

James Beattie's "The Judgement of Paris": A Neglected Example of Eighteenth Century Philosophical Poetry?

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Investigations into the poetic career of James Beattie have traditionally been limited to his most successful poem, "The Minstrel"; or, "The Progress of Genius" (1771/4), which has led to a simplification of his poetic talent and influence. A poem which has received slight critical attention,¹ but is nonetheless essential to a full understanding of Beattie's developing career, is his first philosophical poem: "The Judgement of Paris" (1765). It occupied Beattie's poetic imagination for many months up to its anonymous publication in pamphlet form only four years after his initial volume of poetry. The poem received little critical attention since the author was publicly unknown, and Beattie did not acknowledge the poem openly until his second volume of poetry, *Poems on Several Subjects* (1766). It is Beattie's most ambitious poetic expression up to this point in his career; and his first extended attempt to utilise poetry as a vehicle for philosophical expression.

His ability to express the philosophical ideas he sets forth in the preface to the poem are the first symptom of the frustration that expresses itself in the "The Minstrel" and which partly explains that poem's abrupt ending. Beattie finds the conventions of poetry too limiting for his skill; the poem illustrates Beattie's frustration with poetry as a vehicle for the intricate philosophical ideas he introduces in the preface. The thwarted development of the philosophical ideas foreshadows the antagonistic relationship between philosophy and poetry which Beattie confronts in "The Minstrel." Despite the frustration of Beattie's ambitious philosophical intentions, the poem is a well crafted use of ancient allegory to explore moral preoccupations of the time, such as the nature of ambition, luxury, and the desire for sensual pleasures in place of piety and virtuous self-denial. Naturally his plans and ambitions for the poem occupy many of his letters during the period of its composition and publication, illustrating his high expectations for its reception among his friends, and among the public at large. His motivations for this poem's composition are made clear in a letter to Robert Arbuthnot: "Though instruction be no essential part of Poetry, yet I think they ought never to be disjoined. The poet, both in choosing his subject, and in laying down his plan, should have an eye to Morality."² His intentions mirror those of Alexander Pope's "Essay on Man," which provided Beattie with a model for his own philosophical poem.

It is interesting that Beattie characterises the poem as an "Essay" (iv) in his explicating preface, which is reminiscent of the "Essay on Man." In Pope's design for the "Essay on Man" he highlights the precarious nature of philosophical poetry: "I was unable to treat this part of my subject in more detail, without becoming dry and tedious; or more *poetically*, without sacrificing perspicuity to ornament, without wandring from

¹ The bibliographical history of the poem and its variations are printed in Roger Robinson, "The Poetry of James Beattie: A Critical Edition." Diss., U of Aberdeen, 1997.

² Beattie to Robert Arbuthnot, 20 October 1764, (NLS Acc. 4796 Fettercairn Box 91).

the precision, or breaking the chain of reasoning.”³ It is not surprising that Beattie’s desire to portray moralistic ideas in verse would be plagued by the problems cited earlier by Pope. Beattie chose to fulfil his moral duty in the poem using allegory, and he explains the setting and character of the goddesses later in the same letter to Arbuthnot. He explains how this pagan myth can be altered to suit eighteenth-century morality: “Let Juno represent the Patroness of Ambition, Pallas the power of Wisdom, and Venus the goddess of Pleasure; and let them talk in such a way as becomes beings of superior order; and then it is possible to apply the Judgement of Paris to a moral purpose.”⁴ The poem’s versification exemplifies the elevation of speech referred to in the letter; the poem presents and assesses different arguments for satisfying human desires and passions through the speeches of these three goddesses. Ideally “philosophical poetry promises to bring a larger repertoire of human responses to bear on philosophical questions;”⁵ Beattie, later in his career, will question the validity of this idea.

The poem did not receive much revision between the first publication as a pamphlet and its subsequent version in *Poems on Several Subjects*. Given the great care and attention Beattie gave to the poem for its 1765 debut it is understandable that a year later there would be few significant changes needed to suit the author’s plan. Beattie’s preface to the poem for the pamphlet version is included in *PSS*, and it reflects many of the sentiments he expressed to Arbuthnot. In it Beattie is able to express his philosophical ideas clearly in the preface, but they do not all find expression in the poem. The preface opens with an explanation of the doctrine Beattie plans to explicate in the poem. He begins with the nature of virtuous self-denial, the idea that “whatever course of life we pursue, we must forego some gratifications, if we hope to attain others” (iii). He then turns to sensual pleasure, and the characteristics of virtue and ambition. He argues, “Virtue hath a natural tendency to produce, and is perfectly consistent with the amplest and most diffusive gratification of our *Whole Nature*” (iv).

