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Assumptions and ironies

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Although the few celebrated poems in which Pope sets women in the limelight provide the natural focus for any attempt to understand his attitude to the sex, it is important to remember that the vast bulk of his output is concerned only tangentially with issues of gender. In effect, he can write at length about the human race as if it were entirely masculine. Furthermore, when his attention is not specifically drawn to some female friend or heroine, his casual references to women frequently relapse into dismissive commonplace.

This was a period in which women of the middle and upper classes learned to see themselves less as skilled housewives or assistants in the family business than as leisured companions.¹ Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, writing in *The Spectator*, repeatedly urged women towards the ideal of a sex 'created as it were for Ornament', 'formed to temper Mankind', and endowed with 'gentle Softness, tender Fear, and all those parts of Life, which distinguish her from the other Sex, with some Subordination to it, but such an Inferiority that makes her still more lovely'.² Yet if women's elegant leisure was the natural destiny of a sex created for men's delight, it was also, in line with motives less easily professed, a proud declaration of the wealth that allowed husbands and fathers to maintain wives and daughters in idleness, as conspicuous consumers of the luxury goods which so excited the commercial imagination of the age. The extravagance and frivolity with which contemporary moralists taxed women were in effect the occupational hazards of a role which it suited men to have them play; and against this background outright misogyny became less acceptable than the politely patronising attitude expressed in such characteristic expressions as 'the fair sex'.³ Although Pope was to an extent insulated by the old-fashioned style of housekeeping which persisted in many

¹ For varying interpretations of this change, see Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (London, 1977), pp. 199–201, 325–404; Ellen Pollak, *The Poetics of Sexual Myth: Gender and Ideology in the Verse of Swift and Pope* (Chicago, 1985), pp. 1–76; Laura Brown, 'The Defenceless Woman and the Development of English Tragedy', *Studies in English Literature*, 22 (1982), 429–43.

² *The Spectator*, edited by Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1965), I, 242, 433; II, 70.

³ Katharine Rogers, *The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature* (London, 1966), pp. 166–80.

Catholic families, this was nevertheless the ordinary view of women in the wider culture for which he has often been cast as prime spokesman. Yet, ironically, as far as contemporary definitions of gender were concerned, he found himself in a peculiarly difficult situation.⁴

Religion, politics and illness combined to bar Pope from the full enjoyment of the privileges reserved for men in his society. If, as he states in *Characters of Women*, it is the distinction of woman to develop her personality to the full only in private life, his disqualifications from public life brought him to a condition in that respect parallel to hers, despite his easy assumption that he belongs to the busy world of men:

But grant, in Public Men sometimes are shown,
 A Woman's seen in Private life alone:
 Our bolder Talents in full light display'd,
 Your Virtues open fairest in the shade.⁵

As a Roman Catholic Pope was excluded from the universities, from public office, and from the inheritance or purchase of land, all three factors which traditionally distinguished upper-class males.⁶ Pope's characteristic eagerness to belittle the advantages he lacked should not blind us to the actual importance of such deprivations: critics of his Homer translation were quick to claim that he 'doth not understand *Greek* thoroughly, for he never was at any University'; and when he attacked the sterility of university education he was surely in part reassuring himself that he had missed nothing worth having.⁷ Others might have frowned on an enthusiasm for the classics in which translations encountered in childhood had played so large a part, but Pope rather congratulated himself on having learned to read for the meaning, to discern 'the greatness of Homer's beauties through all the rags that were flung over him'.⁸ Exclusion from public office, like exclusion from university, helped to foster a derisive attitude which is at least partly defensive. The post most appropriate to his talents would have been the laureateship; but the impression given by the *Dunciad* is that the unobtainable distinction is beneath

⁴ On the role of the Catholic mistress of the house, see Maynard Mack, *Alexander Pope: A Life* (London, 1985), pp. 28–29. Old-fashioned housekeeping is a virtue for which Pope praises his Catholic friends Elizabeth and John Caryll. (See Howard Erskine-Hill, *The Social Milieu of Alexander Pope: Lives, Example and the Poetic Response* (London, 1975), pp. 80–82.) The Blount Papers include letters and recipes of Mary Eugenia Blount which emphasise the managerial role of a Catholic housewife on a country estate in the generation after Pope (Blount Papers, c. 65).

