

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 1
Issue 7 *June*

Article 6

June 1944

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Luella F. Norwood

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Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 1, no.7, June 1944, p.115-116

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Colby Library Quarterly 115

IS POPE A POET?

BY LUELLA F. NORWOOD

AS Professor Pottle has pointed out on a preceding page, the authors of the *Lyrical Ballads* set themselves against every principle of neo-classical poetry, and, with their young contemporaries, Byron, Shelley, and Keats, they carried everything before them. Originality, individuality, and freshness came to be more highly prized than the polished art defined in Pope's famous couplet:

True Wit is Nature to advantage dressed,
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed.

And so complete was the nineteenth-century revolution in literary taste that the telling phrase—"what oft was thought"—came to suggest to all readers who fell under the spell of the Romantic Movement the entire absence of originality in content in Pope's poetry.

Scholars and critics are finding in the poetic temper of our own time a climate more favorable to Pope, and the genuine originality of *The Rape of the Lock* is now more widely recognized than at any time since the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads*. In this little masterpiece Pope has, as Joseph Warton pointed out, "displayed more imagination than in all his other works taken together."

In an excellent book on *The Poetical Career of Alexander Pope* (1938), Professor R. K. Root defines Pope's achievement in *The Rape of the Lock* as follows:

"Suppose one were asked to write today a great poem on a week-end house-party, its heroine an empty-headed débutante, its hero a college undergraduate; its chief episode a ride in a motor car, the mixing of cocktails, a game of bridge; its story a passing flirtation, in the course of which the undergraduate hero, having accepted a dare, snips a lock from out the débutante heroine's permanent wave. And the poem must not be merely such occasional verse

116 Colby Library Quarterly

as might become the pages of *Punch* or *The New Yorker*; it must be so great a poem that people will still read it, not only with amusement but with the thrill of poetic delight, two hundred and more years from now, when motor cars and bridge and cocktails and permanent waves may all stand in need of explanatory footnotes. That is what Pope has done."

From material as unpromising as this, he has spun the gossamer and filigree perfection and delight of his mock epic. After more than two hundred years it is still a little masterpiece.

In personal satire no one in the English language has equalled Pope. "In his satires," says Lord David Cecil (in *The English Poets*, 1942), "hate becomes positively beautiful." Single lines and couplets gleam and shimmer with Pope's triumphant contempt. In more sustained passages he builds up a devastating destruction of his enemies. Among these longer passages are his famous character sketches. When he lets himself go, he creates *Sporus*; when he restrains his feeling, he creates *Atticus*.

I look forward to the heralded renaissance of appreciation of Pope with great interest. I look forward to it also with some apprehension. Is there to be another complete swing of the pendulum? When Pope is king, the question will be, not is Pope a poet? but is Keats a poet, or Tennyson, or Robert Frost?

It is to be remembered that, in the last neo-classical age, Shakespeare was considered so barbarous (it is their word) that it was necessary to rewrite his plays before they were correct enough to appear on the polite stage of that time. All this gives me pause, when I hear that the star of Pope is rising. Geoffrey Tillotson is quoted (on page 105 of this issue) as saying: "There is a chance that Pope will become known for the poet he is." That is a consummation devoutly to be wished. I hope, however, that he will not again become known for the poet he isn't.