

Windsor-Forest: Congruence in Satire and Pastoral

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Windsor-Forest is a 434-line poem celebrating Britain's participation in the peace of Utrecht, where peace treaties signed between major European nations in the Dutch city between 1713 and 1715 helped end the Spanish War of Succession (Lesaffer). This poem by Alexander Pope has two parts. The first part, up to line 289, he wrote in 1704; the proceeding lines, however, were penned almost a decade later in the poem's publishing year of 1713 (Rogers 49). In the poem's 1713 portion, Pope's satiric irony refuses to lead readers down a single rhetorical path, and instead allows readers room to doubt. Given this understanding of Pope's satiric irony, the poem's 1713 portion may retain traces of the pastoral despite its focus on georgic matters.

In *Swift and Pope: Satirists in Dialogue*, Dustin Griffin believes that a stylistic divide is observable between the two parts. The pastoral theme is the focus from the start until line 289, where Pope's focus shifts radically toward commercial matters: matters which are more georgic than pastoral and reflect a "gap between rural and imperial England" (54). Ruben Quintero has a similar assessment to Griffin's (500). To begin evaluating the varying opinions on the style of the poem's later-written portion, we must first know about the three genres in the Virgilian Tripartite system. Entire volumes have been dedicated to the explication of pastoral, georgic, and heroic—sometimes also called epic. Thus, I can only give a minute overview of each.

Virgilian Tripartite describes the genres of pastoral, georgic, and heroic (Quintero 499). Oram explains the pastoral as follows:

[the] pastoral is fundamentally social, a meeting of herdsmen for shared speech and song. Pastoral takes life to be inherently a matter of common plights and common pleasures. Herdsmen are important [as] they represent us by virtue of their strength relative to the world. Like us, they lack the heroic capacity to change the world, but they have the strength to face it and to sing about it. (261)

Ruben Quintero further offers a glance into the three genres:

The tripartite division of generic types was widely represented in terms of style and character. The pastoral represented the low or plain end of poetic style, the georgic the middle, and the epic the high. Similarly, the cultural archetypes of character – shepherd, farmer, and soldier – were placed in a hierarchy, though [...] after the thirteenth century the pastoral character became increasingly ambiguous and came to represent in turn the monk, the priest, the poet, and the man of private meditation. (499)

Quintero identifies three casts of characters: the low, middle, and high, each emblematic of a different aesthetic and genre. With a clear class and economic distinction between the different genres, why critics contest the demarcation of pastoral and georgic in the case of *Windsor-Forest* becomes less clear. Bold visual differences typically make easy work of class and genre differentiation, but some situations exist where the aesthetics are less visual. Readers in such a predicament may instead rely on analyzing the ethics of an individual character to determine their affiliation with various genres. Hiltner offers an explanation involving the archetypal landowner and considers his subject's attitude toward the land in terms of passivity or aggression (162). He considers the pastoral as depicting a passive relationship between human and nature,

where a landlord is “[in] a position of relative *otium*, [Latin for leisure], as he need not directly engage with the land” (162). By contrast, “the georgic casts the landowner as active farmer,” and “potentially positions human beings in an active, aggressive posture toward the earth” (Hiltner 162). This effects a different ethic of land use: “certain countrysides were imagined not as places worth saving, but rather, as ripe for exploitation” (Hiltner 155). The preoccupations of characters and their relationship to nature are both categorical determinants for a Virgilian classification of genre.

In Pope’s *Windsor-Forest*, early mentions of verdant woods and the “sylvan maids” (3) within indicate a pastoral setting. However, in the second portion of the poem *Windsor Forest* and its “groves of Eden” (4) disappear, and the theme of empire now dominates in conjunction with divinity, wealth, and naval trade. A “wild heath” (25) and “the shades” (201) of the forest are replaced by a gilded image of the Thames: “the figured streams in waves of silver rolled, / And on their banks Augusta rose in gold” (335-336). This quotation directly describes the *rising* imperial riches that results from reopening trade between nations. In lines 355-358, the speaker compares London to Rome, the greatest empire of antiquity, and the Thames to the river vital to its prosperity in the region that is modern-day Turkey:

Hail, sacred Peace! Hail long-expected days,
That Thames’s glory to the stars shall raise!
Though Tiber’s streams immortal Rome behold,
Though foaming Hermus swells with tides of gold. (355-358)