⁵ *Epistles to Several Persons (Moral Essays)*, II.199 (*Epistle to a Lady: Of the Characters of Women*, hereafter *Characters of Women*); *The Twickenham Edition of the Works of Alexander Pope*, 11 vols. (London, 1939–69), III.ii, 66–67 (hereafter *TE*).

⁶ For a summary of Catholic disabilities, see John M. Aden, *Pope's Once and Future Kings: Satire and Politics in the Early Career* (Knoxville, 1978), pp. 3–20.

⁷ J. V. Guerinot, *Pamphlet Attacks on Alexander Pope 1711–1744: A Descriptive Bibliography* (New York, 1969), p. 40; Joseph Spence, *Observations, Anecdotes and Characters of Books and Men*, edited by James M. Osborn, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1966), nos. 14–31.

⁸ Spence, no. 29; for the influence of Cowley's versions of Latin verse, see *TE*, VI, 4–5.

contempt. As consolation for the impossibility of a paternal inheritance in land he turned to Horace and asserted the sufficiency of a rented home for a rational life of hospitality and decent frugality:

. . . not happier . . .
 In Forest planted by a Father's hand,
 Than in five acres now of rented land.⁹

He ridiculed the conventional patriarchal motive in acquiring property:

“Pity! to build, without a son or wife:
 “Why, you’ll enjoy it only all your life”. (Satires, II.ii.163)

And he went on to detail with glee the pitfalls that beset fathers intent on transmitting estates to their posterity. Yet despite such disclaimers, his letters show that his lack of an heir was frequently in his thoughts, and in the end he compromised by leaving a newly purchased house to his old and dear friend Patty Blount, a choice of heir which enraged his half-sister by its denial of the claims of family.¹⁰ Catholic disabilities cast their shadow even over this last tribute to the most enduring of his friendships: ‘I must desire you to say nothing of what I tell you concerning my purchase of the House in town, which is done in another’s name’, he wrote to Hugh Bethel.¹¹

In addition to his exclusion from public life as a Catholic, Pope shared the long eclipse of his Tory friends after 1714, exchanging the brief glamour of association with men in high office for systematic contempt for a court life identified with corruption.¹² His heroes are men denied office, set apart from the artificial supports to self-esteem implicit in the public life that is now as closed to them as it is to Pope. To the first Earl of Oxford, once Queen Anne’s Treasurer, he writes:

In vain to Desarts thy Retreat is made;
 The Muse attends thee to the silent Shade:
 ’Tis hers, the brave Man’s latest Steps to trace,
 Re-judge his Acts, and dignify Disgrace.
 When Int’rest calls off all her sneaking Train,
 And all th’Obliged desert, and all the Vain;
 She waits, or to the Scaffold, or the Cell,
 When the last ling’ring Friend has bid farewell.¹³

⁹ *Imitations of Horace*, Satires, II.ii.133, 135 (*TE*, IV, 65).

¹⁰ No-one ever seems to have called Martha Blount ‘Martha’; and I have therefore adopted the diminutive ‘Patty’ which was used by everyone who was on first-name terms with her. For the house Pope gave her, see chapter 9.5; for Pope’s half-sister, Magdalen Rackett, see chapter 2.2.

¹¹ *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, edited by George Sherburn, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1956), IV, 509 (hereafter *Corr.*). For an account of Bethel, an old mutual friend of Pope and Patty, see *TE*, IV, 346–47.

