

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

An Introduction to Pope

Pat Rogers



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In this concise introduction to Pope's life and work, first published in 1975, the poet's highly successful career as a man of letters is seen against the background of the Augustan age as a whole. Pat Rogers begins by examining the relationship of the eighteenth-century writer to his audience, and discusses the role of style and versification in this. The book covers the whole of Pope's work and includes not only the translations of Homer and such minor poems as *The Temple of Fame*, but also the prose, both drama and correspondence. Based on extensive research, this book will provide literature students with a greater appreciation and understanding of Pope's verse and the ways in which he addressed his eighteenth-century context in his work.

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For
Michael & Florence
Treadwell

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PREFACE

The eighteenth century as a whole remains obstinately out of fashion. Yet Pope, the most representative European poet of his age, survives. He has not acquired the easy glamour which novelists attain when their works are made into television serials. But the currency of a classic can take other forms, and the serious study of literature provides a climate for writers of the past to thrive anew. Pope is widely read in advanced school classes, in colleges and universities. When he is read, he is commonly enjoyed. Sometimes the enjoyment begins a little grudgingly (one feels somehow that one ought to be resisting the impact of his subtly contrived effects); but those who come with an open mind and a genuine response to poetry often stay to admire and to share in the pleasures of Pope.

The word 'introduction' is meant to convey something more than a mere neutral guide, or prolegomena to the study of Pope. I have in mind the act of sociable courtesy by which we introduce our friends to one another. It was characteristic of the Augustans to assimilate their intellectual life into the ordinary round of day-to-day activities. They saw writing books as a species of good fellowship, just as they designed 'companionable' buildings and composed agreeable and approachable music. I have neither Augustan expectations to count on, nor Augustan means to fulfil them. But it has been my aim to make the encounter with Pope so far as possible a convivial occasion, rather than an abstract of some remote learned proceedings. There is now a formidable body of scholarship grown up around Pope. I am naturally indebted to this distinguished heritage, but, like Pope, I have tried to use this tradition rather than parade it for its own sake. There are still few places where a reader can meet with a full account of Pope which incorporates the most up-to-date findings and yet assumes no prior knowledge of the poet or his age. In this book I have attempted to take note of the latest research, without drowning the text beneath the wide Scriblerian sea of unwanted learning.

The major items in modern scholarship are threefold. R. H.

Griffith's bibliography was truly excellent in its time; but it now needs replacing, and bears only seldom on the main issues I have treated. George Sherburn's work as biographer and as editor of Pope's correspondence fortunately preserves all its value, and this book has been written with constant recourse to Sherburn in both capacities. However, my principal debt is that shared with all students of Pope. The superb Twickenham edition of the poems was originally undertaken by a team of collaborators headed by John Butt. It was completed after his death by the appearance of a splendid series of volumes devoted to Pope's Homer, edited by the greatest of living Popians, Maynard Mack. I should like to record here my gratitude to the publishers (Methuen & Co., and the Yale University Press) for their enlightened patronage of this venture, at a time when scholarly publishing has often found itself on the retreat.

The Twickenham edition is now in every respect standard. So much so, that I have organized this book according to its layout. After introductory sections on Pope's historical situation and on his art, six chapters are devoted to the major poems. Chapters 3 and 4 correspond respectively to the first and second Twickenham volumes. Chapter 5 includes coverage of the Homer, which makes up the last four volumes in the Twickenham series (i.e. 7–10). Chapter 6 answers to Twickenham III.i and III.ii, and Chapters 7 and 8 apply to the material of Twickenham IV and V. This division is both chronologically and thematically sound, and if anyone should think that such servile adherence to the Twickenham plan distorts my view of Pope's development, I can only reply that – like most contemporary students of Pope – I have lived too long under the generous Twickenham auspices to venture too far without its aid. To act otherwise is like rolling up one's map and setting out across the trackless wastes to discover the source of the Thames. Sensible readers, I believe, would keep such a journey without maps for genuinely uncharted territory. In the case of Pope, thanks to this noble edition, we can forget the pioneer stage and enter his world on privileged terms. We can, in a word, derive civilized enjoyment from the poetry right away.

