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Ants, Bees, Fathers, Sons: Pope's *Essay on Man* (1734) and the Natural History of Patriarchy

Paul Baines

Great *Nature* spoke; observant Men obey'd;
 Cities were built, Societies were made:
 Here rose one little *State*; Another near
 Grew by like means, and join'd, thro' *Love* or *Fear*.
 Did here the Trees with ruddier Burdens bend,
 And there the Streams in purer Rills descend?
 What *War* could ravish, *Commerce* could bestow,
 And he return'd a Friend, who came a Foe.
 Thus *States* were form'd; the name of *King* unknown,
 'Till common Int'rest plac'd the Sway in One.
 Then VIRTUE ONLY (or in Arts, or Arms,
 Diffusing Blessings, or averting Harms)
 The *same* which in a *Sire* the *Sons* obey'd,
 A *Prince* the Father of a *People* made.
 'Till then, by Nature crown'd, each Patriarch sate,
King, *Priest*, and *Parent* of his growing State;
 On him, their second Providence, they hung,
 Their Law, his Eye; their Oracle, his Tongue.
 He, from the wondring Furrow call'd their Food,
 Taught to command the Fire, controul the Flood,
 Draw forth the Monsters of th' *Abyss* profound,
 Or fetch th' Aerial Eagle to the Ground.
 Till drooping, sick'ning, dying, they began
 Whom they rever'd as *God*, to mourn as *Man*.
 Then, looking up from Sire to Sire, explor'd
 One Great First Father, and that *first* Ador'd.
 Or plain Tradition that this All *begun*,

Convey'd unbroken Faith from Sire to Son,
 The Workman from the Work distinct was known,
 And *simple Reason* never sought but *One*:
 E're *Wit* oblique had *broke* that steady Light,
 Man, like his Maker, *saw*, that *all was right*,
 To Virtue in the Paths of Pleasure, trod,
 And own'd a *Father* when he own'd a *God*.
 LOVE all the Faith, and all th' Allegiance then;
 For Nature knew no *Right Divine* in *Men*,
 No *Ill* could fear in *God*; and understood
 A *Sovereign Being* but a *Sovereign Good*.¹

Alexander Pope was born in the year of the 'Glorious Revolution' (1688), an obvious test case for the contest between patriarchal or divine-right and social-contract theories of sovereignty, as it was played out during Pope's childhood. Alongside Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* and John Locke's *Of Civil Government*, the main ideas were notably dramatized in poetry in John Dryden's royalist *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), an enormously influential satiric model. Dryden became a Catholic on the accession of James II in 1685 and remained so on his removal from the throne in 1688, necessarily thereby sacrificing his state appointments. In the course of his career Pope, a Catholic by birth and permanently excluded from public office, university education and the franchise, would self-consciously model himself on the independent satiric commentator in a voice sometimes closely echoing Dryden's later mode. As a young man, Pope read widely in religious and political controversy, finding himself strongly swayed by successive arguments, and he attempted an ecumenical, centrist position in early works like the *Essay on Criticism* (1711). But, as party lines between Whig and Tory hardened towards the end of the reign of Anne, bringing with it the prospect of a desacralized monarchy whose claim to sovereignty obviously lay with Parliament rather than divine right, Pope launched a kind of elegiac Tory myth of a Stuart golden age in *Windsor-Forest* (1713), and was thereafter always suspected of High Tory, if not Jacobite, sympathies. His mock-epic *Dunciad* (1728), together with his verse *Epistles to Several Persons* and series of *Imitations* of the Roman poet Horace, in the 1730s, were laced with anti-Hanoverian innuendo. The Whig regime of Sir Robert Walpole was fairly solid for the majority of Pope's later career, and Pope derived much poetic energy and material from his oppositional stance. He was courted by and attracted to the cluster of opposition politicians around the Prince of Wales, but was too independent of mind to become their official laureate, preferring to present himself as outside party divisions.

Pope's *An Essay on Man* is normally considered as a single poem, but the four constituent epistles, composed somewhere around 1730–1, were originally published separately, at intervals of a few months between the first (20 February 1733) and the last (24 January 1734), with the composite sequence coming out in April 1734. The poems were also published anonymously, and not through Pope's usual publisher; until his *Works* of 1735, the *Essay on Man* was not acknowledged as his at all. The speaker of the *Essay* has a notional observer-companion, originally named 'Lælius'. This figure was later identified as Pope's close friend Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, who had returned from his Jacobite exile in 1723 but was still regarded by some as a freethinking troublemaker, making disguise necessary in Pope's deliberate strategy to wrongfoot his opponents, ever ready to damn him as a potential traitor. The poem was originally intended as the first volume of a four-part sequence of 'ethic epistles', and was initially received warmly as a non-party poem of moderate rationalism, with some unwitting praise from Pope's political and literary enemies. Latterly it was regarded by continental theologians, using a poor translation, as heretical, and it was at times accused of deism: the poem has indeed nothing to say of revelation, the redemptive role of Christ, or the functions of religious practice. It was defended with a heavy hand of commentary by a rising Anglican clergyman, William Warburton, soon a close associate of Pope's.

