of others’ motives and characters” which lends both a “moral sensitivity and a literary sophistication” to the work.\(^\text{211}\) However, by focusing on the impossibility of judging others, the skeptical approach can also act as a double-edged sword, as a satirist who cannot judge is no satirist at all.

Fox, in contrast, looks to Locke rather than Montaigne to reconcile man’s inconstancy, or the “two visions of the self.”\(^\text{212}\) To begin his argument, Fox introduces the metaphor of flux that is apparent in both Pope and Locke’s work, even tracing Locke’s river imagery in the following passage:

Our depths who fathoms, or our shallows finds,

\(^{211}\) Noggle, 2001, 162.

Quick whirls, and shifting eddies, of our minds?
Life’s stream for Observation will not stay,
It hurries all too fast to mark their way. (ll. 29-32)

According to Fox:

Pope here posits the dual nature of experience in consciousness, of the self looking outward on the ever-fleeting stream of human experience and, simultaneously, reflecting on its own operation. And what we observe on both levels, Pope intimates, is a state of incessant change and successive motion, the continual hurrying of “life’s stream” both within and without the self. 213

Fox considers this a central motif, as Pope “repeatedly portrays the puzzling ways the ‘same man’ is, ironically, not the same any two moments of his life.”214 The following passage clarifies Fox’s point:

See the same man, in vigour, in the gout;
Alone, in company; in place, or out;
Early at Bus’ness, and at Hazard late;
Mad at a Fox-chace, wise at a Debate;
Drunk at a borough, civil at a Ball,
Friendly at Hackney, faithless at Whitehall.
(ll. 130-35)

While this might simply show that man is capable of playing roles, it also brings to mind the metaphor of the arch, where man’s behavior spans from one extreme to another and can only find a balance somewhere between. Even more in line with Locke’s imagery, the figure of the arch also suggests a fluidity of motion, but because it is also the most stable of structures, one might argue that Locke’s stream is not sufficiently comprehensive to encompass Pope’s view.

213 Fox, 1988, 124.
214 Fox, 1988, 124.
Obviously being slightly tipsy at borough and ball is not Pope’s idea of a proper reconciliation. Such would be equivalent to Fairer’s example of a perpetual drizzle, but this passage does offer one example of a what could be considered a “happy medium”—namely, being right on time. Still, it seems that no simple scheme can explain a man’s character, and because the man depicted here is not likely to achieve such a steady state, his behavior cannot be predicted. For that reason alone, he can never be trusted. It is from this basis that Stumpf traces the negative view of inconstancy throughout history.

Thus *To Cobham* further develops Pope’s view on the perils of inconsistency and inconstancy as introduced in *To a Lady* by demonstrating that inconsistent actions reveal an inconstant character. More importantly, however, while skeptics might view this inconstancy with some detachment, other works that no doubt influenced Pope’s attitude—such as Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputation*—offered a less accommodating perspective. Dryden, too, as well as Hobbes and Shaftesbury, even Prior, had expressed their own concerns over this tendency toward change and self-contradiction as a moral failing.

Benjamin Boyce avoids the morality of the situation entirely, however, emphasizing instead Pope’s prolific use of antithesis. He writes: “Indeed Pope developed a habit of progressing by oppositions and sometimes invented imaginary antitheses in order to give life to a creature not in himself
very complex or interesting.” Such a casual approach to inconsistency meets with criticism from Stumpf. He suggests that where Boyce sees Pope’s delight in *concordia discors* as no less than a “delight and wonder at the complexity of *la comedie humaine*, a delight which almost precludes serious moral judgment,” he is gravely mistaken, insisting that Pope views the inconsistency negatively. Stasis, though, is as undesirable as the extremes of inconstancy in Pope’s view, so I would argue that Pope’s position characteristically lies somewhere between that of Stumpf and Boyce. More specifically, Pope seems to suggest that man must have some freedom of movement within a spectrum of right behavior, and an ultimately and permanently resolved reconciliation would not allow that.

As Sitter asserts, Pope “does not offer a static explanation for a dynamic phenomenon; instead his reader is conducted to a perspective from which he may comprehend the constancy of motion.” Moreover, to delight in *concordia discors*, is not to delight in chaos. A fuller reading of Mack’s earlier cited contention that Pope cherished “the *ad hoc*, recognizing the flux, variety, and disorderliness of experience” also shows that he does so while “upholding the conviction that there are kinds, categories, precepts, maxims, 

---

216 Stumpf 342.
schemes, and general truths, and that experience in the long run adds up to an order—or would, if one’s perspective were wide enough.”

Still, the individuality of man poses other complications. As Pope writes:

There’s some Peculiar in each leaf and grain,
Some unmark’d fibre, or some varying vein:
Shall only Man be taken in the gross?
Grant but as many sorts of Mind as Moss. (ll. 15-18)

Pope seems almost mystified by the care with which men will sort and label varieties of moss and yet insist on ascribing the character of man based on a generalization of types. More importantly, Pope uses this passage to introduce the idea that there are as many variations within man as between men, as Sitter writes:

The next step, quickly taken, is to insist as well on internal diversity, that each ‘varies from himself’ no less than from others. The phrase is clearly a logical paradox, since it both affirms and denies the existence of a single self. But Pope feels little need to argue the point, perhaps because he is now drawing upon a skeptical and introspective tradition [. . .] which emphasized man’s own internal contradictions, stressing the paradox, more than the paradise, within.

While Sitter’s attempt to explain inconstancy in light of skeptical tradition is on target in one respect, it fails in a more important one: it does not address Pope’s goal of finding a way to reconcile these paradoxes, rather than simply acknowledging them. The key for Sitter seems to be in the process of gaining a self-knowledge that will both reveal and thus remove our biases.

218 Mack, 1969, 204-5.

219 Sitter 441.
Pope describes the biases that result from perception, projection and passion, when he writes:

Yet more; the diff’rence is as great between
The optics seeing, as the objects seen.
All Manners take a tincture from our own,
Or come discoulour’d thro’ our Passions shown.
Or Fancy’s beam enlarges, multiplies,
Contracts, inverts, and gives ten thousand dyes.
(ll. 23-28)

“If one is alert to metaphors as well as logic,” Sitter writes, “it is clear that Pope wishes to stress the connection between self-knowledge and knowledge of others. The categories are deliberately conflated.”

Knowing ourselves is crucial to being able to understand others, and as Sitter explains, since the “complexity and mutability of those we observe” should remind us of our own, any “proper inspection implies proper introspection.”

However, the obstacles that impede knowledge of others affects our attempts to know ourselves, as well. To complicate matters further, passion, projection and perspective are not alone in distancing us from ourselves and others; our Reason is complicit, too. As Pope noted six months prior to the poem’s publication, in a letter to Fortescue dated June 7, 1733: “All our Passions are Inconsistencies, & our very Reason is no better” (Correspondence, III: 374).

With phrases such as “retrospective eye” and “dim vision,” and by characterizing our motivations as both “tost” and lost somewhere amid the

220 Sitter 441.
221 Sitter 442.
"Passions’ wild rotation,” Pope highlights our failure to fairly judge our own behavior. On this point Sitter remarks:

This insistence moves the reader rapidly from the airy discussion of other people’s inconsistencies to the mysteries of his own motivation and the feebleness of even his private vision of himself. Pope’s intent, I believe, is to chasten the reader’s skepticism—the pseudo-skepticism of the overly confident—and transform it into real and rigorous humility. The initial strategy is such that the reader, if he grants Pope’s exposition, should enter the illustrative middle section of the poem (51-173) with a strong sense of his own inconsistency and self-delusion.\textsuperscript{222}

Thus, here in the middle section of the poem, the reader finds a conflation between the extremes of self and other that mirrors the extremes of motivation and action that form the basis for the arch. This suggests that the necessary reconciliation requires not only the ability to judge another, but to judge—and thereby moderate—one’s own action and motivation. Additionally, the flux to which Mack refers is also an important element in reading this poem in terms of an arch. It is the constant and active thrust that holds the voussoirs in place and allows the arch to stand, and this is reflected in the constant movement apparent in Pope’s poem. Again this accords with Fox’s allusion to Locke’s river imagery.

Verbs such as “hurries,” “snatch,” and “tost” all suggest conflict, motion, unpredictability and impermanence, adding to the destabilization threatened by the “Quick whirls” and “shifting eddies” of “Life’s stream for Observation.” The result is the seemingly futile nature of any attempt to

\textsuperscript{222} Sitter 442.
make a judgment before the situation—or the character—changes. This recalls the chameleon image from *To a Lady* and Pope’s difficulty in capturing even the reflected images of his women given the instability of the media with which he must work, but in *To Cobham*, Pope characterizes the difficulty this way:

```
On human actions reason tho’ you can,
It may be reason, but it is not man:
His Principle of action once explore,
That instant ‘tis his Principle no more.
Like following life thro’ creatures you dissect,
You lose it in the moment you detect. (ll. 33-40)
```

Just as killing to discover the secrets of life is made impossible by that very act, taking aim at a man’s action to identify his motivation makes that moving target all but invisible. To put it another way, while one might be able to judge a man’s actions, the “clothes” of his behavior do not make the man.

This sense of fluidity and instability reflects the failure to find a principle of permanence and thus prevents Pope from “fixing” an idea of the self, but while Fox finds this “problem” resonating throughout Pope’s work, I believe Pope rejects the idea of a fixed identity, favoring instead a predictive character. To be predictive, character must be stable, but it need not be static. By locating behaviors within a defined range—by seeking a middle
course—man can find that emotional center that will allow for flexibility, but will also allow him to know himself and be known to others.

However, the problems of bias, inconsistency, inconstancy and deception that Pope has presented as obstacles to achieving such predictability are compounded by the introduction of chance. This element of chance functions primarily in two ways, either by leveling results or by provoking divergent reactions. For example, a fifty-fifty chance might allow a philosopher to get lucky with his maxim—or a parroting bird to correctly ascribe character to a guest—but chance, as happenstance, can create situations to which different people react differently. As Pope writes:

> Behold! If Fortune or a Mistress frowns, Some plunge in bus'ness, other shave their crowns: To ease the Soul of one oppressive weight, This quits an Empire, that embroils a State: The same adust complexion has impell’d Charles to the Convent, Philip to the Field. (ll. 55-60)

Not only do people react differently to the same stimuli, they characterize their situations in light of their own interests. Such is the case with Scoto, as Pope writes:

> Ask men’s Opinions: Scoto now shall tell How Trade increase, and the World goes well; Strike off his Pension, by the setting sun, And Britain, if not Europe, is undone. (ll. 158-61)

This passage suggests that a lack of control over events causes Scoto to generalize his interpretation of them. When things are good for Scoto, things are good for everyone, but if Scoto should feel a pinch, the world will darken accordingly. A similar conflict between power and powerlessness besets Sir
Balaam in *To Bathurst* when he accords his success to his wit and his ruin to a cruel God, but Cobham provides the necessary contrast to all three examples of misinterpretation. On his dying day, we will see that despite the capriciousness of life around him, Cobham will remain true to his country. Cobham’s success derives from the fact that he is cognizant of both the extent and the limits of his own power, and furthermore, this recognition gives him the ability to empathize with others.

All that granted, however, Pope must still reinforce his assertion that while it might be true that “Actions best discover man,” one cannot judge a man’s character by his actions because “Not always Actions show the man: we find / Who does a kindness is not therefore kind.” Nor can a man even know his own motivations with certainty since the element of chance that arises from an external force is complemented by another sort of chance, namely the subconscious impulse. As Pope writes:

> Oft in the Passions’ wild rotation tost,  
> Our spring of action to ourselves is lost:  
> Tir’d, not determin’d, to the last we yield,  
> And what comes then is master of the field.  
> As the last image of that troubled heap,  
> When Sense subsides, and Fancy sports in sleep,  
> (Tho’ past the recollection of the thought)  
> Becomes the stuff of which our dream is wrought:  
> Something as dim to our internal view,  
> Is thus, perhaps, the cause of most we do. (ll. 41-50)

By lining up all these barriers, Pope creates no less than a labyrinth of contradictions that seems to defy navigation. In light of this, the Ruling Passion theory seems a paltry weapon.
Consequently, a reading that minimizes the centrality of this theory to the poem might offer a way to find unity not only within this work, but also throughout the Moral Essays as a whole. Indeed, the dualistic Ruling Passion theory presented in To a Lady essentially collapsed in upon itself, and while it serves a sort of concordia discors reconciliatory role here and in To Bathurst, where some suggest it takes on a Mandevillian tinge, the Ruling Passion transforms itself into the “Genius of the Place” by the time we arrive at To Burlington, so it might be instructive to consider a slightly different unifying theme, namely the difficulty of knowing. Such a view would also find To Cobham placed more naturally as second in sequence, as the difficulty of ascertaining the truth about the human character is continued from To a Lady.

Thus, starting with the question, “How does one know truth?” Pope leads us through fictional situations that at once demonstrate the difficulty of discovery. In the first few lines he writes: “And yet the fate of all extremes is such, / Men may be read, as well as Books too much” (ll. 9-10). Although both methods of acquiring knowledge suffer from the same limitation, as one is “drawn from Notions” and the other from “Guess,” our partiality to our own experience would keep us trapped at one end of the spectrum. To get a more accurate perspective, we must learn to navigate between these extremes, incorporating the knowledge of others with our own experience.
Furthermore, as there is no one best way to discover man, and as there is no type that will serve to simplify a characterization of all men from just one man—no “black, brown or fair” here—there is no single way of interpreting an individual’s behavior. If we then put aside the elusive quest for objectivity that has obstacles of its own, and add the observer’s subjectivity to the mix, it becomes apparent that burdened with prejudices, caught up in a stream of changing circumstances and deceived all around, both the observer and the observed are in a constant state of inconstancy that would seem to preclude any sort of accurate judgment.

Pope’s method here can be compared to that used in *To a Lady* where similar concerns threaten to undermine understanding, but in *To Cobham*, Pope does not seem to suggest that instability equates with an inexplicability that denies any possibility of understanding. The task is not easy, though, and Pope’s accumulative illustrations do have the effect of erecting one barrier after another, which suggests not only the difficulty in breaking through to the truth, but also the sort of persistence and determination necessary to constantly maintain a steady course. This sense of compounding is seen both in the poem’s structure and in specific passages, such as in lines 19-24 where the additive transitions—first, next, add, yet more—point to the obstacles ahead. However, as evidenced by the failure of the sage who tries to reconstruct meaning from experience, there are obstacles behind us, as well. While a few men are easily known, such “plain Characters” are rare, and in those who seek to craft an image, “Affectations
quite reverse the soul” (ll. 122-25). The inequity between motive and deed often reveals a conflict, too, as Pope writes:

Or Falshood serves the dull for policy,
And in the Cunning, Truth itself’s a lye:
Unthought-of Frailties cheat us in the Wise,
The Fool lies hid in inconsistencies. (ll. 126-29)

Taken together, these lines reveal a straightforward message behind the confusion: actions and associations are not always related in the way we would initially—or instantly—interpret them. Outlining a series of conflicting actions with assumed associations, Pope writes:

Who does a kindness, is not therefore kind,
Not therefore humble he who seeks retreat,
Who combats bravely is not therefore brave,
Who reasons wisely is not therefore wise, (ll. 62-69).

