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John Gay's the Shepherd's Week

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JOHN GAY'S THE SHEPHERD'S WEEK

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In a letter to John Caryll dated June 8, 1714, Alexander Pope intimated that John Gay had written The Shepherd's Week in retribution for Ambrose Philips' having withheld subscription money from Pope. Pope writes, "It is to this management of Philips, that the world owes Mr. Gay's Pastorals."[1] Just how influential Pope was in the writing of The Shepherd's Week is a matter of controversy. By this time, John Gay had written Rural Sports which he inscribed to Pope. This led to a meeting of the two poets out of which was formed a friendship that lasted until Gay's death in 1732. Being a friend and admirer of Pope's, it is highly conceivable that Gay would come to the aid of his friend in his quarrel with Philips.

The dispute between Pope and Philips came as a result of their differing approaches to pastoral poetry. Adhering to the neo-classical point of view, Pope looked to the Ancients, principally Virgil, for his literary premises. According to Pope, the pastoral should be an imitation of the action of a shepherd living in the Golden Age, the age when the best of men tended their flocks. Further precepts of Pope state that the language should

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[1] Alexander Pope, The Correspondence of Alexander Pope, ed. George Sherburn (Oxford, 1956), I, 229.

be pure and simple; the style should be simple and neat; the characters should be innocent and virtuous rather than clownish; the scene should be simple and decorous; the subject matter should be concerned with only the simple affairs of shepherds.

Philips, on the other hand, tended to follow the rationalist school of thought. He substituted English rustics in a contemporary English landscape, used archaisms in imitation of Spenser, and generally attempted to replace the artificial conventions of the neo-classical with realism. In the preface to his pastorals, Philips states that the "country affords not only the most delightful scenes and prospects, but likewise the most pleasing images of life."[2]

The pastorals of both poets were published together in 1709 in Tonson's Miscellany. When Thomas Tickell wrote five essays in the Guardian praising Philips without mentioning Pope, Pope retaliated by writing an anonymous essay printed by the Guardian in which Philips was made to appear absurd. Irony was attained in this essay through Pope's seeming justification of the praise which Philips had received.

The quarrel between Pope and Philips did not prevent their being associated in the collection of subscription money for Pope's translation of the Iliad. It is Pope's accusation against

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[2] Ambrose Philips, The Works of the English Poets, ed. Alexander Chalmers (London, 1810), XIII, 109.

Philips concerning this money which many critics held to be as the motive that prompted Gay to write The Shepherd's Week.

There are theories that oppose the idea that Gay's intent was to burlesque Philips' pastorals. Differing critics propose that Gay was actually satirizing Sir Richard Blackmore, Thomas D'Urfey, and that he was satirizing no one at all.[3] Blackmore was a doctor who wrote epic poetry of interminable length while making his medical rounds. Blackmore was a favorite target of the early eighteenth century wits. John Robert Moore has argued that Gay parodied Blackmore's favorite structural devices and themes in "Saturday," the last poem of The Shepherd's Week.[4]

D'Urfey, a popular song writer of the time and another favorite target of the wits, is specifically mentioned in "Wednesday," the third of Gay's eclogues. Derisively, Gay beseeches D'Urfey:

> Yet suffer me, thou bard of wond'rous meed,
> Amid thy bays to weave this rural weed.[5]

There are those who do not regard The Shepherd's Week as a satire; but, rather, they regard Gay's work as a realistic

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[3]Patricia Meyers Spacks, John Gay (New York, 1965), p. 32.

[4]Ibid.

[5]John Gay, The Poetical Works of John Gay, ed. G. C. Faber (London, 1926), p. 39.

recording of rural life. Dr. Johnson concludes: "These Pastorals became popular, and were read with delight, as just representations of rural manners and occupations, by those who had no interest in the rivalry of the poets, nor knowledge of the critical dispute."[6] They can be enjoyed without knowledge of the quarrel.

William Henry Irving discounts the theory that Pope was influential in suggesting that Gay write a parody of Philips' pastorals.[7] Irving holds the opinion that Gay's primary purpose was to satirize the Bucolics of Virgil.[8]

That Gay included satirical references to Blackmore and D'Urfey in The Shepherd's Week is evident. But these references are incidental, and to regard them as the primary motive for the writing of Gay's pastorals would be to overestimate the importance of otherwise interesting details.

The speculation that Gay intended to satirize Virgil is unlikely in the light of Gay's close association with Pope. Both Gay and Pope were members of the Scriblerus Club whose members were closely aligned in literary and political matters.

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[6]Samuel Johnson, The Works of the English Poets, ed. Alexander Chalmers (London, 1810), X, 428.

[7]William Henry Irving, John Gay, Favorite of the Wits, (New York, 1962), p. 83.