An Essay on Man adopts, in theory, something of the ethical middle way of *An Essay on Criticism*: in 'The Design' prefixed to the first edition of the whole poem, Pope describes it as 'steering betwixt the extremes of doctrines seemingly opposite ... forming a *temperate* yet not *inconsistent*, and a *short* yet not *imperfect* system of Ethics'. Though the ostensible field of the *Essay* is thus ethics rather than politics, much of it is open to a political reading. The first Epistle, setting out the 'order' of the universe, suggests that everything, including 'Man', has its correct place in a 'Vast Chain of Being' (237), resistance to which is characterized as pride of the kind John Milton explored in his epic of rebellion against God, *Paradise Lost* (1667). As the 'Argument' to the Epistle declares, 'Absolute Submission' to Providence is required, and it might be possible to read that requirement as analogous to a worldly doctrine of Passive Obedience. The second Epistle, however, models the universe, and the mind of Man, horizontally, as a set of mixed, contrasting and balanced parts, a self-governing system in which the appetitive thrust of self-love is countered by reason, vice by virtue, the 'Ruling Passion' (a dominant emotional drive, a sort of monarch within an individual psychological 'commonwealth'), by internal opposition and external contrary forces. This could be read as an image of a constitution functioning by

means of competing but balanced interests, as the British one was supposed to do. Pope's couplet art is very good at analysing and holding in tension opposite qualities, which are themselves writ large over the four contrasting Epistles; with the first two Pope has set up one essentially hierarchical system and one more laterally balanced, each contributing to the overall stability (and immutability) of the cosmos.

In Epistle III, from which the extract is taken, Pope sets out a narrative theory of the origins of government, in which these and other contrasting ideas are explored in explicitly political terms. It is worth noting that the biblical story of Adam and Eve, from which the grant of patriarchal sovereignty is supposed by Filmer to take its narrative shape and explanatory origin, plays no part whatever in Pope's conception: there is no acid Lockean refutation of its validity, it is simply not there at all. Since Pope's concern is to 'vindicate' a structure in which all dynamism ultimately results in replication of the *status quo*, narrative is itself problematic, since history implies that things have been otherwise and therefore could be otherwise again; but theories of government often sought some historical or mythic point of origin, supposedly granting explanatory authority, and Pope gingerly follows this model. The 'Argument' added to later printings of Epistle III gives the relevant sequence as: 'Origin of Political Societies. Origin of Monarchy. Origin of Patriarchal Government', which implies a bald kind of logic. The actual narrative is more complicated and much less clear-cut.

Pope initially suggests that cosmic structure shows co-operation and mutuality down to the inanimate and atomic level (7–14). He next takes us through the collaborative instincts of plants, then animals, which naturally conspire to 'Eternal ORDER' (113). From 150 to 201 Pope gives an account of the State of Nature: not Hobbes's reign of terror but an Edenic 'reign of God', in which self-love and social instinct simply cohere and balance, and no one has mastery over anyone else. During this passage, 'Nature' (a sort of divine apostle of rationality) instructs early humans to study the instinctive self-organization of miniature animal states, particularly '*The Ants Republic, and the Realm of Bees*'. These represent two alternate models, both valid within an overall providential system, in one case communitarian ('*How those in common all their Stores bestow, | And Anarchy without Confusion know*'), in the other, a monarchy which nonetheless guarantees the 'liberties of the subject' ('*And these for ever, tho' a Monarch reign, | Their sep'rate Cells and Properties maintain*'; III. 187–191). (Pope does not mention female dominion of the hive. John Geddie's *The English Apiary* (1721) discusses the role of

the queen bee; but Pope follows the model of Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1714), a political analysis which ignores the issue of a visible matriarchy). These political alternatives are offered to mankind in some exemplary couplets which appear to balance their claims to attention equally. The excerpted section then follows.