The truth is that pride might send a man into retreat, and the bravest warrior may simply have the strongest fear of death. As for he who reasons wisely, Pope writes: “His pride in Reas’ning, not in Acting lies.” (l. 70).

Simple logic can serve us in identifying such contradictions, but something more is required if we seek to reconcile them. To this end, Pope proposes his “New Hypothesis.” As Spence defined it in the memo of May 1730 cited earlier, the Ruling Passion is that “prevailing passion in the mind [that] is brought with it into the world, and continues till death.” This new theory is anything but new, however. One can argue that none of Pope’s ideas were revolutionary, and it is most likely that Pope noted this idea from his reading of Montaigne, who wrote:
[I]n the last scene, between death and ourselves, there is no more pretending; [. . . ]

At last true words surge up from deep within our breast, The mask is snatched away, reality is left.

LUcretius

That is why all the other actions of our life must be tried and tested by this last act. It is the master day, the day that is judge of all the others.”

However, while Montaigne refers back to Lucretius, reverence for the dying day extends at least as far back as Socrates, to whom Pope referred as he set about the task of gathering up epistles that he hoped would reflect the moral quality of his own life.

The problem is this then: according to Pope, we can only know a man’s character at the moment of his death because it is at that precise moment that the Ruling Passion is discernable, however, we must be careful not to interpret our observations as would the “sage historians,” so what have we really learned? Pope will explain how the Ruling Passion can aid in reconciliation when “puzzling Contraries confound the whole,” but only after this passion is illustrated though a series of sketches-cum-psychological profiles. The illustrations serve a dual purpose, as well, offering both symmetry and a unifying feature to the poem as they appear on either side of the Ruling Passion section. To this end, they serve to demonstrate not only that life is fleeting, but also that our grasp on knowledge is equally tenuous. After detailing the difficulties of fixing a man’s principle with images of plundering patriots and perjured Princes, Pope concludes: “Know,

223 Montaigne 55.
God and Nature only are the same: / In Man, the judgment shoots at flying game” (ll. 155-56).

Just as killing to discover the mysteries of life is impossible, so too is the attempt to judge a man before his life is complete. Pope seems to contend that man builds character through actions, irrespective of motivations, but it is only by way of understanding our motives that we can restrain our Passion, and by doing so, choose those actions that will make for the most productive life. Yet even this is complicated by our tendency to value some qualities above others without clearly understood reasons; hence Swift’s spleen is favored over the flattery of a Queen in the same way that a rose competes with a ruby, despite the objective fact that they are both carbon-based forms that owe their radiance to the sun. Throw in the fact that a good result can result from a bad action, and we might decide that not even actions can be fairly judged, only their productive or destructive results.

Consequently, having established man’s mutability and his ever-changing circumstances, and having undermined the traditional methods of comprehending character, Pope demonstrates that neither Nature, actions, passion, nor opinions will get to the truth. The only way to determine a man’s character is to “Find, if you can, in what you cannot change” (l. 173), the one constant, the one immutable thing—the Ruling Passion. The fact that the Ruling Passion takes a central position correlates it to the median, moderating device—the thing that holds it all together.

So again, two-thirds of the way into the poem, the answer to all our questions is revealed in five little lines. Unfortunately, many critics contend
that it is just as quickly dismissed, and this leads to charges of insufficiency. However, Pope does not actually dismiss the theory—it is clearly the focus of Wharton’s extended sketch and the shorter sketches of character types that follow—rather he chooses to demonstrate it, not justify it. The “Design” to Essay on Man had clearly indicated that the second book of epistles—that which includes To Cobham—is not meant to explain, but to illustrate. If critics want a more fully developed treatise on the Ruling Passion, they know where to look. This alone suggests that Pope was very much aware of how these works functioned together, and what role each piece was intended to play. An architectural analogy might suggest that if a contractor wants to inspect a building’s plumbing scheme, he should look to the plan, not the elevation of the façade, to find it.

Still, the problems with this theory are not quite so easily discharged since our observation of the Ruling Passion remains subject to all the other obstacles attendant to any other behavioral observation, and for that reason, we are as likely to misread the Ruling Passion as we are any other motive, but Pope forges ahead anyway, presenting in rapid succession an entire series of characters who are quite literally “gone as soon as found.” From the rev’rend sire leching to his last and the hoggish Helluo yelling for his jowl, we see characters whose ruling passions not only explain their lives, but also offer insights into their current situations and even seem to bring about their very ends. As Pope writes:

The frugal Crone, whom praying priests attend,  
Still tries to save the hallow’d taper’s end,  
Collects her breath, as ebbing life retires,
For one puff more, and in that puff expires. (ll. 238-241)

Additionally, one cannot overlook the small complication that this passion is only validated upon expiration. The benefits might be useful indeed, as Pope describes how this theory unravels all the obstacles that have been placed between the seeker and the truth:

Search then the Ruling Passion: There, alone,
The Wild are constant, and the Cunning known;
The Fool consistent, and the False sincere;
Priests, Princes, Women, no dissemblers here.
(ll. 174-77)

Inconsistencies, inconstancy and deception are all wiped away in a flash as the Ruling Passion is identified, and all the loose ends of a man’s life might now be brought together, but if the subject is dead, what good is it really? Nussbaum’s dismissal of Martha’s reconciliation in To a Lady might also seem appropriate here: it is too little too late.

However, one should not discount the value of an exemplum that relies on retrospective vision. As Cobham’s compliment makes clear, those with self-awareness need not wait until death to guide their actions with an understanding of their motivations. In predicting the Ruling Passion that will be evident upon Cobham’s death, Pope demonstrates Cobham’s relative stability as well as his selflessness, morality and integrity, nay, even his constancy in such an arguably inconstant world. Moreover, Cobham seems to have followed his Ruling Passion so closely throughout his life, that it is predictable prior to his passing. Cobham stands alone in this key position, however, for the remaining character sketches show nothing if not the paradox of searching for the truth of men’s characters. Sadly, a life
characterized by flux hurries to a static standstill in death, although perhaps this explains why the ruling passion is apparent only upon death—because at that moment the movement between extremes must come to an end.

Pope was not far from his own death as he was making his final revisions to this epistle, and so his desire to publish a “definitive edition” of his works could be considered as a death-day pronouncement of his own in yet another attempt to control his image, even after his death. Accordingly, Pope’s moral statements are meant to reflect on his moral stature, but the difficulty of finalizing such an image is made clear in *To Cobham*. As Noggle contends, Pope’s own lust for praise has colored much of his legacy. Nevertheless, despite the predictive limits of the Ruling Passion that threaten to undermine Pope’s aim, if we consider *To Cobham* as “take two” on the problems faced in reaching an understanding of “truth” and consider the way self-awareness offers a means of moderating our own behavior, then we have a successful illustration of man truly in relation to himself.

Yes, becoming aware of biases and subconscious impulses in the pursuit of this much-needed knowledge requires a vigilant attention to motive, and granted, sometimes action is the only available evidence, but the resolution offered in the final third of the poem—just as it did in *To a Lady*—suggests a link between what has gone before and lights a path that points forward to what could come. Although structurally these sections of the poems are in the wrong place, conceptually they correlate to the middle third of the arch, that area in which conflicting extremes find their overlap.
Over the course of the poem, then, Pope has set out a number of apparent contradictions, but because his chief concern is determining how a person can judge another’s character, we find that the first conflict arises between ways of knowing. Which will afford the best process, learning from books or from experience? Cobham, the poem’s dedicatee, is shown to favor the idea of observing men and judging them by their actions, but Pope illustrates the obstacles that undermine such an approach, such as inconstancy, inconsistency, chance, flux, bias and deception. In the end, only the Ruling Passion is capable of revealing man’s motive and reconciling his seeming inconsistencies, and yet this theory relies both on maxim and observation itself. Therefore, Pope’s reconciliatory theory must first reconcile the two contradictory ways of knowing by finding a middle way between them.

As the vertical thrust—the difficulty of knowing—beears down on an individual, he must reconcile the lateral thrusts, that is, he must reconcile his motivation with his action, and in so doing, restrain his Passion with Reason. Cobham, as the poem’s dedicatee, sets the example and represents the Aristotelian point of virtue, or in my reading, the keystone of the arch. He represents not just the middle point that holds the structure together, but in fact represents man’s highest reach in his middle state. Cobham’s behavior is predictive because he has achieved a self-awareness that allows his Reason to restrain his Passion. For this reason, his motivations are easily reducible from his actions, and likewise, his actions transparently represent his motives. The divide between motive and action is no longer
insurmountable; the two are no longer seen as opposing forces, but complementary ones, each requiring the other for a complete understanding. As it bridges not only the “two visions of self” Fox describes, but also unites man’s awareness of himself and others, we can see that this arch is complete and is now self-sustaining.
Chapter 9 - **Between the Ends: To Bathurst**

Self-love forsook the path it first pursu’d,
And found the private in the public good.
(*Essay on Man*, Epistle III, ll. 281-82)

Having looked at man in relation to the universe, and man in relation to himself, Pope turns his attention to man as a part of society. As Clark summarizes it, "The ruling passion allied with reason allows that virtue nearest our vice to become dominant; lust becomes love, or self-love becomes love of others."\(^{224}\) This is not so neatly laid out in *To Bathurst* as Clark’s quote might suggest, but the extremes between vice and virtue are amply developed nevertheless.

Indeed, Pope spent the better part of two years working on this epistle, and as he wrote to Swift in a letter dated February 16, 1733, "I never took more care in my life of any poem" (*Correspondence*, III: 348). In a letter to Caryll a month earlier, Pope writes of *To Bathurst*, "It is not the worst I have written, and abounds in moral example, for which reason it must be obnoxious in this age. God send it does any good! I really mean nothing else by writing at this time of my life" (*Correspondence*, III: 340). This comment follows his exhortation to Caryll that he would prefer to see Caryll’s grandson a “good man than a good poet; and yet a good poet is no

---

\(^{224}\) Clark 86.
small thing, and (I believe) no small earnest of his being a good man”
(*Correspondence*, III: 340). Pope, who sought to be a moral poet as
strongly as he sought to be a “correct” one, turns this elevation of his ethic
work on a framework of parables to demonstrate not only the right use of
wealth, but also the proper use of a man’s life.

According to Pope’s own letters and Spence’s record, *To Bathurst*, first
published in January 1733, was written with the *opus magnum* in mind and is
arguably the single most integral work of the entire scheme. Perhaps this is
why Pope’s manuscripts reveal a difficult progression in organizing and
revising this work, as Leranbaum writes: “It is paradoxical that the poem
that seemed clearly in Pope’s mind at the very earliest stages of planning the
*opus magnum* should, when finally completed, appear to him to be only a
qualified success. On the other hand, one may see the difficulties of
composing the poem and its final lack of independent status as stemming
from precisely these early beginnings.”

That Pope considered *To Bathurst* as part of the larger scheme is
evident from his letters to both Jacob Tonson and to Swift. To Tonson, in a
letter dated June 7, 1732, Pope expresses his hesitation about publishing *To
Bathurst* outside of the larger framework of the *opus magnum*, as he writes:
“I have no thoughts of printing the poem (which is an epistle on the *Use of
Riches*) this long time, perhaps not till it is accompanied with many others”
(*Correspondence*, III: 291). Pope even argues against reading individual

---

225 Leranbaum 90.

168
sketches contained in the epistle apart from the others, as he writes: “to send you any of the particular verses will be much to the prejudice of the whole; which if it has any beauty, derives it from the manner in which it is placed, and the contrast (as the painters call it) in which it stands” (Correspondence, III: 290). He similarly appeals to Swift’s patience when, in a letter dated February 16, 1733, he writes:

I have declined opening to you by letters the whole scheme of my present Work, expecting still to do it in a better manner in person: but you will see pretty soon, that the letter to Lord Bathurst is a part of it, and a plain connexion between them, if you read them in the order just contrary to that they were publish’d in. I imitate those cunning tradesmen, who show their best silks last

Pope further explains the connection that will link the individual elements of his scheme, writing:

[M]y works will in one respect be like the works of Nature, much more to be liked and understood when consider’d in the relation they bear with each other, than when ignorantly look’d upon one by one. (Correspondence, III: 348)

Always attentive to the conception of the whole, Pope did not want the individual epistles that were to make up his opus magnum to be considered as mere elements, however nice they might be in isolation, but as elements working together to effect a larger design. This recalls Pope’s contention in To Burlington that clapped together Palladian elements do not necessarily result in Palladian architecture.

This epistle is distinct from the other three that make up the group, however, and Clark specifically notes an interesting difference in its conversational quality. While Pope remains relatively detached from his
dedicatee in *To a Lady*, takes a contrary position to his dedicatee in *To Cobham*, and directs the future work of his dedicatee in *To Burlington*, he makes a concerted effort to persuade his dedicatee in this poem, pitching a Christian sermon to the pagan Bathurst.\textsuperscript{226} Nevertheless, the overarching topic in this poem is avarice, and what stands out most distinctly in the strongest portraits is the contrast between public and private appearance and public and private behavior. Another difference to note is that here extremes are not reconciled in an idealized portrait of the dedicatee, as we have seen in *To a Lady* and *To Cobham*, but Bathurst still plays a central role, in that it is he who can teach us how to achieve reconciliation.

Another difference between this epistle and those that have come before can be found in its focus. Pope is no longer content merely to identify inconsistencies in human nature, nor even to reconcile them, but rather he now turns his attention to the consequences of such unresolved extremes. These consequences are considerable, and so the poem is complex. To wit, Bateson has complained that “Pope’s trouble was that he was at least as interested in a lot of other things besides the ‘two Extremes of a Vice’” (*TE* III.ii: xxiv) and he packs all those things into *To Bathurst*. Even Mack, who takes a narrower approach by focusing on Pope’s criticism of the new merchant class, and more particularly on its failure to attend to the moral and political responsibilities that result from newly acquired wealth, also notes the poem’s sermon-like quality, pointing to the numerous parables that

\textsuperscript{226} Clark 109.
Pope uses to support his argument. Like the earlier epistles, however, *To Bathurst* still combines philosophy with exemplum to illustrate rather than explicate Pope’s message.

Perhaps the elements featured most prominently in this poem are money (especially paper money) and credit (especially paper credit), with the devaluation of currency from a “gold standard” to a more easily manipulated index opening up a whole new world of opportunities for vice. The origin and government of the Ruling Passion are also back in play, connecting *To Bathurst* to the first two epistles, and the coinage imagery seen in *To a Lady* gets a featured role here as a shower of coins completes Balaam’s corruption by evil forces. This poem does seem to escalate Pope’s argument, though, as it contemplates not only character, nor even the link between morality and character, but also the effects of a moral or an immoral character on society. This, in turn, requires an examination of the link between morality (which is narrowly considered here as the right use of riches) and the Ruling Passion.

