
An Image of Victorian Women in Alexander Pope's and Anne Ingram's Epistles

Debating Victorian Women: Epistle to a Lady and Epistle to Mr. Pope

Between the works, Epistle to a Lady II and Epistle to Mr. Pope, the bone of contention is the character of women. Pope accuses women of amorous passion, fickle and temperamental dispositions, vanity, irrationality and ambition for power. This school of thought corresponds to the prevalent spirit of the seventeenth century Age of the Enlightenment whose emphases are Reason and Humanism. Ingram, in her Epistle to Mr. Pope, opposes Pope's view and argues that dominant patriarchy, lack of proper education for females are to blame for their faults. Further, she posits that the male and female sex have the same natures and therefore share the same faults. Thus, both epistles clash and carry divergent views on the female character.

In the Epistle to a Lady, Pope incarnates amorous passion in several female historical and legendary heroines characterizing women. Each female has a voice in the stanza in which she expresses her liking and bent. To express female sexuality, Pope alludes to Calypso, goddess known in myth for her enthralling charm and passion. Philomede refers to Aphrodite or Venus, goddess of fertility, erotic passion and beauty. Female erotica is also personified in Pastora, who refers to the pastoral genre of literature and art whose main focus is idealized love between shepherds and shepherdesses in an Eden where one's energies are directed to making sonnets, odes, lamentations of love to the beloved. Sappho is a great Greek female poet whose writings and works reflect a mind occupied with passion, and eroticism. Helen of Troy, originally from Sparta, also represents the goddess of fertility in certain cults and is notorious for her unsurpassing beauty and passion. Thus, Pope establishes the ruling impulses of passion in women.

Pope levels another accusation against women classifying them as "chameleons" (2601), unstable, and capricious creatures. Pope makes reference to Cynthia, the goddess of fertility and the moon. The moon is a known planetary body, believed to control seasonal changes and the humours. Another character that refers to the temperamental nature of women is Papillia. Papillio is a genus of colourful butterflies and so Pope labels women as flighty creatures whose main employment is to look attractive, fluttering from place to place, in other words, social butterflies. The butterfly is a sexual creature since it aids in flower pollination so female sexuality and flightiness unite. Fannia is a genus of housefly but used as a female's name. In the context of Epistle to a Lady, Fannia symbolizes the flightiness and instability of women whose place is in the house. So women are inconstant, frivolous creatures.

Pope illustrates women's natural preoccupation with beauty by depicting paragons of physical beauty and female splendour. Callista derives from Callisto who is a legendary huntress, recognized for her prepossessing beauty. The name Callisto in Greek actually means

most beautiful. Narcissica evokes in the reader's mind, the Greek myth about Narcissus who occupies himself looking at his reflection in a river and falls in love with himself. Self-absorbed

pride and vanity are destructive. Beauty becomes a downfall. Pope argues against this general superficiality in women. Pope feminizes Narcissus to represent women as narcissistic. However, Ingram argues that feminine beauty is the only device and employment of women to gain control and distract themselves, since they are deprived of education and denied exposure in the public sphere.

In Epistle to Mr. Pope, Ingram contests Pope's assumption of women's inherent lack of reason and their "impotence of mind" (2600). Women's lack of learning is due to the customary manner of their upbringing or the lack thereof. Philosophy and reason are male dominated fields while dance, aesthetics and music are considered standard female employment. These distractions do not cultivate the mind, neither do they endow the woman with virtue and reason and so she remains unschooled, her mind is in a state of abandon. As a consequence, women are made "strangers to reason and reflection" (2606). Neglect of the mind's cultivation is the root cause of female unbridled passion, and general lack of understanding. Furthermore, Ingram adds that there are as many empty-headed, trifling, and irrational men as there are women. "Nugators... and nugatrixes" are nouns of male and female triflers whose names derive from the Latin word *nugatorius* which means frivolous, trifling and ineffective.

According to Pope, the female gender is "a whole sex of queens" (2603) where "every lady would be queen for life" (2603). Pope charges women with lusting after power and refers to them as queens or goddesses, embodiments of beauty and power using in his Epistle to a Lady II female characters who are mostly goddesses and queens. However, Ingram counters that "power alike both males and females love" (2605) and supports in naming the typical male occupations of soldier, hunter, and king as pursuits of glory, fame and self interest. Both sexes crave control and love of sway. Ambition only manifests itself in different forms because of man's wide, public sphere and woman's private sphere. In whatever gendered occupation, therein lies ambition.

Ingram asserts that "women if taught would be as bold and as wise" (2605). She turns Pope's attention to the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome where illustrious taught women are of steady character, virtuous, learnt and hold high values. Women such as Cleolia (Clelia), a young Roman maiden held captive, swims the river Tiber to liberty and liberates her compatriots. She is a model of courage, exemplifying lofty ideals in her life. Lucretia is another Roman heroine and noblewoman, a paragon of virtue and moral excellence. Her rape and suicide catalyze decolonization and Roman Republicanism. Cornelia stands as another example of female steadiness and virtue. She is full of wifely duty and maternal dedication to her two sons, the Gracchus brothers, who were instrumental in defending and extending the rights of lower-class and landless Roman citizens. Portia, the daughter of Cato, renowned Roman statesman, general, and historian, she reaps the rewards of education. Taught in the school of philosophy and reason, she emerges a consummate in philosophy, full of understanding and courage. As a visible token of her trustworthiness and fidelity to her husband, Brutus, she stabs herself in the thigh, endures the pain and pledges her faith to him. In her, reason and feminine honour unite. Here Ingram counterattacks Pope's accusation on female incompetence and immorality presenting exceptional figures of women who are sturdy in character, with immaculate virtue who develop qualities by solid formative education.

Ingram is an egalitarian feminist who believes that men and women carry essential similarities for "in either sex, the appetite's the same" (2605) . They share the very same passions, predispositions and potential. Ingram rivals Pope in the use of the iambic pentameter and

rhyming couplet and maintains that same form throughout her poem. Both Epistles are written in decasyllabic verse with rhyming couplets aa, bb. This poetic scheme is also used by Shakespeare and evokes the pastoral genre which both Pope and Ingram satirize. Ingram reinforces the sameness of man and woman by replicating Pope's poetic form with as much expertise and flair as he.

All in all, both arguments between Pope and Ingram clash. On one hand, Pope argues that women are "softer males" with ungovernable attitudes, perverse tendencies and inferior wit, whereas Ingram debates the high worth of women in society. She shows that women deserve equal place, equal respect and equal opportunities in society. In English society, these portraits of women are not simply opinions but realities, for women have had to face negative labeling, bias, and exclusion but also women have been embraced and can be embraced as true heroines recognized for their contributions.

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