CHAPTER ONE

The writer and his audience

Alexander Pope is a literary artist of the first rank, whose poems have stood their share of the tests of time – more than their share, perhaps. Unfashionable (though never unread) through much of the nineteenth century, he has come strongly back into favour over the past forty years. Indeed, there has scarcely been a literary fad since the 1920s which has not somehow bent to accommodate Pope. It may be a mixed blessing, of course, to be borne on the wings of a cult, and admiration for the writer has sometimes meant glossing over the faults of the man. Nevertheless, the perennial delights of *The Rape of the Lock*, the enduring interest of *The Dunciad*, the increasingly exciting vistas we see opened up by the *Imitations of Horace*, these all demonstrate genuine power of survival. Aptly so, for Pope himself had engaged in a constant battle for self-preservation. The wonder is not that he became such a good writer, but that he became one at all.

Born in 1688, he would have enjoyed a comfortable background but for one crucial fact. His family were Roman Catholics; and in the very year of Pope's birth the last Catholic to sit on the British throne, James II, was expelled to France amid national rejoicing. In fact James's failings – as a man, as a king, as a constitutional politician – had relatively little to do with his precise religious beliefs. But Pope inherited an unpopular faith, widely regarded as next door to treasonable, and the condition of an outcast. Papists enjoyed a severely limited range of civil rights. The boy was even brought up first on the outskirts of London, later in the country, largely because his father (who had made his money in the city as a linen draper) was obliged by law to live at a decent remove from the capital. Ever afterwards Pope was struggling back, metaphorically or literally, to the centre of things.¹

But there was soon a more grievous handicap still. In his early childhood he contracted a tubercular infection which left him permanently stunted, crippled, a prey to disorders such as migraine and asthma. The famous phrase, 'this long Disease,

my Life' (*EA*, 131), is less fanciful than cruelly accurate. He was rendered dependent on others for the simplest tasks – such as dressing – and this physical reliance may have produced in compensation the fierce personal independence which did so much to shape his artistic career.² And his undoubted prickliness towards other people can fairly be connected with his pain and a sense of his own oddity. In particular, his overstrained attitude to sex, mingling boyish smut with elaborate gallantry, must derive from feelings of being unattractive, if not grotesque, to the women he desired.

Pope, then, grew up in circumstances which threw him back on himself. His parents were both well into middle age (his father had already been widowed once); his half-sister, who was much older, soon married a local landowner named Rackett. His early tutors were recusant priests of little distinction. So he experienced the classic upbringing of the only child. Gifted, ambitious and deeply private by nature, he buried himself in the countryside and in books. The first of these meant the delightful and historically charged 'green Retreats' of Windsor Forest (*WF*, 1), out of which the poet constructed a symbolism of retirement. The second meant principally classical and English poetry. Literature of the ancient world still pervaded Western education; it set standards, prescribed models, and defined attitudes. But it is equally important to remember that Pope developed a passionate interest in vernacular writing, with Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton and Dryden as his masters. Chaucer he came to love, too, though in ways that would now seem eclectic and unscholarly.

Not all Pope's mentors were to be found among the illustrious dead. All his days he had a capacity for something one might call hero worship, were it not too *interested* an emotion for that. What usually happened was that Pope latched on to some older or more powerful figure, conducted a course of self-instruction on his own terms, and then at some point dropped his former pilot, with or without animosity. The list of these guides, philosophers and friends is a long one, and covers some distinguished and some mediocre men. In his adolescence Pope took up with Sir William Trumbull, a retired diplomat who occupied much the same role as did Sir William Temple

with Jonathan Swift a few years earlier. Unlike Swift, Pope showed himself highly precocious; and he had soon outgrown the provincial luminaries of Berkshire. To London he must go, like any aspiring writer; and by this time he was ready for such fading coffee house stars as the dramatist William Wycherley (Dryden, alas, had died just too soon) or the worldly man about literature, Henry Cromwell. A whole panel of selected midwives presided over the appearance of the *Pastorals* (published 1709), the first substantial item in the canon. Pope acknowledged the help not only of Trumbull and Wycherley, but also of William Walsh – an intelligent poetaster – Granville, Garth and Maynwaring. The two great patrons, Halifax and Somers, are little more than dignified sponsors; their names constitute a sign of 'By Appointment'. All these men were genuinely interested in the craft of poetry, but by the time Pope had left his teens he had out-distanced them all. He continued to court the rich and successful, but with less and less pretence of seeking their advice. He enjoyed social intercourse with the great, but he never allowed such intimacy to buy off his pen. Social prestige was one thing, his art another.