Some examples of Pope's 'steering' across a spectrum of political argument mark the narrative, and there are several areas of ambiguity and slippage. 'Men' follow the instructions of Nature to build cities and found societies, which then combine 'thro' *Love or Fear*'; Pope does not determine which, but in the ensuing lines he privileges the mutual friendship borne of commerce, over the enmity of war, as the developing force in social intercourse, later adding further lines to strengthen the image of an antediluvian golden age of benign natural law. 'The name of *King* unknown' indicates a self-governing organization, of the ant kind; until the unknown point in history at which 'common Int'rest plac'd the Sway in One'. That 'one' is (inevitably) male, already eminent for 'VIRTUE' – whether in 'Arts, or Arms' Pope diplomatically leaves undecided. This apparently contractual or elective origin of kingship is at once mapped directly and seamlessly onto a 'natural' origin for the patriarchal authority of a head of state, which is found in the reverence of male children for their father. This brings us to Pope's almost sole use of the word 'Patriarch' in poetry. Though Pope mentions the biblical patriarchs in the notes to his translations from Homer, and lightly in passing in the *Essay on Criticism*, this is his only use of it in a serious political context. In his correspondence he often uses the word in a jocular sense to praise, or tease, men at the head of a family, and on occasion to joke about his own status as a (childless) 'patriarch' of hospitality; these references, always at least a little ironic, nonetheless suggest an image of benign and natural authority, compatible with the narrative through which patriarchalism comes to the fore here.

'Till then, by Nature crown'd, each Patriarch sate,
King, Priest, and Parent of his growing State;

The force of 'Till then' is odd, in that it seems to point to a definite moment in time which is not actually given: as if Pope is saying 'Until the point at which, by Nature crown'd...'. We have patriarchal authority because sons worship their fathers, and that is the 'natural' law. There is nothing to show the process by which the father of one *particular* family becomes king, priest and parent of the state: the extrapolation from domestic to political unit is magical

and opaque, and if Nature is God's surrogate there is nonetheless no visible mandate from God.

Avoiding the issue of the succession of another which might emerge at this point, and therefore simply ignoring the question of how hereditary right becomes a normal model, Pope redirects attention upwards; the 'sons' now require a better explanation for power than the godlike nature of their own father, soon locating it in 'One Great, First Father', or God, who thus appears to be deduced rather than self-evidently present or revealed. Alternatively, in an equally unhistoricized invention, a 'plain Tradition' of God's work perhaps 'Convey'd unbroken Faith from Sire to Son.' Again Pope aligns two complementary possibilities, the authority of a quasi-scriptural tradition and the light of reason deducing an uber-patriarch on the basis of the local father-son model. Most shades of contemporary opinion, from the deistical proponents of 'natural religion', to Catholic followers of orthodox church doctrine, could probably find something to agree with (and to dissent from) here. Pope does however make one point clear: in this still Edenic state of Nature, 'Love all the Faith, and all th' Allegiance then; | For Nature knew no *Right Divine* in Men'. The historical existence of patriarchs is the natural thing, even the best thing, but it does *not* entail a divine grant of power which can be cited in favour of divine right theory. (Nor, however, did anyone require any state oaths of 'Allegiance', so troublesome to Catholics like Pope, in this golden age of patriarchy.)

The point at which having a '*Sovereign Being*' might be other than a '*Sovereign Good*' is also not specified, as Pope goes on to obfuscate that shift as well. He asks 'Who first taught Souls enslav'd, and Realms undone | Th' enormous Faith of *Many made for one*' (242–3), much as Milton asks, rhetorically, who caused the Fall in the early lines of *Paradise Lost*; but whereas Milton has an identifiable narrative villain in Satan, Pope's answer for the development of tyranny out of his ideal patriarchal community is merely this: 'Force first made *Conquest*, and that Conquest *Law*' (246). The subsequent emergence of 'Superstition' and 'Fear' wraps 'Tyranny' in some effective ideological mysticism, but, as narrative, it conspicuously avoids causation. While the obvious historical tyrannies of the world are characterized as malign parody of a beneficent patriarchalism, the only way Pope finds to link the two is through an abstract and unexplained 'Force'. Milton and other republican Whigs often identified the biblical hunter Nimrod as the first patriarchal ruler by conquest (or usurpation). Pope had indeed cited Nimrod as a vicious tyrant in his own early tribute to Stuart paradise, *Windsor-Forest*, finding Nimrod's methods replicated in the Norman Conqueror (and by implication in the methods of William III, the military

prince who had displaced James II); but here he eschews the opportunity to give his 'Force' any quasi-historical identity. It is a sort of Fall, with no apparent cause, though with grim results (242–69).

