

## BROADSIDES ON THE THAMES: THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF *THE RAPE OF THE LOCK*, II, 47-52

As Reuben Brower has shown, allusion in Pope is a resource equivalent to metaphor and imagery in other poets<sup>1</sup>. Yet it is not merely by literary allusion that Pope achieves comic effect in *The Rape of the Lock*, II, 47-52, the depiction of Belinda's water passage to Hampton Court. He creates a comic irony in these verses by a careful blend of a Watteau-like scene with heroically allusive overtones and a crude Hogarthian undertone given strength by its appeal to contemporary awareness of abusive language by travellers on the Thames. The dual ironic contexts of the heroic and the prosaic further heighten the poem's comic incongruity.

The verses themselves are a perfect evocation of the visual, aural, and kinetic, a river scene in rococo:

But now secure the painted Vessel glides,  
The Sun-beams trembling on the floating Tydes,  
While melting Musick steals upon the Sky,  
And soften'd Sounds along the Waters die.  
Smooth flow the Waves, the Zephyrs gently play,  
*Belinda* smil'd, and all the World was gay<sup>2</sup>.

The imagery of bright sunlight, soft breezes, and shimmering water evokes the mood of a hushed summer afternoon. Nineteen sibilants and fifteen liquids vivify the passage to approximate the reverential whispers of the breeze and the gentle lapping of the water, as its theme establishes a harmony of the natural, the human, and the divine.

Classical and English literary allusions heighten both the splendor and the parody of Belinda's cruise. The verses are at once suggestive of Telemachus on the Ionian Sea (*Odyssey*, II) and Aeneas on the Tiber ("*Aeneid*, VII). They further invoke Shakespeare's description of Cleopatra's Nile progress (*Antony and Cleopatra*, II.ii.191-219) and Dryden's picture of Shadwell's majestic parade on the Thames (*MacFlecknoe*, 38-50). As the allusions to Homer, Vergil, and Shakespeare are in the vein of mock-heroic, the reference to Dryden is more in tune with travesty.

Yet Pope achieves greater travesty by using his contemporary reader's awareness of a social phenomenon on the Thames, the abusive river wit practiced by watermen and passengers alike. By 1712, date of the first edition of *The Rape of the Lock*, the practice had merited frequent reference. Indeed, in this context Boswell had quoted Bennet Langton who recalled one of Dr. Johnson's most celebrated gibes:

It is well known that there was formerly a rude custom for those who were sailing upon the Thames, to accost each other as they passed, in the most abusive language they could invent, generally, however, with as much satirical humour as they were capable of producing [...]. Johnson was once eminently successful in this species of combat; a fellow having attacked him with some coarse raillery, Johnson answered thus, "Sir, your wife, under pretense of keeping a bawdy-house, is a receiver of stolen goods"<sup>3</sup>.

The tradition of broadsides on the Thames dates at least to the seventeenth century. In Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), Leatherhead concludes that "there's no talking to these watermen, they will

---

<sup>1</sup> R. A. Brower, *Alexander Pope: The Poetry of Allusion* (Oxford, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock and Other Poems*, ed. G. Tillotson. [The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope, 2.] 3rd ed. (London, 1962), p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> J. Boswell, *The Life of Johnson*, ed. G. B. Hill, Rev. by L. F. Powell (Oxford, 1934), IV, 26.

ha' the last word"<sup>4</sup>. Pepys-also records an instance in his *Diary* for May 14, 1669: "My wife and I by water, with my brother, as high as Fulham, talking and singing and playing the rogue with the western bargemen about the women of Woolich, which mads them."<sup>5</sup> And in the Preface to *The Plain-Dealer* (1676), Wycherley notes that "many Ladies will take a broad jeast as chearfully as from the Water- men, and sit at some downright filthy Plays"<sup>6</sup>.

By the eighteenth century, comment had become more detailed, so apparently widespread was the custom of river wit. In *The London Spy* (1703), Ned Ward devotes sustained attention to it. He notes first that, not a yard or two from the stairs, his boat was assailed by a

scoundrel crew of Lambeth gardeners who attacked us with such a volley of fancy nonsense, that it made my eyes stare, my head ache, my tongue run, and my ears tingle.

One of them began with us after this manner, "You couple of treacherous sons of Bridewell. How dare you show your ugly faces upon the River of Thames, and to fright the Queen's swans from holding their heads above water?" To which our well-fed pilot, after he had cleared his throat most manfully replied, "You lousy starved crew of worm-pickers and snail-catchers. You offspring of a pump- kin, who can't afford butter to your cabbage, or bacon to your sprouts. Hold your tongue, you radish mongers, or I'll whet my needle and sew your lips together."<sup>7</sup>

Ward then proceeds to recount verbatim abuse fired by women and shopkeepers from other boats and the volleys returned by his pilot. Epithets such as "cuckolds", "brood of harpies", "affidavit scoundrels", "shoplifters", and "whistling, peddling lying, over-reaching ninny- hammers" characterize his return barrage. Ward concludes his river trip by calling the Thames "a rare place for a scold to exercise her faculties and to improve her talent, for I think everybody we meet is an academy of foul language"<sup>8</sup>.