[8]Irving, p. 82.

Pope espoused the use of the classical forms of Theocritus and Virgil in the writing of pastorals. In his "A Discourse on Pastoral Poetry," Pope gives Virgil precedence over Theocritus: "Virgil, who copies Theocritus, refines upon his original; and in all points, where judgment is principally concerned, he is much superior to his master.[9] That Pope would have tolerated a burlesque of Virgil is unthinkable. If Pope had regarded The Shepherd's Week as such, his vindictive nature would surely have sought revenge.

Gay's poem reveals the poet's intent. Here Gay uses the same approach to irony that Pope employed in his essay to the Guardian (Guardian No. 40). Gay pretends allegiance to Philips' principles of pastoral poetry which he intends to burlesque. That Gay is making use of irony cannot be doubted when he declares, "Other Poet travailing in this plain high-way of Pastoral know I none."[10] Needless to say, Gay was well acquainted with the poets who dealt in pastoral.

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[9]Alexander Pope, The Works of the English Poets, ed. Alexander Chalmers (London, 1810), XII, 143.

[10]Gay, p. 28.

In the preface to his pastorals, Philips had expressed hope for the success of his endeavor: "Theocritus, Virgil, and Spenser, are the only poets who seem to have hit upon the true nature of pastoral compositions: so that it will be sufficient praise for me, if I have not altogether failed in my attempt."[11] It is evident that Gay has this comment in mind when he writes that no poet "hath hit on the right simple Eclogue after the true ancient guise of Theocritus, before this mine attempt."[12] This ironic comment by Gay indicates that he considered Philips to have failed in his attempt to succeed Spenser as the pastoral poet of England.

Continuing the irony, Gay declares that his pastorals will deal with English country folk. It is his intention to describe the manners of his rustics and the landscape on which they appear in a realistic manner. Gay states, "Thou wilt not find my shepherdesses idly piping on oaten reeds, but milking the kine, tying up the sheaves, or if the hogs are astray driving them to their styes."[13] Gay intends to demonstrate that the charm of the pastoral would be lost if a poet would write according to Philips' realistic notions.

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[11] Philips, XIII, 109.

[12] Gay, p. 28.

[13] Gay, p. 29.

Following the example of Spenser, Gay divides his pastorals according to the calendar, naming each pastoral for a different day of the week as Spenser had named his poems for the months of the year. However, Gay will have only six pastorals; for, obviously, good English shepherds would be in church on Sunday. Furthermore, Gay says that he will borrow from Spenser's list of rustic names which were also used by Philips in his pastorals. Gay states his intention to copy Spenser and Philips further. He will have his shepherds use language "such as is neither spoken by the country maiden nor the courtly dame; nay, not only such as in the present times is not uttered, but was never uttered in times past; and if I judge aright, will never be uttered in times future."[14] One of the criticisms that Pope leveled against Philips was that he used crude and archaic language. To help his readers in the reading of his poetry, Gay attaches a glossary of the more crude and archaic terms in mock imitation of Spenser's glossary to The Shepherd's Calendar.

Gay's first pastoral, "Monday; or, the Squabble," concerns a singing contest between Lobbin Clout and Cuddy, two English swains. A singing contest with two shepherds contending

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[14]Gay, p. 29.

for a prize and a third shepherd acting as judge is a classic form of eclogue used by Virgil in his "Eclogue III." Philips used the same theme in his "Sixth Pastoral" in which the judge is unable to decide between the contestants and awards duplicate prizes. In "Monday," Gay brings the singing contest to a conclusion by having Cloddipole, the judge of the contest declare:

> Forbear, contending louts, give o'er your strains,
> An oaken staff each merits for his pains.
> But see the sun-beams bright to labour warm,
> And gild the thatch of goodman Hodges' barn.
> Your herds for want of water stand adry,
> They're weary of your songs--and so am I.[15]

Thus it seems that an attempt to insert the realities of the English countryside into the classic pastoral form is more conducive to producing humor than the "delightful scenes" of which Philips wrote in the preface to his bucolics.

Gay further demonstrates that his contemporary rustics are not at leisure to become the subjects of pastoral poetry. In "Tuesday; or the Ditty," Gay employs an English maid in the classic pastoral theme of the lament for unrequited love. Marian bemoans the fact that she has lost the affections of

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[15] Gay, p. 35.

Colin to Cic'ly. Marian's wailing is supplanted by her attention to duty:

> Thus Marian wail'd, her eyes with tears brimfull,
> When Goody Dobbins brought her cow to bull.
> With apron blue to dry her tears she sought,
> Then saw the cow well serv'd, and took a groat.[16]

In his parody, Gay points up once again that the combination of realism and pastoral necessarily produces a humorous situation.

