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POPE'S BLANK VERSE EPIC

I have often been impressed by the fact that Owen Ruffhead in his biography of Alexander Pope (1769) paid so much attention to Pope's plan for an epic poem to be entitled *Brutus* and written in blank verse. Having before him Pope's autograph notes for the entire poem, Ruffhead deciphered them as best he was able and gave the public for the first time a fairly complete synopsis of the projected work. The difficulty of making such a synopsis must have been very great, for the notes are miserably arranged, with two or three parallel columns on the same page, the second column being in some cases an explanation of the first and in others a mere continuation; but Ruffhead succeeded in making out of the material before him a coherent plan which, I have no doubt, is fairly true to Pope's intention. As a sample of his accuracy in copying and expanding, I may quote a few of the most legible sentences in Pope's MS exactly as they stand, and then give Ruffhead's elaboration of them:—

This he may tell his Council to encourage 'em to proceed. Yet y^v continue afraid pleading ye example of Hercules for going no farther, ye Presumption of going beyond a God. He answers he was but a mortal like them, & if their Virtue were superior to his, they w^d be as much Gods as he Ye way is open to Heaven by Virtue. Lastly he resolves etc [in another part of the page the sentence is taken up thus:] he resolves to go in a single ship, & reject all Cowards.

This has such an effect, that the whole council being dismayed, are unwilling to pass the straits, and venture into the great ocean; pleading the example of Hercules for not advancing farther, and urging the presumption of going beyond a god. To which Brutus, rising with emotion, answers, that Hercules was but a mortal like them; and that if their virtue was superior to his, they would have the same claim to divinity: for that the path of virtue was the only way that lay open to Heaven.

At length he resolves to go in a single ship, and to reject all such dastards as dared not accompany him.

It is surprising to me that Ruffhead should make his outline with such care and at the same time pay so little attention to the fact that Pope's epic was to be in blank verse. After devoting some eleven pages of his biography to the outline as he elaborated it from Pope's notes, he remarks: "Our author had actually begun this poem, and a part of the manuscript in *blank verse* now lies before me, but various accidents concurred to prevent his making any further progress in it." Interesting

as it may be to know that Pope had completed the plan for an epic poem whose hero was Brutus, the great-grandson of Æneas, and that he had read in detail and revised the stories of Geoffrey of Monmouth, it would have been far more interesting if Ruffhead had given us, instead, the part of the MS in blank verse which, he said, lay before him as he wrote.

What Ruffhead has told us about the design of *Brutus* is confirmed in part by the conversation which Pope had with his friend Joseph Spence.

“The idea that I have had for an epic poem of late turns wholly on civil and ecclesiastical government. The hero is a prince who establishes an empire. That prince is our Brutus from Troy; and the scene of the establishment, England. The plan of government is much like our old original plan; supposed so much earlier: and the religion, introduced by him, is the belief of one God, and the doctrines of morality. Brutus is supposed to have travelled into Egypt; and there to have learnt the unity of the Deity, and the other purer doctrines afterwards kept up in the mysteries. Though there is none of it writ as yet, what I look upon as more than half the work is already done; for 'tis all exactly planned.”

Spence: “It would take you up ten years?”

Pope: “Oh much less, I should think, as the matter is already quite digested and prepared.”

Since Ruffhead's biography of Pope appeared in 1769 and Spence's *Anecdotes* were printed in 1820 (they had circulated in MS ever since Spence's death in 1768), it seems a pity that the whole matter has been so sadly neglected by most of Pope's editors and biographers. I have looked in vain through so many editions of Pope's complete works—so called—without finding the blank verse lines from *Brutus*, that I am inclined to hazard the sweeping statement that they have never been printed.

The neglect of the epic by biographers has been almost as startling as by editors. Two or three brief sentences, showing only a knowledge of Pope's conversation with Spence, is usually the limit of the comment; for instance, Robert Carruthers (1853) remarks rather fantastically, I think,

Among the other plans of Pope was an epic poem, to be entitled 'Brutus,' the hero of which was to attempt the great ocean in search of a new country, and, encounter, like Æneas, long perils both by sea and land. There seems to be no part of this epic written. It was a mere vision, like the poet's grand architectural designs, and was equally unattainable by his resources.

Similarly in the great standard ten-volume edition by Croker, Elwin, and Courthope I find only this brief reference:—

At this period [about the year 1740] he seems also to have been meditating an epic on the legendary subject of the Trojan Brutus¹ and two moral Odes on the Evils of Arbitrary Power and the Vanity of Ambition, by the non-execution of which nothing has certainly been lost to English poetry.

¹ The design of this poem is described in Spence's 'Anecdotes,' p. 288.

An exception should perhaps be made of the Rev. Alexander Dyce, who apparently recognized the importance of Ruffhead's find, and quoted the plan of the epic, almost verbatim from Ruffhead, in the numerous editions of Pope to which he wrote the *Memoir*. But even in Dyce's work one is struck by the fact that he apparently made no attempt to get Pope's autograph notes and the fragment of the poem in blank verse.

It occurred very forcibly to me that if Ruffhead's statement was true, and if Pope in the latter part of his life had definitely decided to abandon the heroic couplet in what he designed as his most pretentious original poem, a startling revision would have to be made of nearly every discussion ever written on Pope's use of the heroic couplet. For instance, W. E. Mead's volume, *The Versification of Pope*, (a Leipzig dissertation) makes no mention of blank verse, and compels the inference that the author was unaware of Pope's actually having begun his experiment with this form. The discovery of these lines of blank verse would not, of course, overturn either the generally accepted idea that Pope handled the "rocking-horse couplet" better than any of his contemporaries, or the theory that this couplet is too limiting and rigid a form for the expression of varied moods and powerful emotion. But it would throw new light on the fallacious idea that Pope was unable to discern the greater freedom offered by blank verse.

The whole matter seemed to me of enough importance to justify a most careful search for the notes in Pope's hand, which Ruffhead had used a hundred and fifty years ago. They turned up, with the mysterious fragment in blank verse, in the British Museum, where they have been lying neglected for fifty years! The entire group of Egerton MSS 1946-60 are original letters and papers of Pope, William Warburton, and others, comprising fifteen volumes, which were used by Ruff-