Conversely, “The pursuit of *Ambition*, or of *Sensual Pleasure*, can promise only partial happiness; being adapted, not to our *whole* constitution, but only to a *part* of it” (iv). These two systems of argument concerning pleasure and self-denial are clearly stated, but find no clear expression in the poem. The preface does explain the overarching thematic elements of the poem, and vindicates his use of a pagan myth to his Christian audience. It is this contention between varying kinds of pleasure and levels of fulfilment Beattie explores in the poem. The failure of the poem to provide a comprehensive exploration of the philosophical issues raised in the preface presents us with Beattie’s first frustrations with the limitations of poetry as a vehicle for intelligent expression. This initial frustration will have lasting effects upon the further development of Beattie’s career.

The poem opens with Paris depicted as a shepherd amidst natural scenery: “Where flowery woodbines wild by Nature wove / Form’d the lone bower, the Royal Swain reclin’d” (3-4). This neighbourhood is devoid of temporal cares, and “He to oblivion doom’d the listless day; / Inglorious lull’d in Love’s dissolving arms, / While

³ Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A One Volume Edition of the Twickenham Pope*. Ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, nd) 502.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Harry M. Solomon, *The Rape of the Text: Reading and Misreading Pope’s Essay on Man* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama Press, 1993) 57.

flutes lascivious breath'd th' enfeebling lay" (46-48). Paris is characterised by sloth, his poetic powers producing weak songs. Introducing him as an animal of pleasure alone is important to the development of the poem's moral argument; because it is through pleasure the goddesses will champion virtue. This attempt to reconcile pleasure and virtue is what the poem calls into question. The goddesses are introduced into the poem with great spectacle, one in which "virtue triumph'd in their beams benign" (98). On this manifestation Paris looked in awe, "His kindling cheek great Virtue's power confess'd; / But soon 'twas o'er, for Virtue prompts in vain, / When Pleasure's influence numbs the nerveless breast" (102-4). Pleasure is here indicted for its ability to deflect the soul from virtue; Beattie argues that choosing pleasure over virtue leads to destruction, which is clearly depicted in his chosen allegory.

Juno "the Empress of the skies" (118) is given the first appeal to Paris. Beattie explains to Arbuthnot his intentions for this introductory speech: "I endeavoured in that speech to set off the charms of Ambition with every ornament consistent with the semblance of virtue."⁶ This speech attempts to illustrate the compatibility between idea and virtue, but Beattie will later reflect upon this as an unrealistic pairing, because ambition becomes the strongest motivation, and ultimately destroys virtue. They benefit humanity in different ways, while remaining independent from each other; their connection can never be more than circumstantial. Juno praises the worth of ambition because it urges humans to reach their potential:

Hence the bold wish, on boundless pinions born,
That fires, alarms, impels the maddening soul;
The hero's eye, hence, kindling into scorn,
Blasts the proud menace, and defies controul" (137-40).

It becomes the driving force within the hero's breast, guiding all his actions in pursuit of its goal. Ambition is an all-consuming element, which leads to an eclipse of all virtue within the soul. Although ambition can sometimes be a great asset it must be checked by virtue, because "unimprov'd, Heav'n's noblest boons are vain" (141). In fact, by championing the cause of ambition Juno also exposes its flaws. Juno holds up the products of ambition as selfish vanity: "Vain then, th'enlivening sound of Fame's alarms, / For Hope's exulting impulse prompts no more; / Vain even the joys that lure to pleasure's arms" (161-63). The warnings and cautions of virtue are overshadowed by the lust ambition plants in the soul.

The following speech belongs to the goddess Pallas, who 'recommends Virtue, [which Beattie considers to be synonymous with knowledge] as being that which gratifies our whole nature, and the perfection of it.'⁷ It is wisdom that will lead Paris from the dangers of ambition and war, but wisdom can only be found in calm scenery by a mind mild and open to receive it: "Rage, ecstasy, alike disclaim her power, / She woos each gentler impulse of the breast" (227-28). The landscape of the poem is fitting for such enlightenment, but the mind and heart of Paris must also be calm and penitent. Pallas urges the swain to "curb the keen resolve that prompts thy soul" (240) to the extreme emotions and ambitious actions that separate him from wisdom. The main argument

⁶ Beattie to Robert Arbuthnot, 20 October 1764, (NLS Acc. 4796 Fettercairn Box 91).

