

My Faults, My Follies

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QUEEN OF THE WITS: A LIFE OF LAETITIA PILKINGTON
by Norma Clarke.
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'If ever a woman wanted a champion,' Virginia Woolf wrote, 'it is obviously Laetitia Pilkington.' Norma Clarke intends to vindicate both the author and her *Memoirs* (she pays tribute to A.C. Elias's invaluable 1997 edition). Correcting the long-standing categorisation of Pilkington as a 'scandalous memoirist' (her story was advertised alongside Cleland's *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*), Clarke persuasively describes the *Memoirs* as a remarkable hybrid: as innovatively mock heroic as the *Dunciad*; as winningly frank and ramblingly anecdotal as the autobiography of her patron, the comic actor and poet laureate Colley Cibber; as dizzying in its inversion of perspective as *Gulliver's Travels*; and as sentimental as the novels of Samuel Richardson, a patron for whom Pilkington provided inside information on the workings of the female heart and the doings of London libertines, and from whom she learned to write to the moment, and to keep in mind new possibilities for a woman's story.

Clarke describes the *Memoirs* according to a series of oppositions that also characterise the generic panoply of 18th-century literature. Pilkington, she says, mixes 'fact with fiction, prose with poetry . . . sincerity with artifice and satire with panegyric'; she looks 'askew' at the couplet of 'respectable Dublin' and 'rakish London', exposes hypocrisy and reverses the reader's moral expectations. The joining of Cibber and Richardson's influences signals the confluence of the novel and the theatre in Pilkington's life and writing.

Pilkington played a variety of roles: young poetic prodigy, disobedient daughter (a part forced on her by her parents, who agreed to let her marry her persistent suitor, the charming aspiring poet Matthew Pilkington, as long as the couple pretended to have eloped against her parents' wishes); respectable matron, favoured member of Swift's literary circle (he taught her the good use of English by pinching her black and blue when she misspoke), Grub Street hack and ghostwriter for hire who figuratively hung out her sign – a literary version of Aphra Behn's courtesan Angellica – across the street from that famous haunt of 'titled drunks and dimwits', White's; enterprising shop-owner; collector and championer of women's stories and 'expert in female distress'; vituperative satirist and, repeatedly, virtuous woman in dire straits. Masks are everywhere in Pilkington's world. Like Richardson's *Clarissa*, she takes what she thinks to be respectable lodgings and finds herself in a brothel. She finds kindness on the street and abuse in the highest places. The lord high almoner, Bishop Sherlock, 'fat and carbuncled, his face "all Knobs and Flames of Fire"', rejects her plea for royal charity, calling her a foreigner (a claim she disputes, retorting that Ireland was 'equally a Part of his Majesty's Dominions with Great-Britain'), a liar and a 'saucy, proud, impertinent Person'. Her husband, Matthew (literary rival, deserter and possible pimp, 'something of a stage villain' in Clarke's phrase), is just one of many men of the cloth whose morals disappoint. John Wesley, silent and dour at a respectable gathering, is rakishly charming when he visits her alone.

Take for a final example the renowned physician, collector and charitable benefactor Richard Mead. When Pilkington first approached him for assistance – she was a distant relation of the Irish branch of the Mead family and was going by the name 'Mrs Meade' at the time – he humiliated her, deflating her literary aspirations and dispensing the measly sum of two guineas. On returning home she flung the two coins in the air and one rolled into a crack in the floorboards, never to be retrieved. Months later, imprisoned for debt in the Marshalsea, she learned to her dismay that an affiliation with the name Mead would do her no favours. Mead was a 'hair fetishist who kept a seraglio of beautiful women who posed naked for him in a variety of "attitudes", usually combing their hair'; he had rid himself of a cast-off mistress who might have been blackmailing him by having her imprisoned for debt, sustaining her in the Marshalsea with the familiar sum of two guineas a week. Pilkington had first seen this woman 'lying dead drunk in a Puddle'; she subsequently led an angry mob against Pilkington, believing her to be Mead's wife. Pilkington then wrote to Mead asking for assistance, and may well have mentioned her illicit knowledge of his affairs (blackmail was a motif in her life, and people subscribed to the *Memoirs* in order not to be named in them). Mead sent her one final guinea and refused further contact. Clarke's comment on the incident is characteristic:

This vision of the hopeless drunk, unjustly imprisoned because she had spoken what men preferred to keep secret, and kept there because men like Mead could buy whatever services they required, seared itself on her imagination . . . The incarcerated ex-mistress symbolised the inequities of a system in which men were directly responsible for female distress. The woman lost everything, beginning with reputation; the man carried on and, in the case of Dr Mead, was revered for his charity.