Assuming that the message we are to glean from the earlier epistles on identifying character (or achieving any knowledge for that matter) is that the process is complicated, complex, tenuous and ultimately uncertain and requires a reconciliation of extremes, *To Bathurst* continues the theme. For Barrell and Guest, the discrepancies between Old Cotta and his son serve to exemplify Pope’s mediation between the “representation of moral behavior as naturally or providentially determined and as subject to the control of the
To support this argument, one can look to the passage that precedes the sketch of Old Cotta, and consider it as the standard by which to judge the Cottas’ behavior. As Pope writes:

Hear then the truth: “‘Tis Heav’n each Passion sends,
  ‘And diff’rent men direct to diff’rent ends.
“Extremes in Nature equal good produce,
“Extremes in Man concur to gen’ral use.”
Ask we what makes one keep, and one bestow?
That Pow’r who bids the Ocean ebb and flow,
  Bids seed-time, harvest, equal course maintain,
Thro’ reconcil’d extremes of drought and rain,
Builds Life on Death, on Change Duration founds,
  And gives th’ eternal wheels to know their rounds.
(ll. 159-70)

In Barrell and Guest’s interpretation, Pope here assures that “extremes of behavior are the means by which God produces the general good of the whole of human society.” I think this passage offers something more than that, though, because while it does point out how nature has reconciled extremes, it also suggests that men can reconcile extremes of passion, and in so doing, achieve a moral balance.

For Edwards, this passage not only harkens back to a key doctrine in Essay on Man, but finds its axis there, the “moral center” that directs the construction of the whole. Clark makes an important point, too, when he writes that this doctrine of reconciled extremes “offers a solution, not in an ideal state of existence, but in this real ‘fallen’ world,” explaining:

---

227 Barrell and Guest 122.
228 Barrell and Guest 125.
229 Edwards 57.
The state of reconciled extremes is the true state of moral virtue, not a statement of Mandevillian economics. Divine providence in its infinite wisdom creates the prodigal and the miser. Man, however, is still responsible and obliged to seek perfection; but, since man cannot attain total perfection, providence reconciles the extremes which men create out of themselves and thus fulfills its divine purpose and harmony in individual men, just as it fulfills cosmic harmony through *discordia concors*.230

---

With the exception of Clark, these critics all point to the providential reconciliation through *concordia discors* as Pope’s central message, but what this passage actually says is that *despite* man’s actions, nature will reconcile all. The true message of the poem relates to man’s actions. A focus on the *concordia discors* or even on the Mandevillian theory of economics ultimately distracts from Pope’s aim because his portraits do not illustrate nature’s reconciliation, but either man’s proper or improper use of nature’s resources. The behaviors presented by characters such as the Cottas, the Man of Ross and Sir Balaam suggest exemplary behavior to either emulate or eschew. Man might not be able to achieve within his lifetime the sort of perfect reconciliation nature will achieve over time, but he can certainly try to act with self-knowledge and moderate his behavior, and more importantly for Pope, he should try to.

230 Clark 111-12.
Recalling Fairer’s attention to Pope’s use of the word ‘reconcile’ as discussed in Chapter 6, we can acknowledge that reconciliation for Pope does not equate with “coming-to-terms,” and so we can look to extremes of the lines quoted above (“Thro’ reconcil’d extremes of drought and rain, / Builds Life on Death, on Change Duration founds”) to argue that just as building life on death does not level the two terms, and just as founding duration on change does not suggest a fixed pattern, such constructive terms do offer a sort of stability by fostering the process of integration or interdependence between the opposing forces. In terms of poetic creation, this sort of reconciliation is far superior to the almost accidental, leave-it-to-Providence reconciliation Barrell and Guest fall back on.

However, if a man’s passion is heaven sent and deterministic (as it directs different men to different ends), the idea of individual responsibility is in jeopardy. Trying to change one’s God-given passion would be tantamount to role rebellion, a thwarting of God’s will, and Pope has already shown us what chaos results from that in To a Lady. Perhaps too perfunctorily, Pope offers up the following passage to explain away the inconsistency:

“The ruling Passion, be it what it will,
“The ruling Passion conquers Reason still.”
Less mad the wildest whimsy we can frame,
Than ev’n that Passion, if it has no Aim;
For tho’ such motives Folly you may call,
The Folly’s greater to have none at all. (ll. 155-60)

In the judo between reason and passion, however, only reason can be controlled, and this puts the individual at a disadvantage. Such a contradiction also threatens to put the poem at a similar disadvantage in that
it suggests an outright renunciation of responsibility, which is antithetical to Pope’s philosophy. As a result, Pope attempts to clarify the idea of determinism by asserting that Passion must have a “motive,” and further he argues:

Riches, like insects, when concealed they lie,  
Wait but for wings, and in their season, fly.  
Who sees pale Mammon pine amidst his store,  
Sees but a backward steward for the Poor;  
This year a Reservoir, to keep and spare,  
The next a Fountain, spouting thro’ his Heir, (ll. 171-76)

Despite the fact that these passages seem to suggest that passions are inherent, if not predestined, and that they “conquer Reason,” Pope still argues that there is value in moderating one’s morality. To this end, the satire of To Bathurst relies not only on the reader’s ability to recognize moral inadequacies in himself and others, but also to correct them in himself. It might also be said that through his satire, Pope designs a plan for a moral life that others can use to build a constructive existence. Therefore, the winner of the struggle between passion and reason may not be a foregone conclusion, after all. As Clark explains: “Pope’s solution is close to Aristotle’s definition of virtue as the mean between two extremes: thus the character sketches of the two Cottas.”

According to Clark, the Cottas together represent the divine balance, but separately they illustrate the lack of moderation that leads to the mean. Likewise, the lack of moderation in both Cottas is so profound that they can never meet in the middle, leading Paul Alpers to describe the balance

231 Clark 112.
between them as a “violent oscillation” rather than the more leisurely equilibrium implied by Weinbrot’s conception of concordia discors.\footnote{Paul J. Alpers, “Pope’s To Bathurst and the Mandevillian State,” Essential Articles for the Study of Alexander Pope Ed. Maynard Mack (Hamden: Archon, 1968) 438-459; 444.}

Leranbaum, however, argues that working through extremes is only one of the ways in which Providence reconciles things. Even Cotta’s son’s good intentions result in no moral virtue. In contrast to the Cottas, the idealized Bathurst is an illustration of the Aristotelian virtuous man.

To grasp Pope’s message, one must realize that To Bathurst does not focus so much upon riches, themselves, as upon the potentially devastating effects such riches can have on society when controlled by corrupt people and institutions, which Leranbaum claims ultimately reflects an “inversion of virtuous and charitable motives.”\footnote{Leranbaum 91.} On the contrary, Earl Wasserman finds that riches can serve both good and evil ends, and as he writes:

Beginning with the quasi-scriptural line, “‘Tis thus we eat the bread another sows,” the speaker examines with considerable gravity and without a hint of satire the equal capacity of riches for good and evil. The paragraph (21-34) has the neatly systematic organization that has always characterized the sermon form, progressing from the individual to society to the nation: riches may preserve life or hire the assassin, help trade or lure the pirate, extend society or corrupt a friend, raise an army or betray a nation.\footnote{Earl R. Wasserman, Epistle to Bathurst (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins P, 1960) 24.}

Paul Baines also submits that To Bathurst “seems architecturally designed to offer symmetrical contrasts of unstable but dynamic relations to wealth

\footnote{176}
revolving around a core of stable civic practice.”\textsuperscript{235} He writes: “From these contrary extremes it is then possible to deduce a providentially-ordered central way.”\textsuperscript{236} This corresponds to Wasserman’s contention that Pope carefully balanced opposing sketches, or as Clark notes, that Pope’s sketches are either “positive, creative and good” or “negative, destructive and evil.”\textsuperscript{237}

All of these readings imply that the opposing forces in play can serve as abutments from which an arch can rise to a central point that will afford stability. Casting man as mason, Pope insists that man’s role is to build this arch; however, his success in raising it will depend on his having learned the lessons taught in the earlier epistles. Specifically, he must develop an awareness of his situation (the human equivalent of \textit{To Burlington’s} “Genius of the Place”) and develop the self-knowledge necessary to recognize his motives.

Leranbaum, however, takes issue with Wasserman’s reading, finding that “the three portraits that conclude the poem both parallel and invert the preceding three” rather than progressing systematically.\textsuperscript{238} She further argues that Pope has not provided a “balanced list of positive and negative uses of riches” but has instead, “loaded the dice.”\textsuperscript{239} By focusing on misuse,
Leranbaum claims Pope emphasizes not the “eats and sows” but the “riots and starves” that follows. As Pope writes:

What Nature wants, commodious Gold bestows,
‘Tis thus we eat the bread another sows:
But how unequal it bestows, observe,
‘Tis thus we riot, while who sow it starve. (ll. 21-4)

Moreover, far from being without “a hint of satire,” Leranbaum remarks on the sarcasm of the following lines:

What Nature wants (a phrase I much distrust)
Extends to Luxury, extends to Lust:
And if we count among the Needs of life
Another’s toil, why not another’s Wife? (ll. 25-8)

This passage alludes to the rationalizing men do to justify actions they know are contrary to nature, actions that are far from being supplemental to Nature’s supposed wants. In fact, the vertical force at work in this poem is essentially the duty an individual has to society, but the resultant lateral forces split off into the public image a man maintains and the rationalizations he uses to reconcile the difference between his public and private faces. These lateral forces are most evident in the sketch of Sir Balaam that concludes the poem, but the vertical forces are bearing down from the very beginning as each sketch illustrates a failure to meet such obligations.

As for loaded dice, in the description of Old Cotta we find a man who is frugal in the extreme. His avarice is explicitly judged by the standards of other frugal types (such as Bramins and Saints), but also implicitly by the country-house ideal and later sketches against which he can be compared. As discussed earlier, the country-house ethos embodies an idealized vision of proper society characterized primarily by hospitality, husbandry and
responsibility on the part of the landed class. Pope’s adherence to this ideal is evident in his description of Old Cotta, as he writes:

Old Cotta sham’d his fortune and his birth,
Yet was not Cotta void of wit or worth:
What tho’ (the use of barb’rous spits forgot)
His kitchen vy’d in coolness with his grot?
His court with nettles, moats with cresses stor’d,
With soups unbought and sallads blest his board.
If Cotta liv’d on pulse, it was no more
Than Bramins, Saints, and Sages did before;
To cram the Rich was prodigal expense,
And who would take the Poor from Providence?
(ll. 179-88)

This passage not only sets up Cotta as a miser, but reflects a broader trend toward manorial mismanagement and neglect. Accordingly, as others have looked for real-life models of Timon’s Villa in To Burlington, Kelsall finds a similarity between Cotta’s house and Stanton Harcourt as Pope described it in his letters. “Cotta’s old manor house stands as a sign of miserliness,” Kelsall writes, “but the moat choked with cress and the courtyard filled with nettles, like Stanton Harcourt, is a sign too of architectural form decaying with lost function.”

Such physical dilapidation belies a more important condemnation, however. Cotta’s negligence as Lord of the Manor is evident in his lack of hospitality—his cold kitchen—but also in his failure to provide for other needs of his tenants. In this failure, he has shamed not only his fortune, but also his birth, as his wealth was inherited as part of a tradition that held up the

240 Kelsall 70. Interestingly enough, Kelsall also compares Cotta’s house to Twickenham, which also lacks tenants or “benighted wanderers” insinuating that, like Cotta, “Pope has opted out from certain communal cares” (74).
importance of proper stewardship. According to Kenny, “the country-house ethos was particularly appropriate as an interpretative model for the early eighteenth century, simply because it was a code for the right use of wealth.”\(^{241}\) By breaking this code, Cotta proves that his behavior is not just witless, but something worse, and despite his wealth, he is without worth. This leads Edwards to maintain that Pope’s goal is to “expose the growing confusion between worldly wealth and moral value.”\(^{242}\)

Although he is also set in contrast to the Man of Ross, Cotta’s son is primarily to be seen as opposite to his father for whose actions he provides the necessary cosmic “correction,” but his moral value is no better despite his very different approach to handling his wealth. As Pope writes:

\[
\text{Not so his Son, he mark’d this oversight,} \\
\text{And then mistook reverse of wrong for right.} \\
\text{(For what to shun will no great knowledge need,} \\
\text{But what to follow, is a task indeed.) (ll. 199-202)}
\]

Moreover, Young Cotta’s prodigality stands in stark contrast to his father’s leaving the poor to Providence—that is, leaving them to find salvation through their poverty—but he accomplishes no more on their behalf in the end. It is in this way that he is contrasted with the Man of Ross, who uses his considerably smaller fortune to much greater good. The distinguishing feature is that the Man of Ross has no ulterior motives, unlike young Cotta whose generosity seems spurred not so much by an expression of love for his country, but by a Wharton-like desire to be loved by his country.

\(^{241}\) Kenny 211.  
\(^{242}\) Edwards 51.
To be sure, Cotta’s son pays a hefty price for his generosity, but he does not pay because of his good faith effort to right his father’s wrongs; he pays because he lacks the sense to strike a reasonable balance. The son swings 180 degrees away from the father in a radical over-correction that wreaks as much havoc as his father’s inattention. The adage “two wrongs don’t make a right” might be qualified here by saying that neither would two rights. Instead, as Pope explains, it is the moderate mean that elicits the best results for all involved. It matters not that Cotta’s son’s generosity is selfless because it is also foolhardy and will run him to ruin:

What slaughter’d hecatombs, what floods of wine,
Fill the capacious Squire, and deep Divine!
Yet no mean motive this profusion draws,
His oxen perish in his country’s cause;
‘Tis GEORGE and LIBERTY that crowns the cup,
And Zeal for that great House which eats him up.
The woods recede around the naked seat,
The Sylvans groan – no matter – for the Fleet:
Next goes his Wool – to clothe our valiant bands,
Last, for his Country’s love, he sells his Lands.
To town he comes, completes the nation’s hope,
And heads the bold Train-bands, and burns a Pope.
And shall not Britain now reward his toils,
Britain, that pays her Patriots with her Spoils?
In vain at Court the Bankrupt pleads his cause,
His thankless Country leave him to her Laws. (ll. 203-18)

Cotta’s son fails to exhibit the sort of stable patriotism that won Cobham praise, replacing it with a fashionable association that lacks conviction.

Moreover, Cobham was able to balance self-love and social love, where as Cotta’s son seems determined to sacrifice himself for the recognition of others. One possible explanation for the discrepancy that sees Cobham well regarded and young Cotta run to ruin is a successful negotiation of the via
media. The ability to moderate behavior in the service of loyalty is what wins the rewards, not the loyalty itself. So when Pope wonders: “And shall not Britain now reward his toils, / Britain, that pays her Patriots with her Spoils?” we know that young Cotta will not be awarded a prize like Marlborough’s: there will be no Blenheim for him.

Charting a conscientious course down the via media, however, would seem to contradict the idea of a passion’s pre-determined direction. Pope writes:

The Sense to value Riches, with the Art T’enjoy them, and the virtue to impart, Not meanly, nor ambitiously pursu’d, Not sunk by sloth, nor rais’d by servitude; To balance Fortune by a just expense, Join with Oeconomy, Magnificence; With splendour, charity; with plenty, health; Oh teach us, Bathurst! Yet unspoil’d by wealth! That secret rare, between th’ extremes to move Of mad Good-nature, and of mean Self-love. (ll. 219-28)

So the lesson that Bathurst can teach us is that generosity and selfishness are not necessarily as contradictory as the adjectives that Pope uses to describe them would make it seem. That is to say that madness and meanness are the true contradictions. Self-love can be good-natured, too, but madness and meanness are less able to coexist. Thus, contradictions only arise if one insists on a single, one-sided, reading of what Pope is putting on offer, for example, that one must be somehow be meanly good-natured and madly selfish to achieve a so-called “balance” between the extremes.
In addition, we have learned that passion not only exists (perhaps as generosity), but that it also directs (perhaps toward a ruinous plentitude), and yet reason can restrain it, as Bathurst shows by offering a hospitable table to tenants and yet managing resources in such a way as to preserve their capacity to keep giving. There is no fixed middle point, but rather a sort of dance—the push and the pull—between the two; again, this is very much the idea of the arch as the individual voussoirs work in relation to, but also in a constructive tension with, their neighbors.

