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## Alexander and Anne: Adamantly Arguing Against Anarchy

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## **Alexander and Anne: Adamantly Arguing Against Anarchy**

Today I will turn my eye and yours to two “visions of order” by Alexander Pope and Anne Finch. In these “visions,” obviously meant to influence their audience into agreement, Pope and Finch present two widely differing ideals. On the one hand there is Finch who, in a solitary nighttime ramble, contemplates the harmony and order of nature without man or God. Then there is Pope, whose order is all centered on God and how God created Order for Man. The one thing they both have in common is that they view man as a being who constantly disrupts these two forms of order with his own interests. Therein lies the tangle that I wish to discuss—that order regulates and disorder is an anarchy that must be prevented. In their “visions of order” Pope and Finch are merely arguing against disorder and it is that, I think, that is the most important instigator for order of all.

In Anne Finch’s poem “A Nocturnal Reverie” the harmony of nature is justly celebrated in contrast to the chaos and uselessness of man’s actions. She soliloquizes the gentle breeze, the birds, the flowers, and the glow worms into peace and repose until one is nearly ready to lie at one of those “cool banks” that “to pleasing rest invite,” (line 12). But one doesn’t do that, because although one side of the poem is to introduce the joys of meditative solitude in the night there is another darker element to the poem that portrays the dangerous elements of uncivilized nature: “Whose stealing pace, and lengthened shade we fear,” (31). Finch is here afraid of a horse until she hears him ripping up the grass and eating it. The horse though could have been a predatory animal with vicious intent and it is in that moment that one realizes that although the forest might be beautiful, it can also be dangerous. This however, is simply another aspect of the harmony of nature, it fits the old adage that “the strong survive and the weak perish.” Order in

nature is, after all, very Darwinian, as Darwin himself proved. Thus, Finch provides the reader with the order that is inherent in nature, with its light sides, “heaven’s mysterious face” and the “glow-worms”, (8 and 17) and its dark sides, the “passing clouds” and the “lengthened shade” (7 and 31). All of this is merely preparation for her contrast to the advent of morning when the world of man again arises. The shift from night to day occurs at the very end and only takes up four lines out of the total fifty lines.

In such a night let me abroad remain,  
Till morning breaks and all’s confused again;  
Our cares, our toils, our clamors are renewed,  
Or pleasures, seldom reached, again pursued. (47-50).

The counterpoise in lines 47-48 is intense in that it poses night against morning and all the joy that has been found in night against all the noise and confusion of day. Man’s world, as Finch sees it, is one of pointless activity that gets them nowhere. None of the things that are most important to man, his “cares,” “toils,” “clamors,” or “pleasures,” are very often successful. Which leads to another contrast in Finch’s poem, that of what she did achieve in the night that she could probably never reach in the light of day: composed stillness.

In contrast to the busy, hectic pace of day, Finch reaches a moment of meditative enlightenment in the quiet night. It is the very clever way in which she poetically builds to her moment of reflection that requires the most note. The very beginning of the poem “In such a night,” (1), leads one from the very first to imagine that “in such a night” as this nothing could be impossible. But then she builds it up, she draws out the suspense of what could happen in such a night as this by beginning each paired heroic couplet with “When,” (9, 11), “Whence,” (13), “Whilst,” (15, 19), and so forth until finally at line 41 she begins “But.” “But silent musings urge the mind to seek/ Something to high for syllables to speak;” (41-42). In such a night, all the whens and whilsts are disregarded in favor of that “but”. Nothing is more important to Finch in

that moment than the time when her mind wings free to seek out a level of existence in which all exists around her in harmony and she exists within that harmony at peace with “th’ inferior world, and thinks it like her own;” (46). Which leads me to my final point in the contrasts in “A Nocturnal Reverie.” In that final image of Anne Finch in nature she claims it as “her own.” She is not here comparing the world of the night to the human world, but rather thinking that the night belongs to her.