Redemption from the tyrannical perversion of patriarchalist rule takes the form not of some Christic sacrifice (the prophetic Christian story of Milton's *Paradise Regained* is also completely absent) but of some conveniently emerging 'Friend of Humankind', whether 'Poet or Patriot', to 'restore' the 'ancient Light' of nature by teaching 'Pow'rs due Use to *People* and to *Kings*' (290). This is a political lesson the poem itself seeks to embody, just as its addressee, Bolingbroke, would contrastingly develop the ideal of a 'Patriot King' of disinterested civic virtue, through the 1730s and 1740s. All of which brings us optimistically to 'Th' according Musick of a *well-mix'd State*', the 'WORLD's *great Harmony*': a mixed constitution of checks and balances which was supposedly the guarantee of British 'liberty'. Beyond that, non-partisan Pope declares:

For *Forms of Government* let Fools contest;
What'ere is best administer'd, is best. (304–5)

After all narrative exploration, Pope appears not to want to foreground any particular identifiable system, patriarchal or otherwise. Epistle IV, on happiness, sounds in summary like a set of instructions for conformity to a general system of order Pope feels he has proved to be valid, immutable and nurturing, never mind particular local variants.

Pope's poem is sometimes referred to as a theodicy, a form of argument which, being a defence of God's authority, might seem patriarchal by definition, though it is important to remember that the poetic model of theodicy towards which Pope's poem nods, in seeking to 'vindicate the ways of God to Man' (I. 16), is *Paradise Lost*, written by the most outspoken regicide of them all. But in place of Milton's apocalyptic mode, centred vividly on the fatal failings of Eve and Adam in relation to the authority of God, Pope presents the universe as a providential mechanism which reconciles all seemingly contrary dynamics – individual, internal and political. It is a compromise model, drawing on elements of both Filmer and Locke; but while in one sense Pope sees the appetite for social organization as prior to monarchy, his narrative also presents patriarchal government as a 'natural' and in principle right and fundamental human development. As Howard Erskine-Hill summarizes the matter, Pope

indeed has 'something for the contractualists, and something more for the patriarchalists.'²

Moreover, a poem calling itself *An Essay on Man* is likely to be masculine in focus, despite the assumed inclusiveness of the title term. It is easy to find an inherent gender imbalance underlying the term 'Man', skewing the poem towards patriarchal thinking: the patrilineal pronouns 'he' or 'his' dominate, and gendered nouns are typically androcentric, 'son' or 'father'. 'Nature' and other such abstractions (such as 'Superstition') are feminine, in a grammatically traditional way which grants a quasi-female figure a 'power' so diffuse as to be ineffable, and wholly fictional. Human female presence is largely confined to roles as nurses, wives, mothers and mistresses, with the occasional errant queen. That Pope as an eighteenth-century male Catholic should tend to privilege a patriarchalist view of the operations of power, and of language, is not very surprising. However, Pope's particular situation is interesting. As Catholicism was effectively proscribed in Britain he was able to use it as a label of alienation without actually having to submit to much by way of religious authority. He could not really practise Catholicism, and sometimes went out of his way to criticize the power of his Church, loyal as he was to English Catholics as an oppressed social group. He is happy here to take a swipe at '*Pope or Council*' as irrelevant sources of authority when compared to natural instinct (III. 88). His religious identity prevented him from assuming official kinds of authority; it gave a paradoxical freedom to exercise other kinds of power.

The final Epistle is one of interesting cracks, in that Pope's normal voice as satiric censor is easier to find here, and among his targets are the *actual* monarchs of his world. After the death in 1714 of Queen Anne, last of the Stuarts and the only sovereign for whom he was prepared to express much warmth, Pope had been routinely disrespectful towards kings and queens. Granted, the reigning British examples were the despised Hanoverians, but there is much anecdotal evidence to suggest that Pope had little time even for earlier Stuarts like Charles II, the all-too-potent parent-king of Dryden's poetry. The opening of the poem called the addressee away from the 'low Ambition, and the Pride of Kings' (I. 2), and in revised versions Pope targeted several aggressive male leaders; Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great are not among the heroes of the finished poem. The final Epistle repeatedly expresses contempt (and little else) for monarchs as a class. While he was from a legal point of view a 'quiet' subject, Pope was no more able than Milton to align

his work with the authority of a court in the way his model Dryden could: however natural patriarchal monarchy might once have been, implicitly as the poem draws to a close there is a shift in authority towards the independent power of the pen. That this has a patriarchal aspect of its own is another story.