

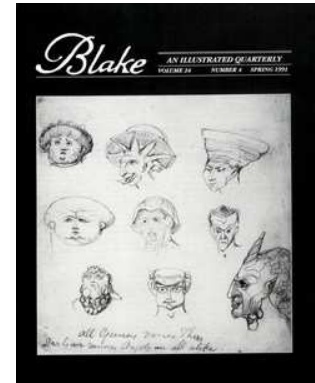
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY  
**BLAKE**

P O E M

Mrs. Blake Requests Her Portrait

Paulette Roeske

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 24, Issue 4, Spring 1991, p. 157



the poet who is assembled and disassembled in a bewildering set of juxtaposed and incompatible identities.

A very brief history of an earlier literary project may help to round off my commentary. Between 1711 and 1715 Pope completed and published *An Essay on Criticism*, *Windsor-Forest*, and *The Temple of Fame*. The revised and enlarged version of *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Messiah* are also products of these years, as is the beginning of the *Iliad* translation. The first three works in particular suggest the scope of the young poet's ambitiously educative program, and all three poems are predicated on well-known preceding discourse. All three poems assess critical, political, and cultural history and thereby initiate an encounter with public and evaluative verse. Pope's en-

terprise is variously underwritten by such concepts as "natural reason" and "natural law." His ability to deploy these concepts as congruent helps locate his discourse within the framework of accepted and recognized cultural and institutional authorities in the early years of the century, and suggests that he is teaching his audience in a manner not resumed again (by a poet; exceptions must be made for Johnson) with the same vigor and ambition until Wordsworth published his early poems and manifestos at the end and turn of the century.

The inability of any English poet to assume Pope's cultural authority in the years directly following his death reinforces the significance of Cox's remark about the education of consciousness in the middle and later years of the

century. One of the reasons sensibility is of such importance to the history of that period is because the values inherent within sensibility were susceptible of complex relations with emergent ideas of the self as personal and social being that a pre-modern culture was bringing into existence. That sensibility lent itself to a politics variously regressive or progressive is part of the give and take and ebb and flow of the greater historical adventure in the making of a modern citizen. It is merely a commonplace irony that one of the most exciting imaginations was also one of the most conservative and that one far less exciting was also among the most progressive.

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## POETRY

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### Mrs. Blake Requests Her Portrait

He keeps putting her off.  
 She, in her quiet way, insists.  
 Knowing he has a way with women,  
 romancing them in paint  
 the color of jewels, inventing  
 their most flattering features,  
 she expects he will exalt  
 her wifely figure,  
 the serviceable hips,  
 hair ripe with oil and smoke.

Over lunch he takes up  
 a dull lead stub and sketches  
 her profile: one miniature eye  
 downcast, half a mouth  
 and chin. Still chewing  
 the last bite of fish pie,  
 he adds a few squiggles for hair.

Pushing it across the table,  
 he trusts her to understand  
 that when he rendered Beatrice  
 crowned, Eve's exquisite neck  
 and Bathsheba disrobed,  
 his vision was of Catherine.

— Paulette Roeske