Hence, not only the theme of the earlier epistles is carried forward in this poem, but the ultimate reconciliation strategy is the same, as well. In To Bathurst, as in the other epistles, Pope clearly seeks to exemplify and encourage “good” behavior, but as we have seen before, it is sometimes difficult to pin down when Pope is evaluating the behavior exhibited or the motivation that inspires it, even though, on the whole, Pope seems more concerned with the effects rather than the causes of behavior. In light of the difficulty inherent in determining motivation, one might argue that behaviors can really only be fairly judged based on their effects, as suggested in To Cobham. Any other attempt at making a moral judgment would be subsumed in variables and hypothetical considerations.
The money metaphor further complicates matters in that paper money and paper credit, rather than the bartered exchanges of old, make identifying corrupt motives even trickier. *To Bathurst* describes Pope’s aversion to the new currency, considering it as an encroachment on morality and honest practice. Pope writes:

Blest paper-credit! last and best supply!  
That lends Corruption lighter wings to fly!  
Gold imp’d by thee, can compass hardest things,  
Can pocket States, can fetch or carry Kings;  

A Statesman’s slumber how this speech would spoil!  
“Sir, Spain has sent a thousand jars of oil;  
“Huge bales of British cloth blockade the door;  
“A hundred oxen at your levee roar.”

Pregnant with thousands flits the Scrap unseen,  
And silent sells a King, or buys a Queen. (ll. 69-78)

A wad of notes is easier to conceal than a hundred bales of hay, as Pope exclaims: “Oh! that such bulky Bribes as all might see, / Still, as of old, incumber’d Villainy!” (ll. 35-6), but what would one do with all the tea in China? The portability and versatility of paper money combine to make it all the more potent and morally corrosive. More importantly, with so many transactions now shielded from view, distinguishing the morally sound from the morally bankrupt is more difficult. As if they were not pesky enough to begin with, motivations are now even further obscured.

Further undermining the stability of a righteous economy is the fact that neither paper money nor paper credit may have real backing, that is, they may be based only upon the promise of payment or the promise of value. With no intrinsic value, money is merely a “representation,” and
recalling the representational quality apparent in To a Lady, we find once again that artifice is in conflict with the naked truth. 243

Accordingly, in To Bathurst, Pope uses the instability of credit and paper currency to reinforce the theme he presented in both To a Lady and To Cobham, namely the difficulties inherent in coming to know the truth. The mystery of the unknowable is then further extended from the problem of understanding oneself and others to the difficulty of detecting the “root causes” underlying any particular situation. As in the earlier poems, Pope again offers a sketch instead of an explanation to illustrate how difficult recognizing moral behavior and establishing “worth” can be. Like Cobham’s projected patriotism-onto-death and the slightly masculinized portrait of Martha, Pope introduces his last sketches with an appeal to his dedicatee—“Oh teach us, Bathurst!”—and he follows this with depictions of even more extremes between which we must learn to navigate.

Having illustrated what not to do in his sketches of the diametrically opposed Cottas, Pope now introduces examples that, if followed in tandem, might suggest behavior we should adopt. Driving home the issues raised in the earlier epistles, Pope insists that in order to reach a state of harmony, we must find a way to accommodate contradictory extremes. This middle way is the moral way.

Enter the Man of Ross and his opposite, Sir Balaam. Mack describes the Man of Ross as “a sketch of the ideal townsman or civic leader.” Alpers has a slightly different view, suggesting that “Pope is trying to pass off a freak as a hero.” Both are more or less accurate statements. The Man of Ross is an ideal, and thus represents an unrealizable goal. Nevertheless, as he represents the positive extreme, the Man of Ross stands in contrast to Old Cotta, as well as Balaam. The Man of Ross not only meets his manorial responsibilities, but he even takes on spiritual qualities. He recalls not just Moses when he bids water from a rock, but even the Messiah, himself. As Pope writes:

The MAN OF ROSS divides the weekly bread:  
Beyond yon Alms-house, neat, but void of state, 
Where Age and Want sit smiling at the gate:  
Him portion’d maids, apprentic’d orphans blest,  
The young who labour, and the old who rest.  
Is any sick? the Man of Ross relieves,  
Prescribes, attends, the med’cine makes, and gives.  
(ll. 264-70)

Actually, the Man of Ross seems hardly human as Pope describes a few of his characteristic feats: “Who taught that heav’n directed spire to rise?” and “Who hung with woods yon mountain’s sultry brow?” (ll. 253, 261). As creator and provider of all good things and the giver of laws, the Man of Ross is no less than a God on earth. Such might make one feel a bit inadequate in comparison, but Pope is not setting up the Man of Ross as a

244 Mack, 1985, 516.  
245 Alpers 454.
model for mere mortals, rather the Man of Ross is but one end on the continuum. Pope attempts to historicize him in his note on line 250, writing:

The person here celebrated, who with a small Estate actually performed all these good works, and whose true name was almost lost (partly by having the title of the Man of Ross given him by way of eminence, and partly by being buried without so much as an inscription was called Mr. John Kyrle. (TE III.ii: 113)

However, the record shows that Pope fictionalized John Kyrle to some degree. Pope himself admits as much in a letter to Tonson dated June 7, 1732:

I intended to write to you my thanks for the great diligence [ . . .] you have shewn in giving me so many particulars of the Man of Ross. They are more than sufficient for my honest purpose of setting up his fame, as an example to greater and wealthier men, how they ought to use their fortunes. You know, few of these particulars can be made to shine in verse, but I have selected the most affecting, and have added 2 or 3 which I learned fro’ other hands. A small exaggeration you must allow me as a poet; yet I was determined the ground work at least should be Truth, which made me so scrupulous in my enquiries, and sure, considering that the world is bad enough to be always extenuating and lessening what virtue is among us, it is but reasonable to pay it sometimes a little over measure, to balance that injustice, especially when it is done for example and encouragement to others. If any man shall ever happen to endeavour to emulate the Man of Ross, it will be no matter of harm if I make him think he was something more charitable and more beneficent that really he was, for so much more good it would put the imitator upon doing. And farther, I am satisfy’d in my conscience (from the strokes in two or three accounts I have of his character) that it was in his will, and in his heart, to have done every good a poet can imagine.

Pope continues:

My motive for singling out this man, was twofold: first to distinguish real and solid worth from showish or plausible
expence, and virtue fro’ vanity: and secondly, to humble
the pride of greater men, by an opposition of one so
obscure and so distant from the sphere of public glory.
(Correspondence, III: 290)

The point is that it is not important for the Man of Ross to be someone the
reader can identify with because the reader is to find a balance between Ross
and his opposite as presented in the final sketch, Sir Balaam.

Vincent Carretta describes Balaam’s role in this way:

By ending the Epistle To Bathurst with the tale of Sir
Balaam, Pope transforms the poem from one that
contains scattered emblems into one that may justly be
described as an over-all emblem. We are accustomed to
eemblematic poems that begin with a visual or verbal
allegory and then proceed to explain, elaborate, and
justify that original fiction. Pope has reversed that
structure here. [. . . ] In effect, the meaning and
significance of Sir Balaam have already been explained
and justified. We see the tale as a parable or exemplum
illustrating the social and political accusations made by
the poet throughout the poem.246

Balaam offers nothing “new” to the poem, but instead confirms Pope’s
proposition in much the same way as do the concluding sketches in To
Cobham. Leranbaum does note a shift in focus, however, as Pope leaves the
societal effects of the misuse of wealth to Providence and considers more

246 Vincent Carretta, “Pope’s Epistle to Bathurst and the South Sea Bubble” Journal of

188
closely how the misuse of wealth affects the individual, arguing that “an individual’s misuse of wealth can do irreparable harm only to himself.”²⁴⁷

From this perspective, Leranbaum argues that the poem becomes more optimistic. Whereas the Cottas alternative avarice and prodigality left their tenants without tether, she implies that Balaam’s failings reflect only upon himself. That may be true, but to read Balaam’s tale as optimistic is to give optimism a dark cast, indeed.

On the darker side, as Clark asserts, the sketch of Balaam “combines the individual evils of all the other negative portraits” essentially rolling “Satan, Walpole the entire Whig politico-economic immorality, Calvinist doctrine and urban money values” into one.”²⁴⁸ Still, the larger lesson comes from the juxtaposition of Balaam’s sketch with that of the Man of Ross; somewhere between these two lies the model that we can follow.

That Sir Balaam’s sketch is framed as a story is important, too. Where the Man of Ross (however real he is intended to seem) is almost a religious parable, so seems Balaam. To reinforce its illustrative quality, Pope introduces the sketch by abruptly turning the narrative in a different direction. The tone appears to become lighter as Pope makes the transition from deep conversation to what almost seems like the beginning of a fairy tale, but these lines also offer a hint at the grim conclusion to come. As the narrator proceeds:

A knotty point! to which we now proceed.

²⁴⁷ Leranbaum 95.
²⁴⁸ Clark 113.
But you are tir’d – I’ll tell a tale. “Agreed.”
Where London’s column, pointing at the skies,
Like a tall bully, lifts the head, and lyes;
There dwelt a Citizen of sober fame,
A plain good man, and Balaam was his name:
(ll. 337-42)

This reference to London’s column will later be contrasted with the spire the Man of Ross “teaches to rise.” It might also be compared to the memorial obelisk Pope constructed in his garden to honor his mother after her death, but where the Man of Ross’ good deeds inspire a rise heavenward, and Edith Pope’s obelisk suggests the same,\textsuperscript{249} Pope pointedly describes London’s column as “pointing at” the sky. This is no happy accident.

Erected to memorialize the rebuilding of London following the Great Fire of 1666, the column concomitantly served as a rebuke to Catholics, to whom the monument’s inscription ascribed blame, thereby pointing an accusatory finger at them. The fact that it towered over the town, rising even higher than Trajan’s pillar in Rome, extended the insult far and wide with an intent to cower Catholics with its symbolic power. By yoking Balaam to this allusion, Pope provides the first indication that he is no “plain good man.”

Granted, at first blush, Balaam looks like a model citizen, as Pope writes:

\begin{quote}
Religious, punctual, frugal, and so forth;
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{249} Cheryl O’Neil, \textit{Alexander Pope: Reflections of the Man in His Garden} 9 September 2002 <http://www.br.cc.va.us/oneil/pope.htm>. O’Neil argues that as the just as the focal point of a cathedral is the altar and the focal point of Pope’s garden is the obelisk, this memorial to his mother represents an altar of Pope’s devotion.
His word would pass for more than he was worth.
One solid dish his week-day meal affords,
An added pudding solemniz’d the Lord’s:
Constant at Church, and Change; his gains were sure,
His givings rare, save farthings to the poor. (ll. 343-48)

Yet these very qualities acquire a new hue upon further consideration. First, the “so forth” tacked on to the end of line 343 immediately minimizes those qualities that initially seemed admirable enough and suggests a lack of gravity, but Balaam’s good traits grow more ironic as they are enumerated. On the worth of Balaam’s word, we might infer that Balaam’s word is his bond, but another interpretation is more likely, namely that Balaam’s word is backed by no moral collateral. This line reflects Pope’s earlier admonishment of lending practices that extended credit based not on the ability, but rather the promise, to pay, and to say that his word “would pass” indicates a certain level of deception. So Sir Balaam’s word might be seen to present an inaccurate estimation of his character and worth, but by framing it in the way he does, Pope indicates that it is the very emptiness of Balaam’s word that denotes the truest estimation of his character.

More unappealing still, Balaam collects all he can from the church, yet offers little in return—“his gains were sure, / His givings rare,”—and his idea of celebrating the Sabbath requires no sacrifice, as he solemnizes it by simply adding a pudding to his meal. Still, Balaam, at least in the beginning, is not malicious; he is just the average man seemingly motivated by self-interest rather than some higher moral calling. As he suffers temptations, however, we come to see just how thin his virtue is, and Pope gets to
reiterate his point on how difficult knowing one’s true motivations can be.

Enter the Devil himself:

The Dev’l was piqu’d such saintship to behold,  
And long’d to tempt him like good Job of old:  
But Satan now is wiser than of yore,  
And tempts by making rich, not making poor.  
(ll. 349-52)

With Satan’s appearance on the scene, Balaam’s downfall cannot be far behind. Interestingly, Balaam’s temptation is not just compared to that of Job’s, but by comparing Balaam to the truly saintly Man of Ross, we can see that Pope is suggesting that it is not the temptation itself that leads to a man’s downfall, but his reaction to it. The implication is that even had the exact same temptation been visited upon the Man of Ross, the outcome would have been much different. In contrast, the inverse argument might also seem plausible, that if not for his temptation, Balaam might have been such a man as the Man of Ross. This reading cannot be justified, however, since Balaam’s opening description has not suggested the kind of commitment to virtue that saw Christ through his temptation, and by implication, would have similarly guided the Man of Ross. In any event, the comparison alone offers the reader an illustration of the tools with which he can resist such temptations and thereby escape a disaster of the sort that befalls Balaam.

Once tempted with all the trappings of wealth and power, Balaam makes a rapid and steady descent. His parvenu status also allows Pope an additional point, as Kenny explains:
[T]he newly rich were always entering the ranks of landowners, especially during prosperous or unsettled times [and] it was desirable to emphasise the opportunity that landowning offered for the benevolent exercise of power and paternalistic enterprise through the magistracy and estate development.\textsuperscript{250}

Alas, benevolence be damned, as Balaam’s supposed saintliness is the first quality to go when riches make other opportunities available. As Pope writes:

Sir Balaam now, he lives like other folks,  
He takes his chirping pint, and cracks his jokes:  
“Live like yourself,” was soon my Lady’s word;  
And lo! two puddings smoak’d upon the board.  
(ll. 357-60)

This double whammy of self-indulgence seems to suggest that as Balaam’s power grows, he comes to see himself in a God like capacity, omnipotent at least, and thus worthy of an extra pudding for himself on the Sabbath. He subverts his religion again when he makes a deal with himself to atone for an ill-gotten diamond, vowing to attend church twice as often and give twice as much. As Pope writes:

Some scruple rose, but thus he eas’d his thought,  
“I’ll now give six-pence when I gave a groat,  
Where once I went to church, I’ll now go twice –  
“And am so clear too of other vice.”  (ll. 365-68)

With this redoubling, Balaam calms his cognitive dissonance in a way that is reflective of the additive principle seen in \textit{To Cobham}, and the functional effect is the same in that the barriers to self-awareness are exponentially increased. Although his moral antenna is a-quiver, merely the appearance of

\textsuperscript{250} Kenny 206.
virtue by church attendance and by tithing is sufficient for Balaam to maintain his sense of scruples. His outward behavior does not reveal his motivations, but Balaam’s recognition of that fact is perhaps the most damning charge against him.