These lines convey a prophetic message that reputation, influence, and riches will all come to Britain as a result of the peace between nations. The invocation of empire is prominent, as is a

tone of optimism towards the divine riches that follow. The speaker identifies colonialism's economic model as one capitalizing on exploitation. Britain does not produce its own wealth domestically, but via foreign sources: he fantasizes that "Peru [will] once more a race of kings behold, / And other Mexicos be roof'd with gold" (411-412). Britain will become a world power, with "a new Whitehall" (380) where "mighty nations...inquire their doom" (381), and a place where "kings shall sue and suppliant states be soon / Once more to bend before a British Queen" (383-384). The poem's preoccupation with economic capital and intercontinental trade shifts the poem's focus away from the pastoral genre; extravagance such as the visual feast Pope offers readers between lines 335-395 replaces pastoral contemplation. "Silver" (335), "gold" (336), "ruby" (394), "pearly shell" (395), "crystal tide" (376), and "silver eels" (341) dazzle and glitter by comparison to his pastoral passages in the poem's first part. Griffin and Quintero have good reason to ascribe this to the georgic, based on imagery; however, I find it a predominantly georgic backdrop against which pockets of the pastoral remain conspicuous, and three instances deserve further examination. The first begins on line 369:

Safe on my shore each unmolested swain
 Shall tend the flocks, or reap the bearded grain;
 The shady empire shall retain no trace
 Of war or blood, but in the sylvan chase. (369-372)

The character of the "swain" is notable. A farm laborer or shepherd ("Swain") who toils within Britain's agricultural landscape, the swain assumes both roles of farmhand and shepherd. This hybrid character crosses between pastoral and georgic roles by "tend[ing] the flocks" as shepherds do and by participating in grain farming. This passage also shows anti-war sentiments.

The speaker draws a distance between Britain and “war or blood” (372), presumably referencing the peace of Utrecht and a greater era of peace to come as a result. A sincere reading of the anti-war sentiment is complicated, though, when we recall the details of the “sylvan chase” referenced on line 372. Pan’s chase of Lodona ultimately ends in her death and is so extraordinarily graphic that critics are “struck by [its] bloody violence” (Griffin, *Swift and Pope: Satirists in Dialogue* 53). Here the pastoral is not a pleasing place for the meek. Leaving behind the pastoral hunt for a more contemporary one, Pope shifts genre in favor of depicting the heroic soldier as hunter, even in the first half of the poem. He describes how “slaught’ring guns” (125) are used on a pheasant which “feels the fiery wound, / Flutters in blood, and panting beats the ground” (111-112). The pheasant’s red “fiery wound” (111) visually juxtaposes Lodona’s transition into a “soft, silver stream” (204), and the pheasant’s “flutter” and “panting” (112) describe sharp deliberate actions rather than languid ones like “weep, and murmur” and “melting” (203). While both subjects of hunts may be incapacitated, their depictions, hunters, and ultimately genres are unlike. Pope contrasts genre through hunting within the poem and undermines any positive connotations of hunting we may have.

The second appearance of the pastoral in the poem’s 1713 portion is an echo of the invocation in which “Thy forest, Windsor!...” (1) becomes “Thy trees, fair Windsor!...” (385). The lines that follow, though, tell of a significant difference in genre. “Thy green retreats” (1) draws readers’ attention into the “shade” (4) of Windsor forest, whereas “...half thy forests rush into my floods” (386) draws focus away from the forest and out into the open ocean. Britain’s naval empire, a component of the georgic/heroic, is prominently featured (Griffin, *Swift and Pope* 50), projecting its colonial powers and implying that the forests become lumber to build ships, rather than being an invitation towards rest and retreat. The motif first appeared in line 32, where “... by

our oaks the precious loads are born, / And realms commanded which those trees adorn.” The oak trees, becoming British ships, bear treasures back to their homeland and are thus symbolic of prosperity and British colonial power. We, however, can wonder as to the emotional valence Pope sought to provoke with his recurring motif of converting forest into ship. Line 386 where “...half thy forests rush into my floods,” articulates a deliberate quantification of “half,” emphasizing the cost born by Britain’s forests in the pursuit of wealth by its people. This potential depiction of Britain’s natural landscape having been diminished as a result of the drive for colonial expansion, despite its georgic foreground, is both striking and reminiscent of a pastoral ethic towards human-nature relations. This second appearance of the pastoral in the poem’s 1713 portions, while asserting a migrating focus from pastoral to georgic, also carries rather ambiguous praise of georgic environmental ethics.

A third appearance of the pastoral in the georgic 1713 portion appears in the poem’s closing lines wherein the speaker retires into a pastoral lifestyle. He states that

Ev’n I more sweetly pass my careless days,
 Pleas’d in the silent shade with empty praise;
 Enough for me that to the list’ning swains
 First in these fields I sung the sylvan strains. (431-434)

