

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-27134-9 - Selected Prose of Alexander Pope
Edited by Paul Hammond
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

On 3 June 1717 there appeared a handsome quarto volume entitled *The Works of Mr. Alexander Pope*. The claim which this book makes for Pope's status is conveyed in a variety of ways. The very title, 'Works', implies bulk and value, a definitive collection. There is a large engraved frontispiece portrait of Pope. On the title page, a quotation from Cicero; it is not translated or identified, and one wonders how many of Pope's readers recognised it as a passage from *Pro Archia* which might be rendered thus: 'These studies nourish youth and divert old age; they are an adornment when affairs are flourishing, and provide a refuge and consolation in adversity; they give delight at home, and are no encumbrance in public affairs; they pass the night hours with us, travel with us, and accompany us into our country retreats.' Will the ensuing works be this classic and versatile companion? There follows a preface which opens with an engraved ornament showing Apollo surrounded by the nine Muses; the initial letter of the preface just happens to be 'T', and is a decorative initial showing the winged horse Pegasus, symbol of poetic inspiration. After the preface come laudatory verses from authors including John Sheffield, Duke of Buckingham; Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea; and William Wycherley. The works actually collected here comprise *Pastorals*, *Windsor-Forest*, *An Essay on Criticism* and *The Rape of the Lock*, together with various translations and minor poems. The book appeared a couple of weeks after Pope's twenty-ninth birthday.

As we turn the pages of this lavish volume we may murmur that modesty was not one of Pope's virtues. But we are not simply looking at an example of poetic vanity; rather, it is a stage in the creation of an image of himself, which Pope worked at throughout his life. Many means were employed to fashion this image. Careful control over the way his works were published (extending to the details of typography) helped to create a visual style of elegance and classical authority. The poses adopted in his poems – the humble man devoted to his parents and his God, the disinterested critic of life and letters, bearing no grudges and concerned only to uphold

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27134-9 - Selected Prose of Alexander Pope

Edited by Paul Hammond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Selected prose of Alexander Pope

moral and literary standards – these are important strategies defining the position of the writer, and placing the work of the critic and satirist in a realm apparently free from private and party malice. And yet this strategy was not without recourse to outrageous mendacity and the scandalous misrepresentation of honest men.

The prose works collected in the present anthology illustrate various aspects of Pope's self-image. There are formal critical essays, on pastoral poetry, on Homer and on Shakespeare. But there are also works which look like literary criticism yet turn out to be devious and challenging critical jokes: *A Key to the Lock* and *The Art of Sinking* take standard critical forms and use them in disconcerting ways. Then there are the scurrilous, mocking attacks on Dennis and Curll and Duck, which delight in inversion and practical jokes. Finally, we have Pope's letters. Some were composed or revised for publication, and carefully project the desired image of the man of letters; others included here are more intimate pieces which allow us to see a different side to the mask, and sometimes even the face itself.

The preface to the *Works* of 1717 is a curious exercise in the creation of an image and a role. It begins with a sentence which sounds modest and tentative, but which is also quite firm in its delineation of the relationship between writer and reader: 'I am inclined to think that both the writers of books, and the readers of them, are generally not a little unreasonable in their expectations.' Though the sentence appears to admit the unreasonableness of authors, this admission is subordinate to the superior defining position of the 'I', this particular author who can see the errors of both writers and readers. The sentences which follow are oddly weighted, with the antitheses unequal: writers are said to desire fame, approval, and power over the opinions of others; readers seek pleasure and entertainment. If there is over-ambition in writers, there is mere frivolity in readers. Pope disingenuously lowers the status of writing, saying that poetry and criticism are 'by no means the universal concern of the world, but only the affair of idle men who write in their closets, and of idle men who read there'. Now the writer/reader antithesis becomes that of poet and critic, and in contrast to the languid state previously evoked, Pope identifies intemperate zeal as a characteristic of critics: 'a bad Author deserves better usage than a bad Critic; a man may be the former merely thro' the misfortune of an ill judgment, but he cannot be the latter without both that and an ill temper'. A careful sleight of hand is at work. Pope suggests that 'even the worst authors might endeavour to please us, and in that endeavour, deserve

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27134-9 - Selected Prose of Alexander Pope

Edited by Paul Hammond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

something at our hands'. Here the 'us' and 'our' align Pope with the readers who are to be charitable to bad authors, thus creating a distance between this author and 'bad authors', who are now 'they'. Then the identity of 'us' changes again, and at the end of this paragraph 'we' are every man whose reputation 'generally depends upon the first steps he makes in the world'.

This sympathetic point conceded, Pope changes the point of view once more and introduces a new character, the good poet, who 'no sooner communicates his works with the same desire of information, but it is imagin'd he is a vain young creature given up to the ambition of fame'. The reading public becomes divided into three groups: 'were he sure to be commended by the best and most knowing, he is as sure of being envy'd by the worst and most ignorant'; and then 'there is a third class of people who make the largest part of mankind, those of ordinary or indifferent capacities; and these (to a man) will hate, or suspect him: a hundred honest gentlemen will dread him as a wit, and a hundred innocent women as a satyrist'. This sentence dismisses the vast majority of readers; it may say that they are honest and innocent, yet dread of wits and satirists can only be attributed to fools and knaves, so the terms 'honest' and 'innocent' are called into question. The paragraph continually plays with conditional clauses, but a succession of 'ifs' and subjunctives does not hide the underlying insistence that 'a fine Genius' is derided by those who fear or fail to understand it. And so, adverse criticism is turned into an inadvertent acknowledgement of Genius.