Another instance of such humorous results occurs in "Friday; or, the Dirge." In this pastoral, Gay uses the classic theme of the lament for a dead shepherd. Again, Gay portrays English shepherds with upmost realism in a parody of Philips' "Third Pastoral." The shepherds Bumkinet and Grubbinol are mourning the death of the shepherdess Blouzelinda. "Friday" has a non-idyllic conclusion:

> Thus wail'd the louts in melancholy strain,
> 'Till bonny Susan sped a-cross the plain;
> They seiz'd the lass in apron clean array'd,
> And to the ale-house forc'd the willing maid;
> In ale and kisses they forget their cares,
> And Susan Blouzelinda's loss repairs.[17]

The effect of Gay's satire in the lines quoted above is to make apparent the futility of the attempt to blend realism with the classic pastoral form; for, in the attempt the poem loses its idyllic qualities and ceases to be a true pastoral.

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[16] Gay, p. 38.

[17] Gay, p. 50.

Other classic themes are treated realistically by Gay. The plaint of the jilted lover portrayed by Virgil in his "Eclogue VIII" is the subject for Gay's "Wednesday; or, the Dumps." Sparabella has lost Bumkinet to Clumsilis, a damsel possessed of lesser virtues than Sparabella. In the face of such injustice, Sparabella determines to take her own life but procrastinates until the sun sets. At this point,

> The prudent maiden deems it now too late,
> And 'till to-morrow comes defers her fate.[18]

Charms are used to return an unfaithful lover in Theocritus' "The Incantation." Gay, in "Thursday; or, the Spell," has Hobnelia employ numerous rustic superstitions to effect the return of her unfaithful Lubberkin, who has left the country in favor of the village. Lubberkin returns and insures his welcome by promising to give Hobnelia a green gown.

In "Saturday; or, the Flights," Gay treats the subject of the harvest. This theme appears in "The Harvest Home," a pastoral by Theocritus. Gay's "Saturday," however, takes on quite another tone. A group of reapers find Bowzybeus asleep

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[18]Gay, p. 42.

by the hedge which bounds the field. Bowzybeus has been to the fair the previous night and has imbibed too many of the large mugs of strong drink available there. The still giddy swain falls to singing popular ballads and songs for the reapers until he again falls asleep and the reapers return to their labors.

One of the major points of contention between Pope and Philips was the character of the language to be used in pastoral poetry. In his essay to the Guardian, Pope had given mock praise to some of Philips' poorest lines. Those lines were taken from "The Second Pastoral" by Philips in which a shepherd bewails his unhappiness:

> Ah me, the while! ah me the luckless day!
> Ah luckless lad! befits me more to say.
> Unhappy hour! when fresh in youthful bud,
> I left Sabrina fair, thy silvery flood.
> Ah, silly I! More silly than my sheep,
> Which on thy flowery banks I wont to keep.[19]

Gay does not hesitate to echo these lines in his second pastoral:

> Ah woful day! ah woful noon and morn!
> When first by thee my younglings white were shorn,
> Then first, I ween, I cast a lover's eye,
> My sheep were silly, but more silly I.[20]

Indulging in further mockery of Philips' language, Gay sprinkles his pastorals with archaic and provincial terms such as welkin, shent, kee, and eftsoons.

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[19] Philips, p. 110.

[20] Gay, p. 36.

Gay's pastorals are vividly realistic representations of rural England in the early eighteenth century. Gay's country swains were pictured as hard workers who were content "To moil all day, and merry-make at night."[21] While the shepherd's hand is employed with plow, rake, and scythe, the shepherdess milks the cows, churns butter, presses cheese, or labors in the fields. The food of the rustics is simple, consisting of such fare as turnips and white-pot, a custard. Equally as simple are their pleasures: dancing on the first of May, playing at blindman's buff, or guzzling nappy beer on a rainy day. The shepherd must beware of fetching a blow from an overseer's oaken cudgel, while the shepherdess must evade the squire who seeks to compromise her modesty.

Gay's success in writing The Shepherd's Week is twofold. He succeeds in his satiric purpose; and, in addition, he records the realities of country living as it existed in his time. The humor found in Gay's pastorals is not dependent on an extensive knowledge of the literary quarrels of the time. Rather, this poem can be read as a correct interpretation of the foibles of the human race,

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[21] Gay, p. 37.

at whatever level of existence, as they go about the daily process of living. This is not to say, however, that the critical dispute revolving about pastoral poetry should be ignored. Gay has clearly demonstrated that the grafting of realism with the classic forms of pastoral poetry produces quite a different fruit than the idyllic scenes which are the goal of the pastoral poet. The Shepherd's Week successfully satirizes Philips' notions of pastoral poetry. Perhaps we are, as Pope said, beholden to Ambrose Philips for the pastorals of John Gay.

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