Pilkington spent the guinea and savaged Mead in her *Memoirs*, 'not failing to allude to his range of well-known "good Works, such as combing the Ladies Heads, &c. &c"'. In stories like these Pilkington is playing a serious game, not unlike Pope's in his feminisation of epic in the beautifully violent world of *The Rape of the Lock*: she is reversing the gender of the 'scandalous memoir' by exposing the male secrets to which her own oppression gave her access.

The role Pilkington fought against all her life was that of the fallen woman. Discovered (or perhaps trapped) in flagrante by her cheating husband and 12 bought witnesses alone at midnight in her bedroom with the young surgeon Robert Adair, she was subsequently convicted of adultery. Matthew got the divorce he had long desired and done his best to enable by, as Clarke puts it, 'tormenting her at home and blackening her name out of it'. Swift tried to erase her name from all his letters and wrote to the alderman John Barber, whom he had earlier persuaded to help Matthew: 'He proved the falsest Rogue, and she the most profligate whore in either Kingdom.' Iris Barry, in the introduction to her 1928 edition of the *Memoirs*, marks our heroine's abrupt transformation in that fateful year of 1737: 'The nice, pretty, poetical Mrs Pilkington disappears at this date: the celebrated Mrs Pilkington appears in her stead.' Pilkington left Dublin to seek her fortune in London. Eleven years later she would rewrite the scene of her undoing as proof of her love of literature. The only desire she had been consumed with, she wrote, was the urge to finish a book that the gentleman refused to lend.

Pilkington's story is about the over-determined confluence of sex and books, of women for hire and authors to let. Clarke sees her as a satirist who wrote to vindicate herself and blame others. Woolf thinks she was an unconscious actress, 'so imbued with the old traditions of her sex that she wrote, as ladies talk, to give pleasure . . . We can never forget that it is her wish to entertain, her unhappy fate to sob.' Barry believes she was a noble fool who tried to keep up appearances, a fighter against a society which 'would cheerfully have made a prostitute and a plaything of her . . . She was a silly little thing to protest so much . . . but there was something heroic and indomitable in her silliness; and in a queer, outlandish fashion she preserved the honour of womanhood.' Suspended between the constraint of old traditions and the necessity of new forms, surviving on the fringes of respectability, Pilkington's greatest innovation was her own story. 'Although it has been the common practice of writers of *Memoirs* to fill their volumes with their own praises,' she begins, 'I am determined to quit this beaten track, and, by a strict adherence to truth, please even my greatest enemies, by presenting them with a lively picture of all my Faults, my Follies, and the Misfortunes which have been consequential to them.' The belief in a 'strict adherence to truth' was shared by Pope, who argued that his exposure of his own faults proved the clarity of his satiric medium, and Gulliver, who staked his claim to truth at the end of the *Travels* by quoting Sinon, the world's most famous and dangerous liar. Pilkington hoped that her brand of truth 'may be instructive to the female part of my readers, to teach them that reputation is the immediate jewel of their souls/and that the loss of it/Will make them poor indeed!' She portrayed herself as a fallen Desdemona, unjustly, indeed tragically accused, who has the temerity to go on living.