⁷ *Ibid.*

Pallas makes is that virtue, not ambition, can satisfy the needs of humanity:

Explore thy heart, that rous'd by glory's name
Pants all enraptur'd with mighty charm--
And does Ambition quench each milder flame?
And is it conquest that alone can warm?" (243-44).

To prove this true to Paris the goddess then recounts the consequences of ambition in war. Implicitly undercutting Juno's argument, Pallas asks if wars that "drench the balmy lawn in

steaming gore" (246) and leave maids weeping, "Her love for ever from her bosom torn" (252) can bring Paris contentment or joy. By satisfying the lust of ambition he turns his back upon the virtue. Pallas urges him to listen "With grateful awe attend to Nature's voice, / The voice of Nature Heav'n ordain'd thy guide" (307-8). Should he follow this path, "Then shall the Shepherd sing in every bower, / And love with garlands wreath the domes of Pride" (339-40). Harmony and peace will continue in this secluded place if Paris heeds Pallas and chooses internal and intellectual prosperity over the temporal riches won by ambition.

Venus, on the contrary "recommends Primarily and directly Pleasure, because life is short,"⁸ the argument of the Epicureans Beattie had encountered in Lucretius. Venus first turns to wars, disclaiming them because their end result is not pleasure: "Joyless and cruel are the warrior's spoils, / Dreary the path stern Virtue's sons ascend" (376). This is the first time in the poem any goddess has specifically made a negative reference to the life of the virtuous. Ambition is called into question not because it alters the noble heart and mind, but because its difficulty to attain brings no pleasure: "why should man pursue the charms of Fame, / For ever luring, yet for ever coy?" (389-90). The argument against ambition is not because it is adverse to virtue, but rather because it does not satisfy the human need for pleasure. Venus reasons that violence sparked by ambition can never bring pleasure and so she urges:

Let not my Prince forego the peaceful shade,
The whispering grove, the fountain and the plain.
Power, with th'oppressive weight of pomp array'd,
Pants for simplicity and ease in vain (437-40).

This setting is conducive to pleasures of Venus, where virtue and pleasure are able to coexist. Venus does advocate virtue in Paris, because it can satisfy his need for pleasure without removing him from the enchanted plain: "Nor I from Virtue's call decoy thine ear; / Friendly to Pleasure are her sacred laws" (481-2). Venus shows Paris that "The bower of bliss, the smile of love be thine, / Unlabour'd ease, and leisure's careless dream. / Such be their joys, who bend at **Venus'** shrine" (513-15) which will lead him to choose her. This philosophy of pleasure once inspired Beattie.⁹ This paradisaal-like state Venus

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ His knowledge of the Epicurean philosophy evident from his translation of the invocation of Venus from *De Rerum Natura* in 1760. Beattie questions the tenets of Lucretius's philosophical poetry through his own composition, but he is not yet very effectively explicating the philosophical ideas he recounts in the preface.

uses to win Paris to her cause; foreshadowing the devastation this choice will cause the people of Troy. Beattie uses graphic personification to drive home his point: “With horror’s scream the Ilian towers resound” (530). By serving his sensual pleasure rather than that of wisdom or even warlike ambition Paris leads his people to destruction. Sensual pleasure wins Paris because its gratification is more overt and concrete than the others, which Beattie does not hold in high regard when held up to the positive nature of wisdom. Even ambition would be a better choice for Paris, because its internal motivation is deeply rooted in virtue itself.

“The Judgement of Paris” is Beattie’s first poem that openly attempts to advance a moral stance. It is an important shift in his poetical thought, because it shows his personal understanding of his role as a poet, to please and instruct his readers by whatever apparatus is most effective. The discrepancy between the philosophy presented in the preface and that of the poem illustrate the limitations Beattie perceived in his use of poetry as a vehicle for moral instruction. The poem represents an important beginning in Beattie’s poetic career, a movement from translations and elegies into complicated philosophical themes, by infusing an ancient narrative with contemporary moral issues. “The Judgement of Paris” represents a turning point in Beattie’s career, one which will reach its climax in the composition of “The Minstrel.”

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