An In Depth Analysis of Montagu's *Saturday; The Smallpox*

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Smallpox* details the horror that one would face upon recovering from smallpox, only to discover that they are now disfigured from the disease. In this case, Flavia, a woman who is likely very vain, is in misery over her appearance after viewing her pockmarked face. The title itself is significant because of the finality presented by it. It symbolizes something reaching an end or coming to a close instead of simply representing a day of the week. In this case, it is symbolic of the end of beauty and the end of vanity.

*Saturday: the Smallpox* is the last of six eclogues written by Montagu. A series of eclogues is typically ended with a poem about someone's death. In this particular poem, it is not a person who dies, but instead the death of her physical beauty. Also, with Saturday technically being the end of the week, it represents an end, or something coming to a close. The something in question could be interpreted as Flavia's beauty. She views her loss of beauty from smallpox scarring as an end to her life, and the poem is essentially her lamentation of herself. Ramesh Suvedi presents an interpretation of the poem that is as follows: "In losing her beauty Flavia has lost the world of flirtation and flattery; she is no longer a celebrity, and without that she feels that life is not worth living" (Suvedi). Flavia is obviously a socialite who is accustomed to people praising her beauty. It could be said that before she fell ill, she could easily turn heads. Her beauty is everything to her, such is her vanity. However, after her affliction, she feels that she is left with nothing. The overarching theme within this poem seems to be the death of beauty, or
more specifically, the death of superficial beauty. It could also be argued that death is a prevalent theme, but Flavia is not actually dying. She has just recovered. What has died is her appearance. She has also lost her sense of self worth.

Montagu herself contracted smallpox in 1715 and was left scarred from it. She hid her scars with makeup, and throughout her life she sought treatment for the scars that covered her face and body. It seems that Montagu is presenting the theme that beauty is temporary, or the outward appearance of beauty is temporary. It is apparent that Montagu is pouring out her own feelings about her scars from the disease within this poem. She wished for women to not be subjected to the fear and the loss of self-confidence that she suffered. According to one source, she was instrumental in introducing inoculation methods to England. It states, "Likewise, as a small-pox survivor — she had succumbed to the disease in 1715, and hid her smallpox scars under makeup, or paint, as it was called — Lady Mary Wortley Montagu was intrigued by the Turkish method of inoculation against this disease, and later introduced these methods into England with the help of the physician Charles Maitland" (Norton). Undoubtedly, Montagu's own experiences with smallpox resulted in this poem that details the horrors and rollercoaster of emotions that such a disfiguring disease can cause a person.

The title itself is a representation of an end. Saturday is the close of the week. It has certain connotations of death. However, there is nobody dying. The end represented by the title is most likely representative of the end of Flavia's beauty, but there is another end that must be explored. It is the end of her affliction with smallpox. Yes, it has left her scarred, but she is no longer in danger of dying, except perhaps by her own hand. This is the one positive that could be extrapolated from this particular poem. Essentially, Flavia is in mourning for her beauty, which she feels is completely lost. However, she is alive and in no immediate danger of dying. She will
be disfigured, but she will be alive. It is not made very obvious to the reader whether or not she is exaggerating, but it can be assumed that she is. She feels such an attachment to her superficial beauty that she believes there is nothing left to live for. Flavia's feelings on her appearance are perhaps best conveyed in stanza two. It says:

' How am I chang'd ! alas ! how am I grown
'A frightful spectre, to myself unknown !
' Where's my Complexion ? where the radiant Bloom,
' That promis'd happiness for Years to come ?
' Then with what pleasure I this face survey'd !
' To look once more, my visits oft delay'd !
' Charm'd with the view, a fresher red would rise,
' And a new life shot sparkling from my eyes ! (Montagu)

She feels that her complexion is what would have provided years of happiness. It states that she would often look at her reflection in the mirror and admire her complexion and the blush of her cheeks. Now she feels that she has lost all of this and it will never be regained. Though she is just getting over smallpox and she has not fully healed yet, she does not think that she will ever again be the beauty that she was before contracting the disease.

*Saturday; the Smallpox* can be viewed as a commentary on female beauty during the 18th century. During this time period, women were terrified of smallpox. It was such a disfiguring disease that there was a fear that simply talking about it could induce infection. Cristen Conger, a historian of female cosmetic products, writes this about the 18th century, smallpox disfigurement and cosmetic products of the time: "By the 18th century, smallpox was a leading cause of death, killing around 400,000 Europeans each year. For those who survived, it usually left scars behind
on patients' faces. Additionally, the lead-based face powder women applied liberally in order to achieve the coveted ultra-pale complexion of the day also damaged the skin. Enter beauty patches" (Conger). Essentially, women were much more concerned about the scars left by smallpox because there was such a stipulation placed on the outward appearance of beauty during this time.

The smallpox epidemic of the 18th century must also be discussed to fully understand the poem. It is almost universally agreed upon that smallpox infection has four distinct stages. One source has this to say about infection:

"The constitution of the patient has a lot to do with which type is contracted—this is established in the first fever. 2) eruptive: from the beginning of the first fever until eruption is completed and pustules ripen. The worst time for the body to throw off the disease. 3) turn of the pox: pustules dry and blacken, patient is extremely bad in appearance. Second fever comes. Most tragic events take place at this stage. Treatment is what is recommended by the physician. 4) convalescent: patient is judged to be out of danger, though further care is still necessary" (Pryor).

It can be assumed that Flavia is in the very late stages of infection, if not completely over it. She is likely in the convalescent stage of infection, where her appearance would still be disturbing but she is out of danger for the most part. She feels that she will never be entirely healed. She now feels that she is hideous.

Montagu's Saturday; the Smallpox is obviously written from a place of experience. Though there is no death within the poem, the title does have connotations of death. The death within is the death of Flavia's beauty. The character views the end of her beauty as the end of her life. She is dependent upon her looks for her social status. After contracting smallpox, she is left
with pockmarked skin. She is so focused on her outward appearance that she thinks she will die without it. The title itself is representative of the end of or the closing of something. It is most likely referring to the end of her beauty, but a positive that could be drawn from it is that it is also the end of her battle with smallpox, and she has survived it.
Works Cited