A sort of numismatic succubus takes Balaam next, as Pope writes:

‘Till all the Daemon makes his full descent,  
In one abundant show’r of Cent. per Cent.,  
Sinks deep within him, and possesses whole,  
Then dubs Director, and secures his soul. (ll. 371-74)

Mack has described the shower of coins in this section as alluding to the rape of Danae, but the conflation of sex and money also suggests the image of Balaam prostituting himself. Purchased and possessed, Balaam is a changed man. Pope writes:

Behold Sir Balaam, now a man of spirit,  
Ascribes his getting to his parts and merit,  
What late he call’d a Blessing, now was Wit,  
And God’s good Providence, a lucky Hit.  
Things change their titles, as our manners turn:  
His Compting-house employ’d the Sunday-morn:  
Seldom at Church (‘twas such a busy life)  
But duly sent his family and wife. (ll. 375-82)

Even the appearance of virtue has now become a secondary concern for Balaam as the last line attests. Now he merely sends his wife and family to church to free himself up for the counting house. Having already all but substituted himself for God, Balaam has now put something even more powerful than himself in that highest position—money. No more is wealth a gift of providence, rather it is gotten by Balaam’s wiles, or “Wit” as he would

251 Mack, 1985, 520.
have it. The balance between “Church” and “Change” has likewise been
upset, since the counting-house serves as his new place of worship. Once
warped by wealth, Balaam is now further led astray by lust. Pope writes:

A Nymph of Quality admires our Knight;
He marries, bows at Court, and grows polite:
Leaves the dull Cits, and joins (to please the fair)
The well-bred cuckolds in St. James’s air: (ll. 385-88)

A whipped man, Balaam changes his friends and his habits to satisfy an
ultimately insatiable bride. The rest of the family suffers, as well:

First, for his Son a gay Commission buys,
Who drinks, whores, fights, and in a duel dies:
His daughter flaunts a Viscount’s tawdry wife;
She bears a Coronet and P-x for life.
In Britain’s Senate he a seat obtains,
And one more Pensioner St. Stephen gains.
My lady falls to play; so bad her chance,
He must repair it; takes a bribe from France;
The House impeach him; Coningsby harangues;
The Court forsake him, and Sir Balaam hangs:
(ll. 389-98)

The domino effect of grasping for money, pleasure and power has
brought an entire family to ruin; his “saintship” is left a “traitor” and a
swinging one, at that. Granted, evil forces were at work, but Balaam was
susceptible from the beginning, as his introductory sketch suggested by
virtue of not only its ambiguity, but also by its placement in the very shadow
of human evil, represented by London’s column. His tale concludes with the
following lines:

Wife, son, and daughter, Satan, are thy own,
His wealth, yet dearer, forfeit to the Crown:
The Devil and the King divide the prize,
And sad Sir Balaam curses God and dies. (ll. 399-402)
This last line is probably the most telling. Whereas Balaam came to see his rise to wealth and power as the result of his own merit, his ruin he attributes to a cruel and uncaring God, raising again the question of dominance between passion and reason, predestination and free will. Additionally, Balaam’s self-image remains in conflict with his public image, and so his rationalization continues up until his last act of non-contrition.

Most interesting of all, however, is the sort of anti-extreme at work in Balaam’s story. His decline and fall is certainly on the end of the spectrum, but Balaam himself is not presented as evil. He does not actively engage in seeking vice, he simply fails to put up much effort at resisting it. Balaam illustrates no struggle of conscience, rather he relies on simple deal making and rationalization to assuage any moral twinge. His temptations, in comparison to those of Christ, are more by invitation than inquisition. As Edwards writes:

> Pope makes no sentimental claim that this is a good man gone wrong, but there still is certain pathos in seeing a not particularly bad man destroyed because he is too stupid to resist or even recognize money’s power to excite all his worst impulses.²⁵²

Edwards goes a step further, too, when he suggests that Balaam’s mindless pursuit of wealth—a pursuit that has no selfish object in mind—is “even more contemptible than honest greed.”²⁵³

Extremes, Edwards seems to suggest, are better than nothing, and in some ways I think Pope would concur. In fact, one of the most interesting

---

²⁵² Edwards 61.
²⁵³ Edwards 61.
conceptions of extremes as presented in this epistle is that of “ends.” As Pope writes of the Man of Ross, who left behind no monument to either his life or his good deeds: “Enough, that Virtue fill’d the space between; / Prov’d, by the ends of being, to have been’ (ll. 289-90). Here Wasserman chimes in with an interesting point:

In the parish register, only these two terminal dates [of birth and death] prove that one has been. But if, like the Man of Ross, one has filled the space between these two ends with virtue, he has fulfilled the ‘ends’ of man’s earthly existence. The record of birth and death alone, which proves that one has been, is the church’s testimony to the irrelevance of wealth and earthly fame. For it is the space between these ‘ends’ that permits one to fulfill his true ‘ends.’ One’s unrecorded virtuous acts are his true fame and the ultimate testimony to his having been.254

These ends are like the abutments that restrain the arch—the extremes of birth and death—and life is the arc that connects them.

Leranbaum concludes that in contrast to both Job and the Man of Ross, Balaam is identifiable only as “an unworthy nonentity” whose distinguishing feature, like Pope’s women in To a Lady, is the evil of nothingness. As Leranbaum explains: Balaam has “no virtue, no religious beliefs, no moral principles with which to fill ‘the space between’ birth and death; he has markedly not ‘Prov’d, by the ends of being, to have been.’”255 For Leranbaum, the conclusion is simply this: “Thinking right” and “meaning well” are the “ends of being.”256 In Pope’s parlance, this would mean that a

254 Wasserman, 1960, 43.
255 Leranbaum 99.
256 Leranbaum 103.
self-aware striving, the byproduct of which offers positive benefits for both self and others, is the mark of a moral life.

In its conclusion, the sad tale of Sir Balaam preempts the reading we might have expected if we were judging from the structure of the epistles that have come before it. Here Pope fails to refer back to his dedicatee with an apostrophe that sets him firmly in the place of the keystone, but the centering that aided this arch’s construction was removed just before the Man of Ross was introduced. The arch was completed when Pope, making his equivalent comparison of Bathurst to Oxford, points forward to more men who will behave like these two, especially a man of whom the following lines will be representative. As Pope writes:

Where-e’er he shines, oh Fortune, gild the scene,  
And Angels guard him in the golden Mean!  
There, English Bounty yet a-while may stand,  
And Honour linger ere it leaves the land. (ll. 245-48)

The sketches that follow this passage are like those that followed the introduction of the Ruling Passion theory in To Cobham, that is, they are merely confirmatory. Importantly, however, this structure allows Pope to end his poem at a place where To Burlington can naturally pick up. Hence, from the desperate scene of Balaam’s demise that concludes his separation from society, Pope can introduce the hope for building society anew.
Chapter 10 - **Building Bridges: To Burlington**

Slave to no sect, who takes no private road,
But looks thro’ Nature, up to Nature’s God;
Pursue that Chain which links th’ immense design,
Joins heav’n and earth, and mortal and divine;
*(Essay on Man*, Epistle IV, ll. 331-34)

In the elevation created by *To Burlington*, we find man’s greatest redemptive act. As Norman Crowe explains: “[C]onsidered objectively, one could argue that the evolution of domesticated society is typified by the striving toward the perfection of architecture.” Accordingly, by ordering his microcosm in accord with the macrocosm, man can build his scale model of the universe. In bending the arch to make our life between the ends, we must follow the laws of nature and work within our material states, but from that foundation, we can aspire to our highest spiritual state. Through architecture and gardening, Pope proclaims, we can create an idealized environment on earth—a heaven on earth no less, to rival Timon’s hell.

This fourth and final epistle that makes up the *Moral Essays* serves as a companion piece to the third epistle, *To Bathurst*. Where *To Bathurst* explored the theme of avarice, *To Burlington* explores the theme of prodigality. From Spence’s notes on the planning of the *Moral Essays*,

---

Bateson gathers that *To Burlington* was “to be devoted to the vice of prodigality and the social function it unconsciously performs” (*TE* III.ii: xxiii). *To Burlington* takes a different tack than *To Bathurst*, however, by framing prodigality in a metaphor of landscape gardening and architecture, and it ultimately deals as much with bad taste as it does with waste. This would also explain Pope’s titular changes that develop from “Of the Use of Things” to “Of Taste” and finally, growing more specific, to “Of False Taste.”

However, Bateson continues to discredit the possibility of the *Moral Essays* as even a partial fulfillment of the *opus magnum* when he notes that Pope built *To Burlington* from an early poem he had written on gardening. He further claims that by putting the poem to dual use, Pope risked “a blurring of the lines of his philosophical argument” (*TE* III.ii: xxv). Originally published in 1731 with the title “An Epistle to the Right Honourable Richard Earl of Burlington, Occasion’d by his Publishing Palladio’s Designs of the Baths, Arches, Theatres, &c. of Ancient Rome,” this poem was also offered for use as a preface to accompany Burlington’s second collection of Palladio’s sketches, although that work was never published. For Bateson, this, too, would seem to invalidate the poem’s inclusion in Pope’s *opus magnum* scheme. To support his contention, Bateson points to a letter from Pope to Burlington dated April 4, 1731, wherein Pope writes:

> I send you the Inclosed with great pleasure to myself. It has been above ten years on my conscience to leave some Testimony of my Esteem for your Lordship among my Writings. I wish it were worthier of you. As to the Thought which was just suggested when last I saw you, of its attending your Book, I would have your Lordship think further of it: & upon a considerate perusal, If you
still think so, the few Words I’ve added in this paper may perhaps serve two ends at once, & ease you too in another respect. In short tis all submitted to your own best Judgment: Do with it, & me, as you will. Only I beg your Lordship will not show the thing in manuscript, till the proper time: It may yet receive Improvement & will, to the last day it’s in my power. Some lines are added toward the End on the Common Enemy, the Bad Imitators & Pretenders, which perhaps are properer there, than in your own mouth. (Correspondence, III: 187)

While Pope’s letter clearly states his intention for this poem “to serve two ends at once,” Bateson nevertheless discounts To Burlington as an “ethic epistle” at all, and instead all but condemns it as “something of a hotch-potch, one third philosophy, one third gardening, and one third architectural compliment” (TE III.ii: xxvi). Once again, I think Bateson is off base, and while Leranbaum concedes the points Bateson makes, she also makes note of the difference between Pope’s original version and his revision. This revision, Leranbaum argues, makes “a genuine contribution” to the Moral Essays as a whole, not only because it further develops the ideas presented in the Essay on Man, but also because as Pope recasts this poem to emphasize the theme of prodigality, he strengthens its link with the earlier epistle, To Bathurst.258

So while To Burlington might appear to be a “hotch-potch” incorporating several subjects, in all those subjects it proves to be a moral indictment of bad taste. As Pope presents it, bad taste results from a lack of good sense, and because it is this sense that is required to navigate the contrarities of existence to find a harmonious life, bad taste results in nothing

258 Leranbaum 107-9.
short of immorality. Furthermore, here, as in the earlier three epistles, the ability to “know”—in this case to acquire the requisite good sense—is threatened by inconsistency, contradiction and chance. Consistent with its placement in the Moral Essays, To Burlington seems more than a simple continuation of the earlier epistles. In many respects it can be seen as the nexus of all the problems inherent in knowing and of all the contradictions involved in achieving individual, social, physical and ultimately spiritual harmony. Helen Deutsch tags To Burlington as a continuation of the earlier epistles by writing that it

resolves the problem of character by limiting the field of inquiry to the material, by creating an oxymoronic conceptual couplet that defines the intractably idiosyncratic “use of riches” with the abstract happy medium of good taste.259

Deutsch is mostly correct in suggesting that Pope shifts his focus from unused to unappreciated “riches,” but Pope’s conception of good taste is much too complex to be relegated to a “happy medium,” and to proclaim that he has “resolved” the problem of character contradicts the poem’s theme. One might even argue that if what Deutsch claims is true, a man could spend a little on something he liked a little and claim to be a man of taste. Still, she acknowledges that the poem distinguishes Burlington from “the extremes of the miser and the prodigal,” and with this we can concur. Thus, as we have seen in the earlier epistles, the dedicatee is the key to resolving the extremes, and in the image of the arch, he functions as the

keystone that unites them. The thrusts in play here are the vertical force of Nature as it dominates man’s landscape and the lateral forces of show and use, or alternatively, beauty and use.

That this poem continues Pope’s development on reconciliation and the use of riches is reinforced by the fact that To Burlington opens almost in media res with a brief look back to the sketches of To Bathurst and only then points the way forward. Pope begins:

’Tis strange, the Miser should his Cares employ,
To gain those Riches he can ne’er enjoy:
Is it less strange, the Prodigal should waste
His wealth, to purchase what he ne’er can taste? (ll. 1-4)

Having established the relationship between avarice and prodigality, Pope proceeds to offer up examples of tasteless behavior, starting with a criticism of fashionable collecting:

Not for himself he sees, or hears, or eats;
Artists must choose his Pictures, Music, Meats:
He buys for Topham, Drawings and Designs,
For Pembroke Statues, dirty Gods and Coins;
Rare monkish Manuscripts for Hearne alone,
And Books for Mead, and Butterflies for Sloan.

Here Pope criticizes those collectors who have no true appreciation of art and antiquities, but have the resources to send forth “experts” as agents to acquire whatever items happen to be in vogue. This passage also foreshadows the books in Timon’s library that might, for all Timon knows, be
made of wood. Pope explains: “Heav’n visits with a Taste the wealthy fool, / And needs no Rod but Ripley with a Rule” (ll. 17-18). The emphasis is on a taste, not good taste, much less true taste. This sort of consumerism is what leads Deutsch to draw a distinction between To Burlington and the other epistles, writing:

While To Cobham and To a Lady attempt, however futilely, to envision and to interpret the characters of men and women, and while To Bathurst reframes the question of character within a ‘natural’ order of consumption and expenditure, To Burlington focuses the eye’s attention not on the nature of the proprietors, but exclusively on the disposition of objects themselves.260

Again Deutsch’s reading is not entirely accurate because it is this disposition of objects that reflects the disposer’s moral worth. This poem is still about people, and it is still about morality.

The catalogue of wastefulness takes an abrupt turn at line 23, when the focus shifts toward Burlington and his architectural publishing. As Pope writes: “You show us, Rome was glorious, not profuse, / And pompous buildings once were things of Use” (ll. 23-4). As it introduces many of the ideas central to the poem, this passage also suggests that Pope will not limit himself to providing examples of waste, but will instead offer an alternative. Moreover, the first couplet establishes the fact that architecture is more than mere aesthetic pleasure— it serves a purpose, just as man’s life should serve some useful purpose—and it simultaneously sets the moral tone for the poem while generalizing the larger theme. By alluding to Burlington’s publication of

260 Deutsch 107.
Inigo Jones and Palladio’s designs, this couplet also recalls the structure of earlier epistles, serving as both the initial compliment and first address to the dedicatee.

As for its praise of Burlington, Deutsch simply finds that Burlington’s allegiance to Palladianism establishes him as a paragon of virtue while his ability “to translate a lost ideal into present practice” establishes his role as a model for behavior.  

This is true on both counts, although some critics, notably B. Sprague Allen, would argue that Burlington was anything but a paragon, or even much of a Palladian.  