In essence then it must be granted as possible that Anne Finch is an early feminist delineating day and night into hemispheres of man’s influence and woman’s, respectively. This is not so overt a distinction as to be obvious, but there are some points that do seem to back it up. In the first place, she grants quite a bit of space to write about the moon, an orb that is generally seen as feminine in quality as opposed to the masculine sun. This springs both from mythology where Diana was associated with the moon and Apollo with the sun, and from the monthly flow of women that was tied into the moon’s cycle. Next Finch mentions Salisbury, who the note tells us was the daughter of one of Finch’s close friends, “Whilst Salisbury stands the test of every light, / In perfect charms, and perfect virtue bright;” (19-20). Thus, Finch gives place to another female in the night and grants her beauty and perfection reflected in the light from the glow-worms. Whereas in a later line, she has “the sunburnt hills their swarthy looks conceal,” (27). Since no lady of Finch’s acquaintance would ever be sunburnt or swarthy in Eighteenth Century England, only a man could have that distinction, and if, as I am assuming, the hills do denote man, they are being concealed in the night. This gives credence to my theory that women belong in the night and men do not. The final point comes when she writes of how the creatures of the night enjoys themselves only “whilst tyrant-man does sleep;” (38). Perhaps I am reading too much into this, but women were not the freest of creatures in the Eighteenth Century and their fathers or husbands ultimately ruled their lives. As such I would imagine that in many cases the

woman could not enjoy herself except when her tyrannizer was unconscious. The order of night, then in light of this view, would seem to be of a freer disposition than that of day. Since, at least in the night the female was free from “tyrant-man.” Then one must consider the possibility that Finch is a proponent of the order of nature and the night because it has so many connections to femininity and the restraints that are lifted from females when night falls.

The one jarring note in this feminist analysis is that in the final lines, Finch speaks in a communal voice and includes herself in the “our” who are pursuing their human interests. In doing this she relegates herself to be of the same chaotic order as all mankind. But perhaps, it is intentional in her efforts to make readers see the joys of solitary meditation in nature that she equates herself with them in daylight pursuits. For she does write, “In such a night, let me abroad remain,” (47), intimating that she would much rather stay in the “solemn quiet” (45) of the night then return to those aforementioned pursuits. In her desire to stay and in describing the epiphany that she achieved in the night, Anne Finch is recommending the experience to all her readers in contrast to their normal daily activities which seldom achieve them anything. In so doing she is exposing the immorality of the human order of acting only in their own interests and favoring an order that leads to self-introspection and contemplation in which the “elements of rage are disarmed,” (44). This last quote leads me directly into examination of Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Man* in which he proposes the view that God created Order for Man, but that Man is ruled by “elemental strife;” (169), just as Finch was until she “disarmed” it. Pope’s hope with his *Essay* is that Man will come to understand his place in God’s order and not be ruled by his base elements. Which is one of the points in which I see Pope and Finch in agreement, in that they are arguing against these elements of disorder (“strife” and “rage”) that disrupt their visions of the perfect order.

In his *Essay on Man*, Alexander Pope expresses many of the same ideals as Anne Finch did in “A Nocturnal Reverie.” For example the one in the preceding paragraph about their similar views on elemental discord. A second occurs in the introduction to the main body of the essay itself. “Together let us beat this ample field/ Try what the open, what the covert yield;” (lines 9-10). In this metaphor Pope is extorting his friend St. John, to throw off the cloak of “meaner things” (1), and go with him into the fields to observe nature and see what they can learn. By beating the field and exposing nature’s bounty, Pope means to learn more about the world and its plan. In Finch’s poem, she too went out into nature and saw its order, however the difference between them in this case comes in degrees. Whereas, Finch looked around her in solitude and soaked in the quiet beauty of nature, Pope plans to go with a friend and attack nature until he finds what he came to see.