¹² See for example the triumph of Vice which concludes *Epilogue to the Satires*, Dialogue I, lines 141–70 (*TE*, IV, 308–9).

¹³ *Epistle to Robert Earl of Oxford*, line 27 (*TE*, VI, 239–40).

In this talk of 'Desarts' (not the most obvious term for a country house full of admiring family and friends) we have an echo of the poetry of retirement as it flourished among Royalists after the Civil War, when the implied alternative of a public life was no longer real.¹⁴ Yet even defeated Royalists, once they had compounded for their estates, were better off in many ways than Pope.

In particular, Pope was to suffer chronic ill health from adolescence until his death at the age of fifty-six: the privacy doubly forced on him as a Catholic and a Tory was further limited by Potts' Disease, a tubercular infection of the bone which progressively disabled him.¹⁵ Because of this he could not seriously think of emigrating as his friend Edward Blount did after the collapse of his scheme for procuring Catholic civil rights (although he soon repented of the idea and came home).¹⁶ Indeed, Pope's family could see no point in his learning modern languages as it was obvious to them that he would never be strong enough to travel, and envy of opportunities he would have known how to use to the full plays its part in his satire of the English fop on the Grand Tour: 'Europe he saw, and Europe saw him too'.¹⁷ If resettlement in a Catholic country was the most obvious escape from internal exile, an alternative or supplementary compensation (also practised by Edward Blount) could be the cultivation of a satisfying family life in rural retirement (*Corr.*, I, 425; II, 86). This was the path taken by Pope's friend John Caryll, whom Pope delighted to praise as a patriarch and upholder of old-fashioned social virtues. However, Caryll's preoccupation with the interests of his relations sprang from a strong identification with family, supported by a happy and fruitful marriage which Pope was prepared to praise but not to imitate.¹⁸ Less than five feet tall and deformed by curvature of the spine, he was acutely conscious of being 'that little Alexander the women laugh at'; and he declared, 'I have no way so good to please 'em, as by presenting 'em with any thing rather than with my self' (*Corr.*, I, 114; II, 290). This was no basis for seeking a wife; and when Caryll offered to give his god-daughter Patty Blount a dowry if that was all that stood between them, Pope made clear the limits of their relationship: 'I have no tie to your God-daughter but a good opinion, which has grown into a friendship with experience that she deserved it' (III, 75).

Thus the interests and responsibilities of a husband and father were no more available to him than the public reinforcements of masculine self-esteem

¹⁴ Maren-Sofie Røstvig, *The Happy Man: Studies in the Metamorphoses of a Classical Ideal, 1600–1760*, 2 vols. (Oslo, 1954–58), I, 60–62.

¹⁵ Marjorie Nicolson and G. S. Rousseau, *This Long Disease, my Life: Alexander Pope and the Sciences* (Princeton, 1968), pp. 7–86.

¹⁶ Eamon Duffy, '“Englishmen in Vaine”': Roman Catholic Allegiance to George I', *Studies in Church History*, 18 (1982), 345–65 (pp. 347–62); *Corr.*, I, 424–25; II, 176. (Edward Blount was only remotely related to Patty.)

¹⁷ Spence, nos. 26, 51; *Dunciad B*, IV.294 (*TE*, V, 373).

¹⁸ Erskine-Hill, *Social Milieu*, pp. 72–82; *Corr.*, I, 123.

denied by his religion and politics; and it is poignant that his image of his role in his own family, after his father's death, places him as mother, with all the gain in tenderness and eclipse of autonomy which maternity implies:

Me, let the tender Office still engage
 To rock the Cradle of reposing Age.¹⁹

For many years he made strenuous efforts to live up to expectations of male robustness: at the first onset of chronic illness in adolescence he went riding regularly in the hope of preserving his health; as a young man he actively sought the reputation of a rake; one hot day in 1735 he exhausted himself by surrendering his coach to a woman with a broken arm and walking three miles into Oxford; and in the next year he was dragged into the Thames when Catherine Talbot missed her footing while he was helping her into a boat.²⁰ All this was really beyond him; and he admitted as much when he wrote in anticipation of a visit to the second Earl of Oxford's Cambridgeshire home at Wimpole that 'while you used Manlyer Exercises' he would 'nod over a Book in your Library' (*Corr.*, III, 53). As he declined with age into increasing dependence, he confessed more readily his need for a quiet, regular, passive existence (IV, 68, 147, 179, 419). He needed a nurse more than a valet; and it was a female attendant who was able to reveal the detailed indignities recorded in Johnson's *Life*:

Most of what can be told concerning his petty peculiarities was communicated by a female domestick of the Earl of Oxford, who knew him, perhaps, after the middle of life. He was then so weak as to stand in perpetual need of female attendance; extremely sensible of cold, so that he wore a kind of fur doublet, under a shirt of very coarse warm linen with fine sleeves. When he rose, he was invested in a bodice made of stiff canvass, being scarcely able to hold himself erect till they were laced, and he then put on a flannel waistcoat. One side was contracted. His legs were so slender, that he enlarged their bulk with three pair of stockings, which were drawn on and off by the maid; for he was not able to dress or undress himself, and neither went to bed nor rose without help. His weakness made it very difficult for him to be clean . . . The indulgence and accommodation which his sickness required, had taught him all the unpleasing and unsocial qualities of a valetudinary man. He expected that every thing should give way to his ease or humour, as a child, whose Parents will not hear her cry, has an unresisted dominion in the nursery.²¹

It is suggestive that this corseted, querulous figure makes Johnson think not just of a spoilt child, but of a spoilt *female* child. Lord Bathurst had shown similar intuition when he upbraided Pope for neglecting his health: 'Is it not enough to have the headache four days in the week, and to be as sick as a

¹⁹ *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, line 408 (*TE*, IV, 127).

²⁰ Spence, nos. 69, 71; Norman Ault, *New Light on Pope, with some Additions to his Poetry hitherto Unknown* (London, 1949), pp. 301–307; *Corr.*, III, 493; *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift*, edited by Harold Williams, 5 vols. (revised edition, Oxford, 1965), IV, 528 (hereafter *Swift Corr.*)

²¹ Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, edited by George Birkbeck Hill, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1905), III, 197–8.

breeding woman the other three?'; and Pope himself exclaimed when his plans were curtailed by illness: 'Would to God I were like any other thing they call a Man!' (*Corr.*, III, 299; IV, 293). In effect, like 'a breeding woman', he had to plan his activities around the whims of his body. It cannot have been easy to accept that 'Manlyer Exercises' were not for him.

2

Pope's beautifully poised 'Ode to Solitude', allegedly first written at the age of twelve, and later carefully revised, is a fine example of a poem that generalises about the human condition from an essentially male viewpoint. It makes a good place to start an exploration of women's place in his work at large, for, despite its precocious origins, it concerns itself with an ideal that remained dear to him throughout his life:

Happy the man, whose wish and care
 A few paternal acres bound,
 Content to breathe his native air,
 In his own ground.

Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,
 Whose flocks supply him with attire,
 Whose trees in summer yield him shade,
 In winter fire.

Blest! who can unconcern'dly find
 Hours, days, and years slide soft away,
 In health of body, peace of mind,
 Quiet by day,

Sound sleep by night: study and ease
 Together mix'd; sweet recreation,
 And innocence, which most does please,
 With meditation.

Thus let me live, unseen, unknown;
 Thus unlamented let me dye;
 Steal from the world, and not a stone
 Tell where I lye.

(*TE*, VI, 3)

The first stanza alone raises two major issues which affected women's standing in the eighteenth century: education and inheritance.