That criticism aside, one could contend that even if the compliment were the totality of Pope’s argument, we would still find a reconciliation theme because Burlington is presented as a vehicle for uniting the past and present.

The use of these lines to introduce the theme is particularly apt, too, because it not only insists on the dual functions of utility and beauty, but also submits that it is through architecture that the greatest act of morality can be recognized. A building is only impressive, Pope contends, when the two qualities, beauty and use, work in tandem. On the contrary, a mere profusion or excess does not magnificence make. Furthermore, as Crowe writes, "Ultimately our understanding of nature configures the way we approach both the environment that we create and the environment in which our creations reside. Thus our quest for understanding what we call 'beauty'  

261 Deutsch 107.
in architecture and cities must become an inquiry into the intrinsic idea of nature as well.” Consequently, while the building itself must meet the requirements of beauty and utility, its surrounding environment must also be taken into consideration as a part of the overall picture. Pope emphasizes this aspect of proper building here as strongly as he does building, itself.

The theme of knowing has not really shifted, then, despite its being framed in a more materially manifest way. As Pope has illustrated his position with character sketches in the earlier epistles, here he looks to the ways in which a man’s built environment represents this character to the world. Much like the way projective psychology attempts to read meaning into drawings, Pope reads character by reading a character’s attempt to craft his own environment. That the poem serves as praise for Burlington is not exactly ancillary since Burlington serves as the keystone, and is thus representative of proper moderating and navigation of the middle way, but the praise of Burlington is certainly not the entire function of the poem as some critics have suggested.

The larger message is that like a good building, a good life must balance beauty and utility; it must also handle the vertical and lateral forces, the tension and compressive forces that, if not properly balanced, threaten its very destruction. Moreover, while utility and beauty might be considered by some as poles on the continuum, Pope—like Vitruvius, Palladio and others

263 Crowe 7.
before him—in insists that a building must have some of both to be considered “good.” Once again, seeming opposites must be harmoniously reconciled.

So while the first three epistles have illustrated the difficulties of knowing truth by reconciling extremes, To Burlington finds the apt metaphor to bring it all together, to not only illustrate harmony at work, but also to point out the moral implications of both harmony and the lack thereof. It is also important to note, as Leranbaum does, that Pope moves from the “private and personal world to the world of public morality and responsibility” in this poem, further developing the theme of proper stewardship introduced in To Bathurst.264

In this public sphere, Pope pities those who attempt to “know” good taste by simply following the “rules.” As he writes:

Yet shall (my Lord) your just, your noble rules
Fill half the land with Imitating Fools;
Who random drawings from your sheets shall take,
And of one beauty many blunders make; (ll. 25-8)

Richard Feingold calls attention to the parenthetical “My Lord” in Pope’s address to Burlington, finding it especially evocative of “the class distinctions between Pope and Burlington” while simultaneously asserting “their more essential equality as artist and architect.”265 Essentially Feingold argues that a shared taste, and a shared good sense, transcends social bounds. As for imitation, Edwards makes an amusing point, writing: “Timon and his friends

264 Leranbaum 109.
imitate Burlington’s imitation of Palladio’s imitation of classical architecture.”

Of course it must be noted that classical architecture, by way of Vitruvius and the Greeks before him, imitated nature, itself, but this sort of imitation is no mere mimicry. The difference, Edwards explains, is that “where Burlington understands the reasons behind the designs, their combination of beauty and use, his imitators are concerned only with forms abstracted from practical considerations.”

Pope develops this idea further in the examples of imitations of beautiful parts that fail to grasp the concept of a beautiful whole. These imitating fools, Pope writes:

> Turn Arcs of triumph to a Garden-gate;  
> Reverse your Ornaments, and hang them all  
> On some patch’d dog-hole ek’d with ends of wall  
> Then clap four slices of Pilaster on’t,  
> That, lac’d with bits of rustic, makes a Front:  
> (ll. 30-4)

The language here suggests a haphazard “hotch-potch” without any planning, without any architecture. The individual pieces might be nice enough alone, but they are not well-integrated, and in the case of the garden-gate are also wholly inappropriate. The message is that simply following the rules, without an understanding of their purpose, leads only to more discord rather than the hoped-for harmony. This is true not only in the purchase of art or the building of structures, but as we have seen in the

---

266 Edwards 66.  
267 Edwards 66.  
268 Perhaps as a joke, Pope, himself, employed a scaled-down triumphal arch as an entry way into his own garden, as depicted in Kent’s sketch of the Shell Temple. See Martin 58.
earlier epistles, it is true in judging the characters of men and women, and in
the use of wealth, as well. Just following fashion or superficial touchstones
will not effect a true understanding of the nature of man’s world and the best
way for him to live in it, which is always Pope’s ultimate goal. Pope explains:
“Something there is more needful than Expense, / And something previous
ev’n to Taste – ‘tis Sense:” (ll. 41-2). So one can have a taste without good
sense, but not good taste. Pope must define what he means by Sense,
however, and as he does so, it becomes clear that Sense is as resistant to
definition as is the Ruling Passion.

In the previous three epistles, Pope has amply demonstrated the
complexity of human experience and the difficulty of making judgments in
the face of seeming contradictions and inherent instability. The same sort of
instability is again in play in To Burlington, but the quest for knowledge is
fraught with its own difficulties here. Rules alone will not cut it; one must
have “Sense,” but how does one go about getting it? Pope’s lines on this
point do not offer much direction, as he writes:

    Good Sense, which only is the gift of Heav’n,
    An tho’ no science, fairly worth the seven:
    A Light, which in yourself you must perceive;
    Jones and Le Notre have it not to give. (ll. 43-6)

It seems the gift of Sense is as far from our reach as an admirable Ruling
Passion. Yet, if that is the case, what hope is there for satire as a corrective
device? If there is really “no science” behind it, and if even the masters
cannot teach it, can we really criticize Timon, Balaam, and the lot for lacking
it?
The acquisition gets even more difficult when we consider that what we are really after is little more than “A Light.” We have had fleeting and insubstantial images in the earlier epistles, but like the rainbow palette in To a Lady, light is really only an idea. Not only is light nothing substantial in itself, it is no more than a reflection of something that is not. This characterization of Sense as Light only serves to reinforce its elusive nature, and if that were not enough, Sense alone is insufficient to achieve the desired end. As Pope writes:

To build, to plant, whatever you intend,
To rear the Column, or the Arch to bend,
To swell the Terras, or to sink the Grot;
In all, let Nature never be forgot.
But treat the Goddess like a modest fair,
Nor over-dress, nor leave her wholly bare;
Let not each beauty ev’ry where be spy’d,
Where half the skill is decently to hide.
He gains all points, who pleasingly confounds,
Surprises, varies, and conceals the Bounds.
(ll. 47-56)

It follows that Sense is really only the means by which to moderate the opposing forces. Just like a man’s Ruling Passion, a place has its own sort of ruling force, “the Genius of the Place” (l. 57). By working with that nature, rather than against it, and in doing so with good sense, we can reconcile the two ends of the spectrum—show and use—into a harmonious whole. Failure to do this results in such effects as Timon’s arcade-turned-wind-tunnel (which “call the winds thro’ long Arcades to roar” [l. 35]) and thereby pits nature against man’s “improvement.” An English estate has little functional use for an arcade to begin with—which is strike one against this improvement—but to build an arcade south of a newly dredged lake which
further chills the north wind that courses through it is nothing short of stupidity. Both utility, by way of appropriateness, and beauty, by way of comfort, have been compromised.

By equating Sense with the Ruling Passion we can see how this epistle takes the ideas presented in the earlier epistles in a slightly different direction. Another difference between this and the earlier epistles is perhaps more important, though, namely Pope’s take on deception. Interestingly, where deception had taken on a most immoral sense in the earlier epistles, from the deception of costume and role playing in *To a Lady* and the villainy of the liar in *To Cobham*, to the hidden transactions and self-deception of Sir Balaam in *To Bathurst*, here in *To Burlington* deception can be desirable. Specifically, Pope praises the skills of hiding, confounding and concealing when it relates to the garden. Art’s ability to manipulate perceptions is deceptive, but in this case it is a pleasing lie. The line between art’s garden and nature’s wildness is carefully blended, purposefully parlayed into a sense of art as nature, and vice versa. In this instance the line between God and gardener are blurred. Pope writes:

Consult the Genius of the Place in all:
That tells the Waters or to rise, or fall,
Or helps th’ ambitious Hill the heav’n to scale,
Or scoops in circling theatres the Vale,
Calls in the Country, catches opening glades,
Joins willing woods, and varies shades from shades,  
Now breaks, or now directs, th’ intending Lines;  
Paints as you plant, and, as you work, designs.  
(ll. 57-64)

As in To a Lady, Pope’s language in this passage clearly elicits images of painting, and in this case equates gardening with painting by using words such as “Lines” and “shades” even “Paints,” if it were not clear enough already. In fact, Spence records Pope as saying that “All gardening is landscape painting,” and a further record in Spence reinforces Pope’s painterly gardening technique: 269

The lights and shades in gardening are managed by disposing the thick grove work, the thin, and the openings, in a proper manner: of which the eye is generally the properest judge. – Those clumps of trees are like the groups in pictures, (speaking of some in his own garden). – You may distance things by darkening them, and by narrowing the plantation more and more towards the end, in the same manner as they do in painting [. . .].” 270

Yet the confusion about when art ends and nature begins is not new to this poem; the difficulty of knowing the true nature of people and events has dominated all the epistles under consideration here. To Burlington is different only because Pope now seems to promote obscuring the truth, rather than finding a process that will expose it.

While artful manipulation serves Pope as satirist, it serves the literary landscaper, too. Eighteenth-century gardens were often designed to guide and instruct in moral terms, and a properly executed garden was expected to

269 Spence, 1964, 104.  
270 Spence, 1964, 134.
be as morally enlightening as it was aesthetically pleasing. The literary quality derives from the use of artful elements—such as sculpture, inscriptions and architectural structures—placed among the natural plantings and ground contours that resulted in a sort of organic poetry. A walk in such a garden is tantamount to taking a journey toward truth. Additionally, the purposeful placement of benches and seats also helped the gardener set the rhythm and the pace, and as Stephanie Ross asserts, by “arranging vistas, orchestrating juxtapositions and preparing surprises in an appropriate sequence,” the entire event was explicitly managed.\footnote{Stephanie Ross, “\textit{Ut Hortus Poesis}—Gardening and Her Sister Arts in Eighteenth-Century England,” \textit{British Journal of Aesthetics} 25.1 (Winter 1985): 17-32.} Noting an emphasis on the word “managed,” Ross points to Horace Walpole’s description of Pope’s garden walk, as he relates that

\begin{quote}
the passing through the gloom [of the grotto] to the opening day, the returning and again assembling shades, the dusky groves, the larger lawn, and the solemnity of the termination at the cypresses that lead up to his mother’s tomb, are managed with exquisite taste.
\end{quote}

With this sort of direction, the garden takes on a linear, scenic schematic and becomes nothing short of literature, and like the best literature, it provides a moral education. Schulz alludes to as much when he notes the “paradisal analogy” of the circuit walk, and while the narrative might be linear, the curve implied by the circuit recalls not only the image of the arch, but even that of the dome, which is formed by a continuous arch turned in 360 degrees.\footnote{Schulz 2.}
Accordingly, Pope walks us through his epistles, providing the illustrative examples that demonstrate the process of knowing and elucidating his larger moral lesson. Having conducted both Martha and the reader on a tour through his imaginary picture gallery in *To a Lady*, Pope now has the reader in tow when he makes his merciless tour around Timon’s estate. Moreover, in accordance with Schulz’s suggestion that walking through the English garden is an attempt to achieve the ideal of Eden, Pope’s readers are presented with a juxtaposition of ideal and real. Pope’s method extends further, too, as the satirist juxtaposes the admirable with the despicable. Although Pope provides examples of both the admirable and the despicable, the good and the bad, the actual and the ideal, he relies on the reader to sort out the lessons implied for himself.

The contrasts between Martha Blount and Pope’s wilder women, between Cobham and Wharton, between the Man of Ross and Sir Balaam, all illustrate this process. Here, in *To Burlington*, the central negative example is Timon who is compared with the dedicatee, Burlington, but his example is dependent on the reader’s understanding of an ideal environment. As Kenny argues, “For the individual in search of personal integrity in a materialistic age” the country-house ethos “remained a touchstone of civility,” and so by these standards Timon is uncivilized. Timon’s lack of taste is not trivial because it belies his abdication of his moral responsibilities; it violates the country-house ideal. By carelessly laying out his estate and grounds, he creates a moral void rather than a morally edifying idealized space.
Perhaps some mention should be made of Pope’s use of the term villa in reference to Timon’s place. In Palladio’s parlance, the villa meant a country retreat, but as part of a working farm. Timon’s above-ground quarry of stones (an image Pope had referenced regarding Blenheim Palace) is clearly meant to be a “great house,”—and as such, it is meant to represent its owner’s great status—but its dysfunction is made clear in every area. Gibson even goes so far as to call it an “architectural Dunciad.” The dining hall is sacred where the chapel is profane, and Timon calls the place a villa, quite frankly, just because that is the term in vogue.

In fact, Timon’s villa shares much more in common with Blenheim than its mere size, and perhaps for this reason many have suggested that the latter served as a model for the object of Pope’s ridicule in this poem. However, as alluded to earlier, many models seemed an equal match. Pope’s description of Blenheim in a letter dated September 1717, is instructive enough to consider here. His estimation is as follows:

I never saw so great a thing with so much littleness in it: I think the Architect built it entirely in compliance to the taste of its Owners: for it is the most inhospitable thing imaginable, and the most selfish: it has, like their own hearts, no room for strangers, and no reception for any person of superior quality to themselves [. . .]. When you look upon the Outside, you’d think it large enough for a Prince; when you see the inside, it is too little for a

---

273 William A. Gibson, “Three Principles of Renaissance Architectural Theory in Pope’s Epistle To Burlington,” Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900 11 (1971): 487-505; 503. Gibson further notes that Pope hopes Burlington will be able to point us away from such moral disasters, noting that architecture is among the “arts extinguished by Dulness” in The Dunciad (505).

215
Subject; and has not conveniency to lodge a common family. It is a house of Entries and Passages; among which there are three Vistas through the whole, very uselessly handsome. There is what might have been a fine Gallery, but spoil’d by two Arches towards the End of it, which take away the sight of several of the windows [. . .] as if it were fatal that some trifling littleness should everywhere destroy the grandeur [. . .]. In a word, the whole is a most expensive absurdity; and the Duke of Shrewsbury gave a true character of it, when he said, it was a great Quarry of Stones above ground. (Correspondence, I: 431-2).

Of course, the lack of accommodation charge was leveled against Burlington’s own Chiswick house, too, but Blenheim here represents the same sins as Timon’s Villa. It is inhospitable, is built purely for show—and in this case it has cost the subjects of England far too much money, as it was a gift to Marlborough rather than a project funded by his own pocket. Most importantly though, it is “uselessly handsome”; it has failed to combine beauty with good use.