The true scandal, as Clarke sees it, is not Pilkington's fall but the double standard that forced her to live Pope's 'life of a wit' as a war between the sexes. As *The Rape of the Lock* makes clear, when female honour means sexual reputation, and when female heroism means sexual submission (the failed moral of Pope's mock epic is the prude Clarissa's injunction 'to keep good humour still whate'er we lose'), a fallen woman determined to defend her virtue cannot succeed, even when armed with a pen. Considered fair game by rakes and madams alike (when she writes 'it was quite the mode to attack me' after her husband cast her off, she means 'physical as well as verbal attacks on her person as well as her reputation'), Pilkington is remarkable in Clarke's account for her refusal to submit to shame or to silence. Even her moments of despair are rejections of a predictably tragic end. Sitting one night by Rosamond's Pond in St James's Park, she contemplates throwing herself in. She is saved, in a typical twist, by a well-bred mother and daughter, who engage her in genteel conversation about the beauties of the evening. Always polite, and often lonely, she responds and is comforted. The women invite her home to supper; the husband, cold and violent, reminds her of Matthew. Another night in the same park and the same baleful location, she is recognised by a well-dressed army captain she had known in Ireland. He takes her to a tavern and feeds her cold chicken and champagne while she regales him with her 'unhappy' story; he escorts her home and gives her two guineas. This episode, Clarke remarks with her usual withholding of judgment, 'suggests she might not always have refused men's custom, although it might also have happened exactly as she told it'. Sentiment, however, didn't work with everyone. Writing a 'heart-wrenching account of her decay' to an old rake of her acquaintance, she received this response:

You old Devil, when you were handsome, I told you I loved you, as I told every woman who came in my way; but by God, my dear little creature, I never cared a half-penny for you; and so you now begin to talk to me like a death's head, or a memento mori . . . And pray, Madam, what's your misfortune to me? Must I break a ten guinea bet at White's, to give you one, because you are unfortunate? That would indeed help to make me so, as I should repent it all my life. – Oh! thou beautiful ruin! thou admirable antique! thou venerable matron! thou poetical sybill! In short, thou dear fine worthy antient gentlewoman!

The writer who styled herself both 'poor Laetitia . . . the Foot-ball of Fortune' and Swift's rightful successor was shrewdly described by Woolf as 'a very extraordinary cross between Moll Flanders and Lady Ritchie, between a rolling and rollicking woman of the town and a lady of breeding and refinement', a satirical lady perpetually outrunning distress. But Clarke points us to a more interesting confluence in her juxtaposition of Pope's epigraph, 'the life of a Wit is a warfare upon earth,' with one from the *Memoirs*: 'But I have been a Lady of Adventure, and almost every day of my life produces some new one.' She is indeed an adventuress in the mould of Moll Flanders but, as Clarke points out, she is also a literary adventurer in the mode of Moll's author, the Grub Street entrepreneur Daniel Defoe. After her heyday at White's she had begun 'a blank-verse tragedy, *The Roman Father*, based on an episode in Roman history in which the heroine, Virginia, her honour threatened by the advances of a corrupt tyrant, is killed by her father, Virginius'. Clarke sees the plot as 'illustrative, perhaps, of her growing sense that to be female and virtuous and stay alive was a doomed enterprise'. The play was never finished; fittingly enough, Act I was salvaged for the third volume of the *Memoirs*.

There Pilkington rewrote herself as a gritty tragicomic version of Clarissa, that moral paragon and victim of the marriage market, the unwitting and anti-theatrical heroine of a she-tragedy not unlike *The Roman Father*, a skilled social observer who in her willed innocence, as Dr Johnson put it, preferred anything to the truth. Resisting her family's pressure to marry her to a repulsive rich suitor, Clarissa flees with a libertine seducer, the charming and theatrical Lovelace, who ultimately rapes her. Refusing to marry him and give her story a happy ending, Clarissa's obdurate suffering exposes the hypocrisy of virtuous and vicious alike. Both Clarissa and Laetitia refuse to equate a fall with the end of virtue. But while Clarissa, moving from one state of confinement to another, writes herself into a protracted and carefully composed death (she uses her coffin, her ultimate prison and resting place, as a desk), Pilkington, who pleaded with Richardson to spare his heroine – 'Spare her virgin purity, dear Sir, spare it! Consider, if this wounds both Mr Cibber and me (who neither of us set up for immaculate chastity) what must it do with those who possess that inestimable treasure?' – moves from one adventure to the next, writing for her life to the very last. By the skin of her teeth and by virtue of her wits, she achieved Clarissa's fondest wish: she remained single, in her own memorable phrase, a 'Noun Substantive, obliged to stand alone'.