Education is, ironically, the theme that the contemporary woman reader – Pope's mother, for example – would be most likely to miss. Not being schooled in the classics, she would probably not register the Horatian echo in the first line by which the poet places his poem in its tradition. To be deaf to such allusions is to experience eighteenth-century writing in a muted, often puzzling way; yet this, however mitigated by translations, was the condition of most of the period's female readers. There is, for example, the cautionary tale of young Mrs Pilkington, helping Swift to sort his letters from Pope:

'But, Sir', said I, 'here is a Latin Sentence writ in italics, which, I suppose, means something particular; will you be so kind as to explain it?' 'No', replied he, smiling; 'I will leave that for your husband to do'.²²

The tag turned out to be embarrassingly indecent, so female curiosity was duly punished (Pilkington, p. 67). For educated men the classical languages were a symbol of their cultural superiority, marking their graduation from the female tutelage of the nursery to the male world of public life. When Fanny Burney's father expressed disapproval of Dr Johnson's offer to teach her Latin, their mutual friend Hester Thrale commented tartly, 'because then She would have been as wise as himself forsooth'.²³ She may have been remembering a Johnsonian remark that caused Boswell characteristic disquiet:

Whether he meant merely to say a polite thing, or to give his opinion, I could not be sure; but he said men knew that women were an overmatch for them; and therefore they chose the weakest or most ignorant. If they did not think so, they never could be afraid of women knowing as much as themselves. I must have this more amply discussed with him.²⁴

The second of the factors highlighted in the first stanza of the 'Ode' is, however, by far the more important, since the complex of customs and beliefs evoked by the phrase 'paternal acres' lies at the heart of long-established assumptions about women's role and function. The belief that property belongs by nature to men and that their sons are its natural heirs may have been immemorial, but it was nonetheless vividly present to the imagination of the age: Richardson brings Clarissa to her death through her brother's rage at seeing his 'natural' dependant made a proprietor in her own right, and Jane Austen uses the dispossession of women in favour of men as a trial of female character in *Pride and Prejudice*.²⁵ Pope himself was caught up in a similar situation when his old acquaintance Michael Blount, admittedly with the full sanction of custom, required his mother and sisters, including Pope's beloved Patty, to leave home on his marriage, and subsequently failed to pay regularly the allowances on which they were expected to maintain themselves. In this case Pope was fired by indignation and exerted himself over many years to obtain adequate support for Patty (see chapter 5.3).

An important though by no means universal rationalisation of the restric-

²² *Memoirs of Mrs Pilkington, 1712–1750, Written by Herself* (London, 1748–54; reprinted 1928), p. 62.

²³ *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (later Mrs. Piozzi) 1776–1809*, edited by Katharine C. Balderston, 2nd edition, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1951), I, 502.

²⁴ *Boswell's Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, edited by Frederick A. Pottle and Charles H. Bennett (London, 1936), p. 118; cited by Mrs Thrale, *Thraliana*, I, 171–72.

²⁵ Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa; or, the History of a Young Lady*, edited by Angus Ross (Harmondsworth, 1985), pp. 53–54, 56, 77–78; Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, edited by Frank W. Bradbrook and James Kinsley (Oxford, 1970), pp. 23, 54, 62.

tion of inheritance to males is expounded by Boswell, whose obsession with the perpetuation of estates in the male line led him into a protracted disagreement with his father:

My father and I had a warm dispute at night on male and female succession. I argued that a male alone could support a family, could represent his forefathers. That females, in a feudal light, were only vehicles for carrying down men to posterity, and that a man might as well entail his estate on his post-chaise, and put one into it who should bear his name, as entail it upon his daughter and make her husband take his name . . . I fell upon a most curious argument which diverted my own fancy so much that it was with difficulty I could preserve my gravity when uttering it. 'If', said I, 'you believe the Bible, you must allow male succession. Turn to the first chapter of Matthew: "Abraham begat Isaac, Isaac begat Jacob", &c. If you are not an infidel, if you do not renounce Christianity, you must be for males'. Worthy man! he had patience with me. I am quite firm in my opinion on this point. It will not do to say a grandson by a daughter is as near as a grandson by a son. It leads into a nice disquisition in natural philosophy. I say the stamen is derived from the *man*. The woman is only like the ground where a tree is planted. A grandson by a daughter has no connection with my original stock. A new race is begun by a father of another name. It is true a child partakes of the constitution of his mother, gets some of his mother's blood in his veins. But so does he as to his nurse, so does he as to the ox whose beef he eats. The most of the particles of the human frame are changed in a few years' rotation. The stamen only continues the same. Let females be well portioned. Let them enjoy liberally what is naturally intended for them: dowries as virgins, a share of what their husbands have while wives, jointures when widows . . . In every age some instances of folly have occurred to humble the pride of human nature. Of these, the idea of female succession is one of the most striking.²⁶

Elsewhere he refers tellingly to 'the opinion of some distinguished naturalists':

Our species is transmitted through males only, the female being all along no more than a *nidus*, or nurse, as Mother Earth is to plants of every sort; which notion seems to be confirmed by that text of scripture, 'He was yet *in the loins of his FATHER* when Melchisedeck met him' (Heb. vii. 10); and consequently, that a man's grandson by a daughter, instead of being his *surest* descendent, as is vulgarly said, has, in reality, no connection whatever with his blood.²⁷

To the ancient world the female contribution to conception had been far from obvious. In the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus, Apollo upholds Orestes' claim that he is not kin to the mother he has murdered; and his reasoning is essentially the same as that outlined by Boswell.²⁸ Aristotle, offering a theoretical account of conception, likens the process to carpentry: the father is the carpenter, the mother the wood, and the child the finished product; and this model is taken up by Thomas Aquinas, who stresses its hierarchical implications:

²⁶ *Boswell in Search of a Wife 1766–1769*, edited by Frank Brady and Frederick A. Pottle (London, 1957), pp. 270–72.

²⁷ *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, edited by George Birkbeck Hill and revised by L. F. Powell, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1934–50), II, 414.

²⁸ *Aeschylus*, with an English translation by Herbert Weir Smyth, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols. (London, 1957), II, 335.

The generative power in a female is imperfect in relation to that which is in a male. And so, just as in the arts, an inferior art disposes the matter while the superior art imposes a form, as said in the *Physics*, so female generative power prepares the matter while male active power fashions the matter which has been prepared.²⁹

The pervasive metaphorical pattern insists that women are not originators. For Boswell woman is soil to the seed, for Aristotle and Aquinas she is the raw material to the craftsman, and behind both analogies we sense her affinity with primeval chaos awaiting the male word of God in creation. Indeed, both levels of this metaphor are brought together in Aquinas's account of the conception of Christ, in which he is at pains to establish the passivity which Mary shared with all women: 'either she effected something, which would make her the father of Christ, or she effected nothing' (LII, 55). Not surprisingly, researchers down to Boswell's time frequently assumed that the natural order must display this hierarchy – hence the hostile response of John Cook to William Harvey's equally erroneous but dissection-based claim that the mother, not the father, produced the preformed embryo:

As the Earth seems a Nidus for all Seeds of Vegetables, so the Ova of the Female serve for the like Use . . . to think otherwise would be making Woman the chief Person in the Creation, in as much as she is supposed to contain her Species, both materially and formally, in her self, and needs only a little of the Spirit of the Male Sperm to set those Animalcula in Motion; so that instead of God's giving Woman for a Help-mate to Man towards Procreation, he is thus made Woman's Help-mate; and so hath the least share in this Action; whereas by Nature he was designed the chief Agent in it, and that from his Loins should proceed all Mankind . . . which the Text of St. Paul well alludes to, when he says of *Levi*, that he was yet in the Loins of his father, when Melchisedeck met him.³⁰