---

274 Jane Clark, “Lord Burlington is Here” Lord Burlington Architecture, Art and Life Eds. Toby Barnard and Jane Clark (London: Hambledon, 1995). In her fascinating discussion of Chiswick House’s curiously inconvenient features, Clark turns to freemasonry for an explanation. Noting the degree of the Royal Arch that was peculiar to Jacobite freemasonry, and which adapted the story of the Israelites return to the Promised Land and the building of the Second Temple, she traces the Masonic symbolism apparent in nearly every aspect of the house as she argues that Chiswick House is actually the equivalent of a Second Temple in honor of the Stuart line’s hoped-for return from exile, if not “a palace on the lines of Greenwich (to which it makes many references) to welcome that king home.” Seen in that light, she concludes that Burlington’s bauble “immediately appears perfectly ‘convenient’” (293).
As Pope reiterates the importance of Sense, we can see how its lack results in an incomplete project. Timon’s Villa is far from alone in illustrating a failure to reconcile the two requirements of building—use and beauty—that will turn mere parts into a whole, so to avoid such failure, Pope urges:

Still follow Sense, of ev’ry Art the Soul,
Parts answ’ring parts shall slide into a whole,
Spontaneous beauties all around advance,
Start ev’n from Difficulty, strike from Chance;
Nature shall join you, Time shall make it grow
A work to wonder at—perhaps a Stow.  (ll. 65-70)

The recurring theme of harmony and parts producing the whole is here seen to be not merely a reconciliation of beauty and use, but also a collaboration between man and nature. One must also consider the role chance plays, and the fluidity that resonates throughout the earlier epistles is evident here, too. “Spontaneous beauties” do not sprout from Reason, but they do derive from the inspiration that is driven by Sense. Importantly, when Pope describes Sense as the very soul of art, he draws a correlation between Sense and the Ruling Passion, as both are apparently God-given. Subsequently, those who possess this gift seem to be in a privileged class.

That said, it seems a bit unfair to criticize the projects of those who, through no fault of their own, lack this crucial faculty, but Pope nevertheless sets their gardens in his sights. Contrasting them with the idea of an ideal garden, Pope presents examples of gardens that have failed in one respect or
another, but especially in regard to Sense and Taste. Some are guilty of sacrificing utility for beauty, or vice versa. As Pope describes the results when Sense deserts the scene:

> Without it, proud Versailles! thy glory falls;  
> And Nero’s Terraces desert their walls:  
> The vast Parterres a thousand hands shall make,  
> Lo! Cobham comes, and floats them with a Lake:  
> Or cut wide views thro’ Mountains to the Plain,  
> You’ll wish your hill or shelter’d seat again.”  
> (ll. 71-6).

Still other gardens fail because their planners have skipped the all important first step; they have not consulted the “Genius of the place.” Villario’s garden is but one example:

> Behold Villario’s ten-years toil compleat;  
> His quincunx darkens, his Espaliers meet,  
> The Wood supports the Plain, the parts unite,  
> And strength of Shade contends with strength of Light;  
> A waving Glow his bloomy beds display,  
> Blushing in bright diversities of day,  
> With silver-quiv’ring rills maeander’d o’er –  
> Enjoy them, you! Villario can no more;  
> Tird of the scene Parterres and Fountains yield  
> He finds at last he better likes a Field. (ll. 79-88)

Despite following “the rules” of good gardening, after a decade of coercing nature into his preferred contour, Villario finds that his garden fails to please him. Perhaps it is because he has stripped the landscape of all its artful wildness that his garden has lost its ability to charm.

The fashion-forward son of Sabinus exhibits the same sort of heavy-handed approach seen in Villario’s handiwork, but he perhaps proves that following fads wreaks even more havoc on the landscape. As Pope describes this exercise in personal “taste” that decimates a father’s forest:
Thro’ his young Woods how pleas’d Sabinus stray’d,
Or sat delighted in the thick’ning shade,
With annual joy the red’ning shoots to greet,
Or see the stretching branches long to meet!
His Son’s fine Taste an op’ner Vista loves,
Foe to the Dryads of his Father’s groves,
One boundless Green, or flourish’d Carpet views,
With all the mournful family of Yews;
The thriving plants ignoble broomsticks made,
Now sweep those Alleys they were born to shade.
(ll. 89-98)

By juxtaposing the gardens of father and son, Pope highlights both the natural and the artificial. By choosing “greens” and “carpets” over “thick’ning shade,” Sabinus’ son not only destroys by way of deforestation, but eliminates the variety that produces harmony. Importantly, the father’s natural forest offered not only personal enjoyment, but also the opportunity for a patriotic participation in reforestation. This idea of reforestation as good husbandry was reinforced, if not introduced, by the publication of John Evelyn’s *Sylva* in 1644. As a result, the image of Sabinus and son recalls the image of the Cottas, but where the alternating avarice and prodigality of the latter set served as extremes that might ultimately be balanced by nature, Sabinus’ son destroys by way of “improvement.” However, young Cotta, too, lays waste to his trees, if for the Fleet rather than for fashion, but both sons consequently fail as patriots.

---

275 Gibson 499.
As is the case with the other epistles that make up the *Moral Essays*, Pope presents a longer, more detailed illustration of key points later in the poem to reinforce those made earlier in a series of shorter sketches. In this case we get Pope’s *tour de force*, the monstrosity that is Timon’s Villa. Just as Timon was most likely a composite sketch, his villa, too, is fictional, but that did not stop the chatter and attempts to identify it with an actual estate. Speculation about the Duke of Chandos as Timon led to his Cannons as a possible model for the garish estate, but Walpole’s Houghton Hall is an equally good candidate. Pat Rogers has even suggested Chatsworth as a possible source, but no true-to-life model would be likely to match the myriad of details that make Timon’s Villa the model of just about everything that can go wrong in an architectural attempt at magnificence.

The visit begins with a warning to the wary that Timon has spent a goodly sum to make his estate a marvelous sight, as Pope writes: “At Timon’s Villa let us pass a day, / Where all cry out, ‘What sums are thrown away!’” (ll. 99-100). Our guide will not be swayed by expense alone, however, and he makes it clear that every visitor is at once aware that the money employed in this venture has been but a waste. Additionally, in his quest for magnificence, Timon is apparently under the impression that size matters, as the following passage demonstrates:

So proud, so grand, or that stupendous air,  
Soft and Agreeable come never there.  
Greatness, with Timon, dwells in such a draught  
As brings all Brobdignag before your thought.  
To compass this, his building is a Town,
His pond an Ocean, his parterre a Down:
Who but must laugh, the Master when he sees,
A puny insect, shiv’ring at a breeze!
Lo, what huge heaps of littleness around! (ll. 101-109)

No finer touches are to be found here; Timon goes all out, assuming
bigger is better and leaving good sense aside. The effect the proportions
have, however, are not those that Timon intended. Actually, his stature
seems smaller by comparison, as he appears insignificant and powerless, like
an “insect, shiv’ring at a breeze.” The grossness of his creation has another
effect, too, as it reveals Timon’s meager morality and deficit of sense. The
place is also inhospitable to Timon’s guests, as we will see later.

It is important to note, though, that Timon does not just fail at his
attempts at architecture or hospitality. Rather those failures reflect his larger
moral failure. The “town” and “ocean” references do not simply emphasize
the poor proportion of the place; they serve as an analogy for Timon’s power,
and the resultant reach of his responsibility. As wealth brings power,
Timon’s position sets him up as a role model beyond his immediate estate,
as a man who should offer moral guidance to his tenants. In erecting such a
condemnable edifice, Timon flouts his responsibility. He fails to provide the
guidance required of him, or any semblance of balance for that matter, and
the surroundings suffer for it, tenants and all.

Timon’s garden has gone awry, as well. Pope has taken the
description of a proper garden and turned it on its head when he writes:

    His Gardens next your admiration call,
    On ev’ry side you look, behold a Wall!
    No pleasing Intricacies intervene,
    No artful wildness to perplex the scene;

  221
Grove nods at grove, each Alley has a brother,
And half the platform just reflects the other.
(ll. 113-18)

Predictable, uniform and artless would be apt descriptors. Ironically, without a little deception, the garden is glaringly artificial and seems to be an obvious imposition upon nature. Gardens here can be likened to Pope’s ladies, of whom he writes: “Tis to their Changes that their charms we owe” (l. 42). These are pleasing—not puzzling—contraries, and a garden is confounded without them. Another comparison can be drawn between To Burlington and To a Lady, as well. Just as Pope’s women represent the evil of negation, so too, is Timon’s garden described in negative terms, with “No pleasing intricacies,” “No artful wildness.”

All the epistles point to a variety, a mixture, and a balance between extremes as the most desirable state. One might even say that Timon’s garden lacks character. A garden with less regimentation would be allowed to grow a little wild, to take on a sort of personality that would change as it grows in harmony with nature, but Nature has no welcome place in Timon’s world. As Pope writes:

The suff’ring eye inverted Nature sees,
Trees cut to Statutes, Statues thick as trees,
With here a Fountain, never to be play’d,
And there a Summer-house that knows no shade;
Her Amphitrite sails thro’ myrtle bowers;
There Gladiators fight, or die, in flow’rs;
Un-water’d see the drooping sea-horse mourn,
And swallows roost in Nilus’ dusty Urn. (ll. 119-26)

222
Instead of artful blending, we see Timon trying to remold nature, cutting trees into statues and then sowing a statuary forest. This contrasts with the fact that rather specific guidelines for statuary placement dominated in the eighteenth century. As Spence noted:

> There’s a particular propriety of place for the statues that may best be introduced into gardens: thus Flora and Zephyrus for parterres, Pomona and Vertumnus among fruit-trees, fauns and dryads in groves, etc. [...] Statues should be adapted to the place where they are introduced: [...] water deities, for fountains and near your rivers, etc.

This does not stop Timon from putting rough and tumble, to-the-death gladiators among the gladiolas (so to speak), so his scene suffers from an incongruity that throws it out of balance. Furthermore, while Timon’s garden walk does serve as a vehicle for a narrative lesson, that lesson is neither aesthetic nor edifying. As Pope writes:

> My Lord advances with majestic mien,  
> Smit with the mighty pleasure, to be seen:  
> But soft – by regular approach – not yet –  
> First thro’ the length of yon hot Terrace sweat,  
> And when up ten steep slopes you’ve dragg’d your thighs,  
> Just at his Study-door he’ll bless your eyes.  
> (ll. 127-32)

---

276 It must be noted that Pope entertained a similarly outlandish idea, as Spence records him: “I have sometimes had an idea of planting an old gothic cathedral in trees. Good large poplars with their white stems (cleared of boughs to a proper height) would serve very well for the columns; and might form the different aisles or peristiliums, by their different distances and heights. These would look very well near; and the dome rising all in a proper tuft in the middle, would look as well at a distance” (Spence, 1964, 40).

Visiting Timon is a virtual obstacle course, with plenty of hoops to hop through before being fortunate enough to reach the host’s door. The dashes in line 129 convey a sense of breathless exhaustion, rather than a smooth and effortless amble, with the “not yet” emphasizing delayed expectations. The pass over the terrace feels more like a hike through the Sahara. Topped off with the ten individual monosyllabic words, one for each interrupting slope, the procession seems almost without end. The reward for all this effort almost seems insulting, just a view of Timon’s monster of a manse.

The rules of architecture are as irrelevant to Timon as are those of gardening. As Avril Henry remarks, Timon displays nothing but “ostentatious vanity,” and he represents the sort of men who “have no sense of architectural tradition, no responsibilities to anything other than their own proud selves.”

Like the unbalanced proportions of his garden, Timon’s unbalanced abode also reflects a moral imbalance. According to Gibson the correlation between the architecture of a house and the morality of its owner was repeated throughout the eighteenth-century by writers such as John Dennis, James Thomson, Shaftesbury, and others. More importantly, Gibson contends that these writers believed that architecture that did not follow the proper guidelines constituted “destructive assaults on [the] moral, religious, 

and social order." Bad building reflects not just bad manners, but a bad person behind it all, and it is even dangerous to society as a whole.

Passing through Timon’s doors is tantamount to falling into that moral void. Here Sense is unknown, but fashion is at home. Like the connoisseurs in the first few lines of the poem, we find that Timon has stuffed his study with pseudo-treasures:

His Study! With what Authors is it stor’d?
In Books, not Authors, curious is my Lord;
To all their dated Backs he turns you round,
These Aldus printed, those Du Sueil has bound.
Lo some are Vellom, and the rest as good
For all his Lordship knows, but they are wood.
For Locke or Milton ’tis in vain to look,
These shelves admit not any modern book. (ll. 133-40)

Timon’s library is obviously meant less for study than for show. His appreciation for fine bindings and elaborately printed editions, however, was common to many eighteenth-century gentleman collectors—and Pope should hardly criticize them, considering he must certainly have taken advantage of that tendency in finding subscribers for his own works—but owning well-bound books by good authors is a different matter altogether. Nevertheless, even if Timon has managed to acquire some worthy tomes, Pope suggests that faux-books, those painted representations of books on blocks of wood, might well mingle among them for all Timon knows since he has probably never touched them himself. One thing is for certain, wooden or real, the spines on Timon’s shelves will not reveal any out-of-fashion names.

_____________________

279 Gibson 495.
If the library seems devoid of value, the Chapel provides no haven either. For all the outward show of religious devotion, Timon’s decorator touches fail to soothe the spirit. Pope writes:

And now the Chapel’s silver bell you hear,
That summons you to all the Pride of Pray’r:
Light quirks of Musick, broken and uneven,
Make the soul dance upon a Jig to Heaven. (ll. 141-44)

No meditative mood music will break the cheer here! Just a glance at the ceiling might set one’s heart a-flutter with its sensuously sprawling saints, as Pope describes it:

On painted Ceilings you devoutly stare,
Where sprawl the Saints of Verrio or Laguerre,
On gilded clouds in fair expansion lie,
And bring all Paradise before your eye. (ll. 145-48)

The dining hall is as inhospitable as the chapel is irreverent. Instead of convivial gathering of friends, Timon offers a far too formal and too well-timed dinner, where his guests find neither comfort nor satiety. The menu might be extensive, but it ignores the guest’s preferences, and the architecture of the room is a further testament to Timon’s tastelessness. Pope writes:

But hark! The chiming Clocks to dinner call;
A hundred footsteps scrape the marble Hall:
The rich Buffet well-colour’d Serpents grace,
And gaping Tritons spew to wash your face. (ll. 151-54)

The discomfort that attends such a show is obvious:

Is this a dinner? This a Genial room?
No, ’tis a Temple, and Hecatomb.
A solemn Sacrifice, perform’d in state,
You drink by measure, and to minutes eat.
So quick retires each flying course, you’d swear
Sancho’s dread Doctor and his Wand were there.
Between each Act the trembling salvers ring,
From soup to sweet-wine, and God bless the King.
(ll. 155-62)

The guests are not central to this event—and an event it is, Pope insists, complete with acts and intermissions. No, Timon’s guests are merely decoration for his dinner scene. In summing up his visit, Pope crystallizes the disharmony of the place:

In plenty starving, tantaliz’d in state,
And complaisantly help’d to all I hate,
Treated, caress’d, and tir’d, I take my leave,
Sick of his civil Pride from Morn to Eve;
I curse such lavish cost, and little skill,
And swear no Day was ever past so ill. (ll. 163-68)

Such a condemnation, coming from one who valued visiting and friendship as highly as Pope, reads as a serious indictment, indeed.