A third, and final, similarity between Pope and Finch’s approaches to revealing the true order can be seen in Pope’s second point when he writes, “In human works, though labored on with pain,/ A thousand movements scarce one purpose gain;” (53-54). This is equal to Finch writing that although man pursues many things he seldom attains one of them. They are thus both mocking man’s attempts to serve his own self-interest, and subsequently hinting that there are better plans of ordering one’s life. Finch wrote for solitary contemplation, but Pope writes for submitting oneself to God in his infinite power. Looking at the above quote again even as he laments man’s efforts at “works” he applauds God’s, “In God’s, one single can its end produce;/ Yet serves to second too some other use,” (55-56). So even while He is completing the one work with ease, in doing it he is furthering another work. In contrast to Man, God is far superior, and in this essay Pope continually strives to point that out.

In his brief introduction to the essay, Pope proclaims that the purpose of the whole essay will be to “vindicate the ways of God to Man,” (16), and this is what he proceeds to do.

However, this is not all Pope does. In justifying God to Man, Pope is advocating the natural rights that God has to claim over man's submission, because God is at the top of the hierarchy. Pope's view of order is in the shape of a chain, "Is the great chain, that draws all to agree,/ And drawn supports, upheld by God or thee?" (33-34). Pope wrote this, and the answer at first seems unclear. In the previous lines the word register had been of science, "connections," "dependencies," "Gradations," (30, 30, 31), which would seem to suggest that the inroads that the new sciences were making were replacing God as the upholder of the system and replacing Him with Man. Also simply the fact that Pope was writing an essay in order to hold God up before Man and vindicate him to them is in itself taking hold of the chain and holding it up. Thus, one may at first believe that Pope is suggesting that Man, in fact, sits at the ultimate height of the hierarchy and not God, but the next line quickly belies this impression, "Presumptuous Man!" (35). That Man would ever even think himself to be holding up the chain is an arrogance that Pope is vehemently opposed to. Thus, since he only gave two options for who was holding up the chain, and it's obviously not Man it must, consequently, be God.

As was mentioned already, Pope sees "elemental strife" or pride to be the downfall of man into disorder, and the one way he sees to combat this human failing is in submission to God.

Submit—In this, or any other sphere,  
Secure to be blest as thou canst bear;  
Safe in the hand of one disposing Pow'r,  
Or in the natal, or the mortal hour. (285-288)

Pope is advocating submission to the ultimate "Pow'r" because only then will Man be held safe and secure for the duration of his whole life. Without God and his plan and great chain of order Man is lost. Pope believes that in Man's overwhelming pride and aspirations to be more than he already is, he will upset the delicate balance in the chain. The way in which Pope puts it is in asking if man will "Be pleased with nothing, if not blessed with all?" (188). Man wants to have

attributes such as the eyeballs of a fly or extrasensory skin; but Pope explains how if Man was more than he was than he would have a harder time looking to God which should, after all, be the most treasured aspect of his existence. To Pope, the greatest form of order ever achieved is that embodied in God. In Pope's view God pervades every aspect of life, "He fills, he bounds, he connects, and equals all," (280). God is the order, and Pope merely wants Man to accept the order that God has already placed into existence and, submitting to the will of God, take his proper place in the Order.

These two "visions of order" are very different when it comes down to the principles of order behind them, no matter how many similarities they had in between. For Pope order is of God's creation and if Man in his pride breaks the chain then "the whole must fall," (250), and a chaos of cataclysmic proportions will ensue. Finch's view of order, on the other hand was sedate and composed of nature in all its glorious night enshrouded appeal. For her when order was achieved a "solemn quiet" descended and when the natural order was disrupted by man's "clamors," then all that happened was that the moment of "compos'dness" (43) passed and worldly activities were again taken up. Ultimately, however, I see an equality between what they are countering their orders against. Finch dismisses the turbulent order of man's world to promote instead a still order in harmony with nature and Pope tries to temper the impetuosity of Man's order of strife with a divine Order of submission to God. In each case they appear, to me, to be arguing against an order of disorder in favor of an order imposed by a force outside of themselves.



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