Likewise, another Grub Street wit, Tom Brown in his *London Amusements* (1708) overhears less civil invective on the river.

No sooner had we put off into the middle of the stream, but our Charon and his assistant (being jolly fellows) began to scatter the verbal Wild-fire on every side of them, their first attack being on a couple of fine ladies with a footman in the stern. "How now, you two confederate brimstones, where are you swimming with your fine top-knots, to invite some Irish bully or Scotch Highlander, to scour your cloven furbelows for a petticoat pension? I'll warrant your poor cuckolds are hovering about Change, to hear what news from Flanders, whilst you, like a couple of hollow-belly'd wh--s, are sailing up to Spring-Gardens to cram one end with roasted fowls, and the other with raw sausages." One of the ladies taking courage, plucked up a female spirit of revenge, and facing us with the gallantry of an Amazon, made the following return, "Get you home you old cuckold. Look under your wife's bed and see what a lusty gardener has been planting, a son of a wh--e in your parsley-bed[...]."<sup>9</sup>

Compared with Ward's and Brown's reportage, Addison's is mild. In *Spectator*, 383 (1712), on the water to Spring Garden, Sir Roger de Coverley's friendly country greeting to passing boats is returned to him by some young men who call him a "'Queer old Putt [... J not ashamed to go a Wenching at his Years'" and they continue "with

---

<sup>4</sup>V.iv.172-73. Ben Jonson, *The Complete Plays*, ed. G. A. Wilkes (Oxford, 1982), IV, 110.

<sup>5</sup>Samuel Pepys, *The Diary*, ed. R. Latham and W. Matthews (Berkeley, 1976), IX, 655.

<sup>6</sup> William Wycherley, *The Complete Plays*, ed. G. Weales. [The Stuart Editions.] (New York, 1967), p. 380.

<sup>7</sup> *The London Spy: The Vanities and Vices of the Town Exposed to View*, ed. A. L. Hayward (London, 1927), pp. 117-118.

<sup>8</sup> *The London Spy*, p. 119.

<sup>9</sup> *Amusements Serious and Comical*, ed. A. L. Hayward (London, 1927), pp. 120-121. Brown recounts still more

"Billingsgate Fecundity", pp.121-125.

a great deal of the like *Thames-Ribaldry*”<sup>10</sup>. Still later in the century, the tradition of verbal abuse is recorded by Fielding in *The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon* (1755). He notes the broadsides between two crews on the Thames: “a dialogue of oaths and scurrility was carried on as long as they continued in each other's hearing.”<sup>11</sup> As these contemporary sources suggest, the urge to satire was not confined to coffee houses, pamphlets, poems, and plays.

Considering Defoe's estimate in *A Tour Thro' London about the Year 1725* of “above two thousand Sail of all Sorts, not reckoning Barges, Lighters, or Pleasure-Boats, and Yachts; but of Vessels that really go to Sea”<sup>12</sup> and the contemporary riverscapes of Badslade, Vanhaeken, Canaletto, S. Scott, and Buck, the Thames was crowded with watercraft. And if the air were as thick with vocal lampoons as contemporary observers note, then Belinda's cruise upstream was, to an eighteenth-century reader, anything but the quiet idyll it seems to be. That reader could only smile in imagining the broadsides such a fine lady as Belinda would attract (and, perhaps, with which she would react). Indeed, the playful allusion to the *fiat lux* at line 52 that underscores a beauty's godlike status in Queen Anne society may as well have implied to a contemporary reader the validation of mirthful river wit by a beauty's own silent, smiling approval.

As the allusions to Homer, Vergil, and Shakespeare's water journeys grant an ironic overtone of mock-heroic to the passage, Pope's sense of his 1712 reader's certain recognition of the Thames's anything-but-heroic wit lends an ironic undertone of travesty to Belinda's cruise. The literal beauty of the scene in the poem contrasts ironically with the crude reality of river wit to establish a comic incongruity between literature and life on the Thames, where Billingsgate and St. James once met.

---

<sup>10</sup> *The Spectator*, ed. D. F. Bond (Oxford, 1965), III, 438.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Fielding, *The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon*. [Everyman's Library.] (London, 1964), p. 214.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Thro' London about the Year 1725*, ed. M. M. Beeton and E. B. Chancellor (1929; rpt. New York, 1969), p.47.