More in accord with the assumed order of things was the rival animalculist (homunculist) theory, which identified the preformed embryo in the male spermatozoa, a theory familiar to modern readers from the opening of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*.³¹ It was also familiar to Mrs Pope, who was shown 'some of the *semen masculinum* with animalcula in it' when her son took her to Mr Hatton's clock and microscope shop (*Corr.*, I, 465). Perhaps even for those few mothers who understood the implications of the supposed homunculus it was too academic a theory to impair their sense of relationship to their children; but if they needed a theory that would enable them to take the

²⁹ Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, with an English translation by A. L. Peck, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1963), I.xxi–xxii; St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Latin text and English translation, 61 vols. (Blackfriars, Cambridge, 1963–76), LII, 55.

³⁰ John Cook is quoted in Louis A. Landa, 'The Shandean Homunculus: The Background of Sterne's "Little Gentleman"', in *Restoration and Eighteenth-Century Essays in Honour of Alan Dugald McKillop*, edited by Carrol Camden (Chicago, 1963), pp. 49–68 (p. 57). For an account of the various theories see Joseph Needham, *A History of Embryology*, 2nd edition, revised with the assistance of Arthur Hughes (Cambridge, 1959), pp. 37–44, 205–11.

³¹ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, edited by Ian Campbell Ross (Oxford, 1983).

credit, or – perhaps more likely – the blame for the way their children turned out, they could turn to the belief that offspring were also influenced by their mothers' behaviour and disposition before birth and by their milk afterwards. The latter notion provides grounds for maternal self-congratulation in the verse epistle which Pope, or perhaps Swift, put into the mouth of Bounce, Pope's Great Dane bitch:

Before my Children set your Beef,
 Not one true *Bounce* will be a Thief;
 Not one without permission feed,
 (Though some of *J—*'s hungry Breed)
 But whatso'er the Father's Race,
 From me they suck a little Grace.³²

Although the chimerical homunculus owed its 'discovery' to the new technology of the microscope, its power lay in old-fashioned assumptions about the structure of society – hence its appeal to the reactionary sentiments of Boswell and the fictional Walter Shandy. From such a point of view the order implicit in the social organisation of England before the Civil War was still valid:

So long as a person occupied an inferior status within a household – as a child, servant, apprentice, or even as a wife – and was subordinated to the head, his social identity was altogether vicarious. The family was represented to the larger community by its head – its patriarch, as it were – and thus those whom he commanded were 'subsumed' in his social life. Thus, the father-master of each family was both its link with society as a whole and its authority, and his status was universally recognised.³³

Despite radical attempts during the Civil War to form an understanding of society on new foundations, this old-established order still underlay the mainstream of political theory; and therefore debate about the nature of parenthood had distinct political overtones.³⁴ This, rather than any zeal for women's rights, is clearly the principal reason why John Locke, in his *Two Treatises of Government* (composed before 1683, published in 1689), makes claims favourable to the status of wives and mothers.³⁵ His context is Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* (composed in the early 1640s, published in 1680), a defence of Stuart absolutism on the grounds that God gave Adam a fatherly power over his descendants which was absolute, and that all present kings enjoy the same power either by inheritance or by usurpation.³⁶ Under the

³² 'Bounce to Pop', line 49 (*TE*, VI, 368); for attribution see Pat Rogers, *Eighteenth Century Encounters: Studies in Literature and Society in the Age of Walpole* (Brighton, 1985), p. 36.

³³ Gordon J. Schochet, *Patriarchalism in Political Thought: The Authoritarian Family and Political Speculation and Attitudes Especially in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 65–66.

³⁴ For refusal of the patriarchal model, see Gerrard Winstanley, *The Law of Freedom and Other Writings*, edited by Christopher Hill (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 77–78.

³⁵ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, edited by Peter Laslett, 2nd edition (Cambridge, 1970), p. 51.

³⁶ Sir Robert Filmer, *Patriarcha and Other Political Works*, edited by Peter Laslett (Oxford, 1949).