The next years witnessed an almost unbroken triumph, with a series of brilliant poems headed by *The Rape of the Lock* bringing Pope's name to the attention of everyone. He joined the glittering array of talent who made up the Scriblerus Club: Swift, John Gay, Dr Arbuthnot and Thomas Parnell. At the same time he got to know the influential Whig writers headed by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. He embarked on the translation of Homer's *Iliad*, and when it was completed in 1720 he had achieved a competence for life simply from the profits of this work. By this time too he had put down roots in Twickenham: a settled home, and a kind of topographic trademark, for the rest of his life. Here he observed his filial duties, his mother living to an advanced age, cultivated a garden full of symbolic impedimenta and *objets trouvés*, and went on working. His first collected volume had appeared in 1717; and though work on *The Odyssey* and an edition of Shakespeare (1725) slowed him for a time, he burst out around the age of forty with a new flood of satiric masterpieces. It is these later poems, including the *Moral Essays*, Horatian poems and *The Dunciad* in its vari-

ous guises, which enjoy the highest admiration today. Without prejudging any critical questions, we can say that they develop logically from the earlier work, more fanciful and less abrasive though it is. Famous, feared and loved all at once, Pope came to be regarded as *the* man of letters of his day. His renown was still at its peak when the ill health he had fought so long finally overcame his feeble body. He died in 1744, a week after his fifty-sixth birthday.

To all appearances this is the purest success story. A sickly, disadvantaged boy pulls himself by his own efforts to high cultural eminence. He acquires a sound financial standing, though not vulgar riches. He looks after a fond mother; makes a host of friends, most of whom he keeps; mixes on terms of unstrained familiarity with the greatest in the land; pays his double taxes, as a Catholic; and leads a modest, dignified private life. Above all, he keeps writing, and maintains the quality of his work with astonishing regularity. Really there is nothing lacking, excepting good health and a lasting sexual relationship – but this last would have worried his contemporaries much less than would be the case today. Yet to some people this is all too successful to be convincing. The progress is too smooth; there are few signs of artistic alienation, and what looks like a disconcerting readiness to accept the plaudits of polite society. But this is only half the truth.

In fact, Pope's assent to the received values of his time is more apparent than real. Much of his work, particularly in the 1730s, was devoted to countering the new politics of that period – not just the administrative machine itself, but the wider moral assumptions on which it rested. From the *Rape* onwards, Pope made himself into an unrivalled anatomist of the idiocies and inhumanities of the polite world. His satire is vigorous, plain spoken, *risqué* on many occasions. Far from a timeserver, he established a whole new rhetoric of dissent. Yet it is true that he did all this without, as it were, infringing his gentlemanly status, or jeopardizing his admission to the best circles. To understand this, we must look carefully at the actual form and idiom of Pope's poetry. As I have said elsewhere, 'He was that most dangerous critic of society, who can ape its fashionable chat and fall in with its pointless conventions.

He wrote of the social scene from within: but he was a fifth-columnist.³

* * * * *

The term 'society' must be handled with care. It does not refer to the entire six million or so people living in England at that time. London was unique in possessing a large, ill-governed, unhealthy urban sprawl, rife with organized crime. Towns such as Liverpool, growing fast though they were, had still not overtaken Bristol and Norwich in population. (When Pope died in 1744 the great mercantile centre of Philadelphia was amongst the leading cities in the British Empire; and the poet's American readership was very considerable throughout the eighteenth century.)⁴ Nevertheless, even the scattered population of rural England was mainly out of Pope's reach. The lower orders of society had neither the education, the leisure nor the means to apply themselves to reading. Books were an expensive commodity. In any case, the freeholders and yeomen, a notch or two up in the social scale, were almost as unlikely to join the reading public. Shrewd in practical affairs, and capable of responding to sharply written polemics by Swift or Defoe, they had little taste for *belles lettres*.

The truth is that – despite Pope's cultivation of rustic values – his audience was aristocratic and metropolitan in colouring. He might celebrate 'the silent Shade' (*WF*, 432), but his real affinities lay in the busy city life. His real subjects were men and events, and his readership was a sophisticated, tight-knit group. If his poetry has a wider appeal today, that is not because tastes have changed but because the literary public has been greatly extended. The constituency of serious artistic interest now embraces people very different in background, occupation and income. In Pope's day, broadly speaking, it did not.