Pilkington had a near-photographic memory: she knew Shakespeare by heart (in happier days she had proved this to Swift, who tested her at her behest), and won her parents over to the project of her education when her father overheard her at the age of five reading aloud Dryden's *Alexander's Feast*. That same day she memorised Pope's *Messiah* and recited it perfectly to her sceptical mother. That remarkable memory provided her with a different sort of 'inestimable treasure', and it keeps her alive today. At a recent conference on Swift, I heard Pilkington evoked as an authority on whom 'nobody would wish to rely', yet rely on her we must, since her anecdotes on Swift are the most evocative we have. One from early in their acquaintance is suggestive of what would come later:

When we came into the parlour, the Dean kindly saluted me, and, without allowing me time to sit down, bade me come and see his study; Mr Pilkington was for following us, but the Dean told him merrily: 'He did not desire his company'; and so he ventured to trust me with him into the library. 'Well,' says he, 'I have brought you here to show you all the money I got when I was in the Ministry, but do not steal any of it.' 'I will not indeed, Sir,' says I; so he opened a cabinet, and showed me a whole parcel of empty drawers. 'Bless me,' says he, 'the money is flown!' He then opened his bureau, wherein he had a great number of curious trinkets of various kinds, some of which he told me: 'Were presented to him by the Earl and Countess of Oxford; some by Lady Masham, and some by Lady Betty Germain'; at last, coming to a drawer filled with medals, he bade me choose two for myself, but then he could not help smiling when I began to poise them in my hands, choosing them by weight, rather than antiquity, of which indeed I was not then a judge.

Swift too, as the empty drawer shows, thought himself wronged by those in power in London, who had left him to spend his days in Irish exile. Only the medals remained ('Verses on the Death of Dr Swift' shows his outrage at Queen Anne's failure to deliver a promised gift of medals) as material tokens of memory. Weighing the medals as if they were money, Pilkington presages the moment when she too will turn to her memories, but hers will provide literal sustenance. The title page of the *Memoirs* boasts that it contains 'all her poems' and 'Anecdotes of several eminent persons, Living and Dead. Among others Dean Swift, Alexander Pope, Esq., &c., &c., &c.' Swift was her biggest draw: 'Her name will always be linked with his.'

Perhaps the greatest strength of Clarke's biography is her reliance on Mrs Pilkington's authority; indeed her relationship to her subject is one of emulation, to the point where at times it seems the two have one voice. A minor weakness is the occasional tendentiousness with which Pilkington's story is made to fit a paradigm of feminist outrage. This results in some missed opportunities, as in a small but significant moment when Pilkington quotes Milton's 'Il Penseroso' to an English schoolmaster with whom she carried on a flirtatious correspondence two years before her death. Contemplating the thought of seeing her literary lover in the flesh, Pilkington likens herself (or is it him?) to Swift, who, observing 'What dangerous things are Men of Wit,' leaves uncompleted the story of his own ambiguously platonic amour in *Cadenus and Vanessa*. 'But however,' she continues, 'I am a Woman of Courage, and if I have a mortal Heel, or a fallible part, it is only to be assailed by magical Numbers' – that is, by poetry.

Such strains as warbl'd to thy string
Drew iron tears down Philo's cheek,
And made hell grant what love did seek.
And truly I am at least as susceptible of the
softest Passions as his grim Majesty.

Clarke sees Pilkington at this moment as 'an old trouper playing a part' in a familiar play of coquetry, and points out that she misquotes Milton, mistaking the Stoic sage Philo for Pluto, god of the underworld. 'Pluto's sexual demands symbolised Persephone's death,' Clarke intones, 'Demeter's grief, and wintry dearth.' But perhaps Pilkington is thinking of a different story here. It was Orpheus, after all, whose notes drew tears down Pluto's cheek, persuading him to release Eurydice from the underworld. At this moment Pilkington is at once sentimental poet and weeping philosopher, undoing her own sad story of abandonment (Orpheus did look back) in the vertiginous space of a few lines. Perhaps the moral to be drawn is not about the eternal suffering of women at men's hands but rather the power of poetry, and even of anecdote, to triumph over death.
