

# A Review of “Living on the Margin: Alexander Pope and the Rural Ideal” by Claudia Thomas Kairoff

*Juan Aguilar*

Review of Claudia Thomas Kairoff “Living on the Margin: Alexander Pope and the Rural Ideal.” *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2005, pp. 15-38. *EBSCO*.

Kairoff’s essay “Living on the Margin: Alexander Pope and the Rural Ideal” is a thorough investigation of Pope’s views regarding property ownership, the moral responsibilities of aristocratic landowners, and several other complicated and evolving philosophies. Concisely and efficiently, Kairoff takes the reader chronologically through Pope’s biography and works to dispel some of the negative criticism Pope has received. Beginning with Pope’s landowning philosophy, Kairoff demonstrates how Malcolm Kelsall and other critics have misinterpreted Pope’s true objectives. She examines the effects that being forced to live outside of London had on Pope, specifically his thoughts on rural land-use by the more privileged members of London society. As Pope aged, Kairoff argues he knowingly evolved from a naive country gentleman to “a member of the professional, renting, and commuting class that was establishing itself between the country and the city” (17). She engagingly navigates the reader through Pope’s morphing personae from the self-espoused “rustic shepherd” (17) to lecturing the nobility on their use of land, as Pope matures personally and artistically.

Kairoff responds to critics who have overlooked how often Pope broke with the traditional trope of rural moral supremacy. Pope tended to hide his true beliefs behind satiric “Horatian language,” making it easy for readers to overlook how often he deviated from the

traditional assumptions he apparently celebrated (16). As Pope matured beyond typical pastoral ideals, he grew to believe that virtue and morality themselves emanated from a responsible and purposeful rural retirement.

Prior to getting into detail on Pope's landowner philosophies, Kairoff gives the reader a synopsis of Pope's life. Quickly summarizing the key events from his early life up to his early thirties serves to remind readers of the circumstances in Pope's life that would play a major role, including the financial losses his father suffered, the severe taxation on Catholics that forced the family to move and downsize homes, Pope's own stock market losses, and finally his acceptance of celibacy. As Kairoff puts it, "He never again posed as the rustic shepherd boy, nor even as the comic young man-about-town. He realized that he had left 'happier hours' behind" (18). Pope's choice not to own a home was so that he would not open himself up to the same financial ruin that struck his father. He rented, remaining on the social margins. This sets the stage for Kairoff's main arguments.

From the topic of landownership, Kairoff seamlessly segues into the bulk of the essay. In close examination of several of Pope's works, particularly the "Epistle to Burlington" (1731) and "Epistle to Bathurst" (1732), she refutes critics' arguments systematically. Kairoff first delves into Pope's theories on responsible landownership and the duty of the aristocracy to improve the circumstances of the people and land of Great Britain. Pope believed the responsible landlord uses their land holdings to instigate work for the community, thus improving their own property and, more importantly, stimulating the local economy. Kairoff holds up the example of John Kyrle, "the Man of Ross," in "Epistle to Bathurst" as an embodiment of this interpretation of Pope (22). Pope idolizes Ross for beautifying his own landholdings while also endorsing public

works that would service his neighbours and the community. Through this example, Kairoff argues against Raymond Williams's cynicism towards Pope's idealized theories, opposing Williams by praising Pope's challenging of the status quo when others would not (29). Kairoff goes on to explain how Pope's beliefs extended beyond the land itself to differentiating between those buildings and landscapes that did or did not serve a moral purpose. Her close readings of Pope's poems and personal letters demonstrate to the reader Pope's philosophies without coming off as conjecture. She provides us with wide ranging yet succinct evidence to dismiss Williams's critiques.

Pope's suggestions to the aristocracy on how to best spend their money extended beyond landholdings to what is within and around those lands. Kairoff explains that "For Pope and his generation, taste was an index of morality" (25). Contrary to the beliefs of Kelsall, Pope judged landowners on several factors, not simply on their use of property. Pope condemned the "uselessness of a wealthy dilettante's collections" if they did not have a moral instructional use. Those men who consciously curated their possessions for intellectual or cultural stimulation Pope lauded, especially as it related to their garden. To Pope, the rural garden was a perfect intersection of art and nature: "Pope's personal love of gardening led him to illustrate his theory of taste through an art that, in his era, joined plantings arranged in painterly fashion with architecture reminiscent of and often adorned with classical texts, as well as with sculpture and paintings; the art of landscaping, in effect, encompassed most of the arts" (25).

Kairoff spends over half her essay explaining in detail this love affair with gardening, defending Pope's principles against critics who claimed the connection between a landowner's garden and his or her morals was weak at best. Kelsall labelled Pope hypocritical for decrying

ostentatious villas in his poetry but celebrating the gardens of nobles who agreed with Pope's politics. Kairoff again argues that Kelsall misrepresents Pope's intentions and does a close reading of his poetry revealing his true convictions as to why nobles representing his theories are celebrated while others are satirized. She does not spend much time discussing the politics of Pope's favoritism in depth, taking some of the edge off her counterarguments to Kelsall. She provides enough evidence from poems and letters for the audience to trust her expertise. The reader should take Kairoff's assertions with a grain of salt, understanding that the article does not aim to encompass this issue in detail.

Kairoff does a good job including brief but honest counterarguments to all her main contentions. More in-depth research may reveal potential weaknesses to some arguments, but the article is commendable for achieving its main aims concisely. Her documentation of the nobility's reactions to Pope's theories of "prudent productive investment, tempered by reasonable charity" (29) is as insightful as it is entertaining. The reader not only better understands Pope and the criticism surrounding him, but also the historical scene all this played out in. Kairoff fulfils her stated intention to repel criticisms of Pope's rural ideal by documenting his complex journey through personal and artistic maturity. "Living on the Margin: Alexander Pope and the Rural Ideal" functions as both an informative scholarly article and an entertaining biographical piece—attributes, unfortunately, rarely found together.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

© Juan Aguilar, 2019

Available from: <http://journals.sfu.ca/courses/index.php/eng420>