It is, then, misleading to think of Pope as a detached or culturally isolated figure. We must not confuse his elective affinities or his intellectual loyalties with his actual role as the most conspicuous man of letters in his time. Of course, Pope *professed* detachment on many occasions. His house and garden at Twickenham, on which so much care was lavished, are part of a

desperate effort to camouflage a suburban life style behind a façade of agrarian repose and classic monumentalism. Similarly, his periodic 'rambles' to the provinces – never too far afield – have the air of country *retreats*: something the real countryman never needs. Pope certainly did his health some good, physically and nervously, when he visited Bath or Bevis Mount, Oxford or Down Hall. But his real staging posts were the estates of the great landowners – Stowe, Rousham, Cirencester, Hagley – where he could come as a house guest to the earls of creation. He sends back from darkest Oxfordshire a marvellous communiqué to Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (*Corr*, i, 505–8). It is one of the most brilliant letters in the English language; but it is the work of an observant tourist, and needs a trained reader to appreciate its knowing allusions and witty attitudes. Pope could be very happy for a time, deep in the provinces. So long as he had his civilized audience back home to receive his reports.

The only concrete guide to his readership is to be found in the subscription lists for his *Homer*. Unfortunately, no thorough social analysis of this data has yet been carried out (a task on which the present author is engaged). It is of course true that subscribers are not wholly typical of the reading public at large. They will tend to be the better-heeled, the more accessible, the less retiring among the total body of what we might call consumers. Nevertheless, it is just these factors that serve to make subscribers an influential group: opinion formers as well as readers. When Pope solicited the original two guineas entitling the subscriber to the opening instalment of the *Iliad*, he was still quite a new name to potential buyers, though already an auspicious one. With his friends he made a determined effort to drum up support, as was then normal enough. The success of the *Homer* venture, culminating in a profit of almost £10,000 on the two works (out of which he had to pay his collaborators on the *Odyssey*), remains a cause for wonder. Pope had managed to get some glittering names to head his list, but so did the authors of many subscription volumes. Pope's list is distinguished not by a concentration of dukes, nor by a penetration into new levels of society. He simply reached a higher proportion of the cultural élite than did his rivals, and made a more

durable impact upon them. The Homer translations became a commercial success but they were first of all a literary triumph.

I have said that Pope's intellectual stance is not always a reliable guide to his actual relationship to society. For example, he distanced himself politically from the London merchant class to which his father belonged. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that prosperous and educated members of the commercial class were keenly aware of Pope. Again, though the law often comes in for vigorous satire (e.g. *IH*, Sat. II, i), members of the profession were among the poet's most devoted adherents. As with Jane Austen, Pope found a market in the very sort of people he treated most savagely.

Conversely, Pope's expressed admirations do not imply his acceptance by any social group as an entirety. In *The Dunciad*, he sets off his picture of anarchic dullness with brief allusions to tutelary figures: Swift, Chesterfield, Wyndham, Pulteney, Murray (later the great Lord Chief Justice Mansfield), Barrow, Atterbury. Such men are usually presented as lone warriors for defeated causes. They stand up for values under threat from the community at large. Characteristically, Pope endows the forces he is opposing with power, majesty, wealth, arrogance. By contrast, his exemplars of virtue seem frail and precarious. A common tactic is to take the strikingly *unrepresentative* case, perhaps in order to encourage the others: Burlington, the untypically public-spirited peer, or Martha Blount, the least vain of women. The natural rhetorical figure to convey this situation is paradox:

Great without Title, without Fortune bless'd,
Rich ev'n when plunder'd, honour'd while oppress'd,
Lov'd without youth, and follow'd without power,
At home tho' exil'd, free tho' in the Tower.

(*IH*, Ep. I, i, 181-4)

By suggesting that virtue is rarely met with, Pope flatters the reader who has recognized, and presumably endorsed, that virtue. (Note also the oxymoron implicit in the rhyme words *blessed* and *oppressed*, together with the ironic merging of *power* and *Tower*.) It is part of his stock-in-trade to make each reader feel that he or she is morally more acute than society at large.