The incongruities abound, as much or perhaps more so than the inconsistencies and inconstancy that plagued so many of the characters in the earlier epistles. All reasonable expectations are unmet, nay denied, and so a day at Timon’s is almost exactly the opposite of what one would hope to enjoy when visiting a country estate. Furthermore, the paradox of starving among plenty suggests an image of man out of his element, a man at odds with nature. Finally, the visit has provided neither moral edification, nor aesthetic pleasure; Timon’s guests are not even granted a respite from the daily grind. The rules have been followed to the letter, but they have been followed to the exclusion of good sense, and for that reason, the visitor must make a hasty retreat if he is to restore a sense of harmony to his life. As
Kelsall contends, if Pope were to include Timon’s Villa in a tour book, he would give it only a one-star rating.²⁸⁰

That long and arduous day done, Pope returns to the original topic that concerns him—prodigality. According to Edwards, Sense is “the strongest counteragent” to prodigality, and perhaps for that reason, is the surest guide to morality, as he argues:

Prodigality, through its violation of proper principles of behavior, is an offense against man and society, but it is also an offense against nature, from which standards of propriety are derived; and it is this second aspect of prodigality that directs the development of Burlington into the powerful climax of the Moral Essays. The development runs from a description of violation, through a consideration of what has been violated, to a positive definition of a noble role for man to play in the life of nature.²⁸¹

Man does not have to play a noble role to have positive impact in the larger scheme, however. With Mandeville’s philosophy once again suggested as a sort of providential reconciliatory scheme, Pope grudgingly grants some benefit to vice. While Timon’s Villa fails in its attempts at magnificence despite the considerable sums employed to that end, Pope concedes:

Yet hence the Poor are cloth’d, the Hungry fed;  
Health to himself, and to his Infants bread  
The Lab’rer bears: What his hard Heart denies,  
His charitable Vanity supplies. (ll. 169-72)

Again, a balance between extremes brings possible hidden benefits. Charitable vanity is better than no charity at all, and such vanity as Timon’s is sure to lead to a great deal of charity. That the good deeds are

²⁸⁰ Kelsall 62.  
²⁸¹ Edwards 67.
unintentional, even senseless, reiterates the prodigal’s lack of morality, and such a lack is again reinforced when one considers how carefully the prodigal has crafted his image. It would seem he leaves nothing to chance; nothing but charity, that is.

Although Timon’s Villa is less a comfortable home than a monument to bad taste and even worse waste, it, too, will feel the balancing forces of nature. While it serves a valuable lesson in providing a negative example, this lesson will not last. Unlike a true work of art, Timon’s Villa offers no timeless value and the corrective forces of time and nature will eventually take their toll on Timon’s creation. As Pope explains:

Another age shall see the golden Ear
Imbrown the Slope, and nod on the Parterre,
Deep Harvests bury all his pride has plann’d,
And laughing Ceres re-assume the land. (ll. 173-76).

This “re-assumption” is simply the natural order, and suggests that Nature is only taking back that which was taken from her. The moral blight is temporary; like Shelley’s Ozymandias, Timon’s pride will not stand the test of time, but fortunately, neither will it leave a permanent scar on the landscape. As Pope illustrated in To Bathurst, death can quickly erase the memory of a man unless he leaves something valuable behind, as did the Man of Ross, but the value the Man of Ross conferred was not a monument
to himself, but rather the good will that resulted from his good deeds. Pope certainly hoped (and worked hard to assure) that he would leave behind a body of work that would serve man well as he strives to make a better society. Burlington, too, Pope suggests, can leave the land improved. With a series of rhetorical questions, Pope sets up his final compliment to Burlington:

Who then shall grace, or who improve the Soil?
Who plants like Bathurst, or who builds like Boyle?
‘Tis Use alone that sanctifies Expence,
And Splendour borrows all her rays from Sense.
(ll. 177-80)

Who indeed? Only the man who can marry Sense with Taste. While expanding the idea of beauty, sense and utility as inseparable elements, Pope describes the environment such a man would foster:

His Father’s Acres who enjoys in peace,
Or makes his Neighbours glad, if he encrease;
Whose cheerful Tenants bless their yearly toil,
Yet to their Lord owe more than to the soil;
Whose ample Lawns are not asham’d to feed
The milky heifer and deserving steed;
Whose rising Forests, not for pride or show,
But future Buildings, future Navies grow:
Let his plantations stretch from down to down,
First shade a Country, and then raise a Town.
(ll. 181-90)

The ideal owner would husband his estate with care, increasing its bounty year by year, not just for himself, but for his tenants, too. With lawns ample enough to offer an artistic landscape and still provide sustenance to the livestock, this ideal estate blends both beauty and utility, and there is real pride in that. The estate is no mere home, either. While serving the civic duties of providing shelter and defense to its citizens, the estate also gives
its neighbors a thriving town and comfortable country retreat. Burlington might be this man, but his work is not yet done. Armed with Pope’s punch list, Burlington is finally charged to set the world aright. As Pope directs him:

You too proceed! make falling Arts your care,  
Erect new wonders, and the old repair,  
Jones and Palladio to themselves restore,  
And be whate’er Vitruvius was before.  
Till Kings call forth th’ Idea’s of your mind,  
Proud to accomplish what such hands design’d,  
Bid Harbors open, public Ways extend,  
Bid Temples, worthier of the God, ascend;  
Bid the broad Arch the dang’rous Flood contain,  
The Mole projected break the roaring Main;  
Back to his bounds their subject Sea command,  
And roll obedient Rivers thro’ the Land;  
These Honours, Peace to happy Britain brings,  
These are Imperial Works, and worthy Kings.  
(ll. 191-204).

Feingold suggests that his passage puts Pope “above his noble addressee in authority” and claims that to Pope’s mind, it is the vision of great works, rather than the works themselves, that is most valuable.\(^{282}\) According to Feingold, Pope “assumes his own high role as civic visionary” and in so doing “establishes and emphasizes his authority to direct the work of both the nobleman-architect and his executive—the king. That is, he establishes and emphasizes his absolutely central position in the life of the polity.”\(^{283}\) In fact, this is why I regard Pope as an architect, himself, if not an architect of buildings, per se. Pope, as a satirist, seeks to be an architect of man, and by extension society. By conceiving of man in the image of the

\(^{282}\) Feingold 27.  
\(^{283}\) Feingold 27.
arch, we can see how Pope not only acknowledges the existence of extremes and their impact on man, but also allows a flexibility that assists man in achieving his highest goal, of striving toward the keystone that holds it all together.

This is not to diminish Burlington’s tasks, however, not least of which is maintaining the wonders of by-gone geniuses. Furthermore, Pope seems to insist that Burlington’s work will live on, reflecting an art that transcends time. One needs not belabor the fact that Pope hoped for the same for his own work. More importantly, though, Pope demonstrates here that contrarities can be reconciled. He has implied as much in the earlier epistles that make up the *Moral Essays*, but here Pope explicitly directs it, and thus Gibson declares: “The aesthetic norms he advocates—and the moral ones they imply—are capable of being realized.”

For Edwards, *To Burlington* exemplifies how “architecture becomes a metaphor for the sensible creativity through which man can cooperate with natural process” and thus realize his goals. For this reason, Edwards posits that “[t]his vision of useful art is perhaps the most ‘Augustan’ passage Pope ever wrote” and even “one of the greatest moments of English neoclassicism.” Edwards maintains that the theme of *To Burlington* stands in contrast to the “fruitless activity described in the other *Moral Essays*” and asserts a connection between man and nature that can result in a

284 Gibson 489.
285 Edwards 71.
286 Edwards 71-2.
constructive process, despite the fact that “the tendency of history was toward quite another state of affairs.”

In this case, Nature and Burlington will work together to create the necessary harmony, not just for Burlington’s estate, but for all Britain. For Leranbaum, this final vision is “expressed as a hope, rather than a statement, but it is still optimistic, in contrast to the dark ending of To Bathurst and for that reason alone might justify its placement as fourth in the Moral Essays,” yet she also notes that it “develops the theme of happiness in harmonious living,” and so it corresponds to the fourth epistle of Essay on Man, as well.

The connection between To Burlington and the opus magnum is even stronger in Clark’s estimation, as he writes:

This insistence on harmony between man and nature might be considered the theme of the total ethical system which Pope had originally projected in the five poems here considered. The Essay on Man presents man as if in the abstract, and the four “Ethic Epistles” present him in the particular.

Clark further argues that in the Essay on Man, pride causes man to break his union with: 1) external nature, as women in To a Lady are depicted only in unstable portraits that have no bearing on any internal qualities; and 2) internal nature, as To Cobham asks what makes man tick; but also 3) society, as in To Bathurst where social responsibility requires moving past self-love to social love; and finally, the result is that man is 4) unhappy in his

287 Edwards 71-2.
288 Clark 119.
ethical relationships. However, by working together with nature in a creative way as in To Burlington, man can ultimately reconcile all these divisions, can mend the breaks, and find peace within his realm.

As Erskine-Hill asserts, To Burlington “deals not merely with the building of gentlemanly or aristocratic villas, which presupposes an existing social order, but of works which make social orders possible through releasing man from the dominion of nature.”

---

Fussell perhaps sums it up best when he writes: "When we recall the dome in *Essay on Criticism,*" which is "the intersection of Pope’s ethical and literary psychologies" we find that "great works are made the way coherent people are made, through a tension of opposing forces." When man can find resolution in himself and with others and can accept and work in harmony with the spiritual and the material, then all seemingly irreconcilable forces will be reconciled. From the particular rises the general, and the greatest good of all.

By considering each epistle that makes up the *Moral Essays* as an elevation, as an illustration of a key element of a corresponding epistle from the *Essay on Man,* one can construct a model of Pope’s overall goal. I believe it is not too far a stretch to say that each individual elevation also represents a triumph of victory over vice, but taken together, the result is an architectural structure that represents man in his middle state as he confronts the inconsistencies and inconstancy of life he finds when he seeks to understand his spiritual universe, his fellow men, himself and his physical world, as well as effect the proper behavior such an understanding enables. With the knowledge he gains by finding a way to reconcile these seeming

\[^{290}\text{Fussell 196.}\]
contradictions, by “steering betwixt” them, he is able to strive toward the highest point of his existence here on earth. He might not always find himself at that key point, but Pope allows for a range of behavior—as represented by the golden mean—and that in turn allows man the flexibility that precludes an otherwise almost certain failure to achieve a meaningful existence.

In other words, man is imperfect, but his moral duty is to strive for perfection nonetheless. Add to this Jane Andrews Aiken’s contention that “[t]he concept of a mean has a moral as well as an aesthetic function,” 291 and the architectural analog as it relates to Pope’s concept of man’s social world becomes even more clear. Most importantly, however, the middle third of the arch that represents this mean is also responsible for the stability of the entire arch, itself. Accordingly, each member of society acts as a voussoir, handling the thrusts of life, relying on each other for support and stability.

As for the monumental quality of his task, Pope had written to Swift in a letter dated February 16, 1733, that

There is nothing of late which I think of more than mortality, and what you mention of collecting the best monuments we can of our friends, their own images in their writing; [. . .] I am preparing also for my own; and have nothing so much at heart, as to shew the silly world that men of Wit, or even Poets, may be the most moral of mankind. (Correspondence, III: 347)

Pope’s own monument to his morality did more than mark his image, however, because not only does the flexibility Pope affords in his philosophy make it all the more likely that people will follow it, but the art with which he presents his scheme amply demonstrates that moral poetry does not have to be cumbersome, somber and preachy. Likewise, a moral life is not reserved for the few or the lucky; with self-awareness, however hard-won, and a modicum of restraint, man can have a productive and happy life on earth, making the most of his middle state.

Consequently, we can see how the *Moral Essays* present elevations that rise from the plan Pope established in his *Essay on Man*. Curiously enough, they rise much like the walls of the temple Pope describes in his *Temple of Fame* in 1715—complete with dome—perhaps reinforcing in the *opus magnum* an earlier conception of Pope’s pursuit of a lasting purpose. In this case, taken separately, the epistles of the *Moral Essays* form four arches that represent each aspect of man’s life in his middle state as he strives for a higher one. Taken in conjunction, these arches can be placed at right angles to each other forming a pendentive structure. With this model we can see how men can work together in society to form an intermediary foundation that will support the weight of the dome that covers it all [Figure 5]. This is the perfection Pope had always sought, and through the striving for understanding that characterizes a moral society, it can be realized.

Reading in this way, we can see that Pope did complete a reasonable facsimile of his long planned great work, his *opus magnum*, and that he has
even created a monument that attests not only to his art, but also to his morality.
Figure 1 – Man in Proportion

Leonardo da Vinci’s  
*Vitruvian Man*  

Cornelius Agrippa’s  
*Man in Square with Numbers*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Book I:</strong> Materials, techniques and orders</td>
<td><strong>Epistle I &amp; To a Lady</strong> – working with the fundamentally unknowable and ever-changing nature of the universe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Book II:</strong> Private homes</td>
<td><strong>Epistle II &amp; To Cobham</strong> – knowing the individual, self and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Book III:</strong> Public Works</td>
<td><strong>Epistle III &amp; To Bathurst</strong> – using riches in service to society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Book IV:</strong> Ancient Temples</td>
<td><strong>Epistle IV &amp; To Burlington</strong> – effecting an ideal on earth through proper building</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The FIRST BOOK.

Of the Nature and State of Man.

Epist. I.
--With respect to the Universe.

Epist. II.
--As an Individual.

Epist. III.
--With respect to Society.

Epist. IV.
--With respect to Happiness.

The SECOND BOOK.

Of the Use of Things.

Of the Limits of Human Reason
--Of the Use of Learning.
--Of the Use of Wit.

Of the Knowledge and Characters of Men.
Of the particular Characters of Women.

Of the Principles and Use of Civil and Ecclesiastical Polity.
--Of the Use of Education.

A View of the Equality of Happiness in the several Conditions of Men.
--Of the Use of Riches, &c.
Figure 4 – Arches in Elevation

To a Lady
Societal Expectations

Blount
Affectation
Nakedness

To Cobham
Knowledge of Self & Others

Cobham
Motivations
Actions

To Bathurst
Social Duty

Bathurst
Public image
Rationalized self-image

To Burlington
Nature

Burlington
Show
Use

242
Figure 5 – Pendentive to Dome


Corse, Taylor. “Heaven’s ‘Last Best Work’: Pope’s ‘Epistle to a Lady’” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 27.3 (Summer 1987): 413-25.


About the Author

Cassandra C. Pauley earned a B.A. in Communications from the University of Louisville in 1986 and a M.A. in English Literature from Murray State University in 1991. She enrolled in the Ph.D. program in English Literature at the University of South Florida in 1992, studying part-time while working full-time and teaching. She also earned a TOEFL certificate while teaching at Zapadosceska Univerzita, Czech Republic, in 1999.

Ms. Pauley has taught a variety of courses in her service as a Teaching Assistant and as an Adjunct Instructor, has received teaching awards from both USF and Florida Metropolitan University, and she has been active in student, academic and professional organizations acting as co-sponsor for the Sigma Tau Delta Honor Society, serving as a mentor for new teaching assistants, working with the Graduate Student Association on several projects, and presenting papers and moderating panels for a number of national and regional conferences.