Pope situates his surrogate amicably in a world away from bustling urbanity. In the idyllic pastoral and its accompanying lifestyle, he asserts that performing pastoral poetry to an audience of country labourers is “enough for me.” Living in the pastoral’s “silent shade” (432), “fields” where “sylvan strains” (434) are sung, and in the company of low characters such as the “swain” (433), a poet can rejoice in a simple life. Pope’s outward abandonment of the georgic and

instead opting to praise the pastoral here, is inconsistent with an otherwise pervasive effort to praise Britain's intercontinental trade network across the poem's 1713 portion. Griffin states in *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* that Pope's satires frequently "build the satirist into a hero or prophet, but they do not conclude without implicitly questioning the effectiveness of their own moral stance" (100). He also states that "one common closural device in satire is a combination of ...formal and thematic devices...so that the form can be represented as AAAA...B, where A and B [stand for] thematic elements. In Juvenal's tenth satire, where "most of the poem is taken up with a series of examples of what men foolishly wish for... [,] only the last twenty lines (out of 366) are devoted to what men should pray for" (Griffin, *Satire* 100). If we consider lines 431-434 in light of patterns of satire, a similar AAAA...B pattern emerges; persistent praise of the georgic concludes with praise for the pastoral. The georgic genre stands in for thematic element A, and the pastoral genre stands in for thematic element B. On the surface, the pattern of satiric closure holds.

One commonly held precept of satire is that a target is ridiculed by depiction against a more reasonable ground (Griffin, *Satire* 64); this belief perceives satiric irony as "stable" (Griffin, *Satire* 65). For Pope, satiric irony is often "unstable," where ground and target are more complementary than antagonistic to each other, and the aim is not necessarily to persuade readers for one instead of the other (Griffin, *Satire* 64). Satiric irony instead calls for the view that "irony should be understood not simply as a binary switch, either on or off, but more like a rheostat, a rhetorical dimmer switch that allows for a continuous range of effects between I almost mean what I say and I mean the opposite of what I say" (Griffin, *Satire* 65-66). In light of unstable irony, I can highlight yet another problematic part of line 386 that extends beyond the transformation of Britain's forests into its fleet.

Line 386 juxtaposes with lines 393-394, where, speaking as the Thames, Pope says “for me the balm shall bleed, and amber flow, / The coral redden, and the ruby glow.” These two lines are rife with potential references to the negative cost of Britain’s wealth, with “bleed,” “redden,” and the iridescent glow of rubies, which is also visually reminiscent of blood. These lines depict Pope praising the georgic ethics of industry and commercialism with a curious amount of red imagery. As if sensing the growing stability of his irony, Pope quickly changes tack thereafter, and returns to his dominant pattern of praise for the British empire; a moment of stability has its footing quickly removed. In addition to line 386, the motivations behind the poem’s conclusory return to a pastoral setting are also muddied due to closely fitting Pope’s convention of satiric closure. Griffin suggests in *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* that satire is not merely provocation, but can rather be inquiry (42): inquiry which “provoke[s] men into thinking... via paradoxes” (53). The appearances of the pastoral within the portion of *Windsor-Forest* written in 1713 are indeed rife with paradox. Praise for the effect of naval trade on Britain’s rising fortunes exposes Britain’s balding forests, British lives saved in peace times are overshadowed by an overtly violent hunt, and Pope’s retirement to the pastoral contradicts the poem’s georgic subject matter and heroic form.

Pope has been criticized as “apolitical” (Vermeule 40), and this is perhaps evidenced by Pope’s choice of satiric inquiry and unstable irony, which leads to readers arriving at paradoxes rather than specific moral instruction. Griffin further highlights satire’s ineffectuality as a form of moral instruction by stating it can “hurt individuals, yes. Embarrass the government, perhaps. But seriously disturb the state [and effect real moral change at a significant scale] – probably not” (*Satire* 154). Even in the late nineteenth century, Pope was renowned for his biting satire, Byron even going so far as to call him the “moral poet of all civilization” (Vermeule 39). To be

both apolitical and a moral figure would be paradoxical, as moral instruction intrinsically stems from moral values which are formed by society. Viewing Pope's ambivalence in *Windsor-Forest* can certainly lend credence to an attack on his moral authority, but Oram offers an alternate interpretation on Pope's lack of political will. His view of the pastoral highlights the similarities between the conventions of satire and the pastoral because, according to him, the pastoral is "not to be identified with an idealized landscape; rather, it's a dialogue of opposing voices" (262). Oram also explains that these competing dialogues typically remain unresolved, as after both sides have been heard, the eclogue typically ends in a pastoral suspension (262). It is clear that in the poem's 1713 portion, Pope does not uniformly praise the georgic, but instead inserts small pastoral moments to show glimpses of a competing narrative. The resulting moments of conflict also are devoid of explicit moral instruction, and, as such, we see that rhetorically they lack resolution. Pastoral suspension and satiric inquiry appear similarly to rely on using various competing voices to build paradoxical narratives. We can begin to understand how identifying the numerous moments of satiric inquiry can lead to characterization of *Windsor-Forest's* latter-written half as pastoral in spirit, despite its georgic subject matter and heroic poetic form.

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