The rhetoric continues to claim both modesty and greatness. 'The life of a Wit is a warfare upon earth; and the present spirit of the world is such, that to attempt to serve it (any way) one must have the constancy of a martyr, and a resolution to suffer for its sake': if there is an element of self-deprecation in calling oneself a 'Wit' (rather than a 'Genius') it is almost obliterated by the appropriation of religious language. Just enough facetiousness is preserved to forestall outrage at this gambit, and the word 'martyr' is thus dexterously slipped past the reader's guard. But lest this appear too solemn a development, Pope moves into a sentence which offers a self-deprecating account of how he came to write and to publish: 'I writ because it amused me; I corrected because it was as pleasant to me to correct as to write; and I publish'd because I was told I might please such as it was a credit to please.' The separation of the activities of writing, correcting and publishing into discrete stages is important: the first two are governed by the desire to please himself, the third only by a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27134-9 - Selected Prose of Alexander Pope

Edited by Paul Hammond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Selected prose of Alexander Pope

desire to please a select few. There has been no intention to become a public man of letters, no vocation to instruct and please readers at large, and the implication that this was all a kind of pleasant accident distances momentarily the grand claims made by the rhetoric of this preface and the typography of the *Works*. But even in this parenthesis Pope advances a claim to social prestige: he will please such as it is a credit to please, as, earlier, one of the advantages of having a 'Genius to Poetry' was said to be the 'privilege of being admitted into the best company'.

The modesty topos wears thin, and Pope forestalls the reader's recognition of this by remarking: 'If anyone should imagine I am not in earnest...'. Yet what follows this, offered as a further demonstration of humility, is actually a comparison with the Ancients. The moderns are limited by writing in an insular and transitory language. But then, commending the imitation of the Ancients, Pope asserts that 'the highest character for sense and learning has been obtain'd by those who have been most indebted to them', and proceeds to draw attention to his own extensive debt. The distinguishing characteristic of the Ancients was their dedication to correctness, for 'it was the business of their lives to correct and finish their works for posterity'. Here Pope touches upon a subject of recurrent concern to him, that of erasure and correction. This is not only a zeal for stylistic excellence, but forms part of Pope's attitude to life, part of his notion of how one creates a self. His own works were compulsively revised both before and after publication: pages of manuscript drafts and hundreds of small alterations to the wording and typography of his poems testify to his continual desire to erase and re-create. Pope also redraws the boundaries of his own canon, and in this preface he distances himself from, without actually denying, some verses of which he is not proud, by saying: 'look upon no verses as mine that are not inserted in this collection'. This continual process of revision also extends to the moral life, for he wished to 'make each Day a *Critick* on the last' (*An Essay on Criticism* 571). 'For what I have publish'd, I can only hope to be pardon'd; but for what I have burn'd, I deserve to be prais'd': the destruction of some early, imperfect work invites praise, partly for the moral reason that it has entailed a sacrifice of self-love. Yet this sits oddly with other areas of the egoistic rhetoric of the *Works*, such as the insistence on the early date at which the *Pastorals* were composed. For all that Pope talks of a sacrifice of self-love, and erases parts of his past, the self is never erased, or even diminished, but only reinforced. The persona of the man of letters is built up from a series of strategies which proscribe

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27134-9 - Selected Prose of Alexander Pope

Edited by Paul Hammond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

criticism: Pope is precocious (and so judgement of his early work must be merciful); he is modest (and does not claim to have produced perfect works); he is a classic (and is so steeped in the good sense of the Ancients that his thoughts are more theirs than his own); and, above all, he is the servant of nature, but far from this being a deprecation of his artistry, it is the appropriation of the ultimate talisman in the eighteenth century's moral vocabulary. Every one of these strategies which appear to diminish the author actually erases his figure only temporarily, to bring it back in a more powerful form.

Whatever moral view we may take of these tricks, they do amount to a potent enabling strategy. Pope himself was triply disabled, by his physical deformity, his Roman Catholicism, and his lack of formal education. These strategies enable him to take command of the literary and moral language of his age. His early work appropriates the literary traditions: the *Pastorals* and *Windsor-Forest* announce a new Virgil who can recreate the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*; the translations announce a new Dryden, whose *Fables* are continued by this gifted successor; while the *Essay on Criticism* places Pope in the tradition of poet-critics such as Horace, Vida and Boileau as one who will re-shape the literary heritage and redefine the age's key terms, 'wit', 'sense' and 'nature'.

Pope's concern with re-writing, with making perfect, and his employment of deceit and rhetorical tricks, seems to be part of that dual vision of chaos and stability which informs much of his work. There is a stable truth, he insists, a common fund of good sense shared by us and the Ancients; Nature is 'One clear, unchang'd, and Universal Light' (*An Essay on Criticism* 71), and yet the constructs of human reason are precarious, and the world of letters corrupt and desperately fragmented. For us to spell out the antithesis in that way makes it seem clear and tolerable, makes it into a rational proposition subject to analysis and amendment. But for Pope the instruments of analysis and reform have themselves been corrupted, with language and the cultural institutions damaged by the dunces. A perception of the instability of language haunts Pope's own language; words have an unstable half-life, imaged in troubling shifts between the inanimate, the animal and the human:

How hints, like spawn, scarce quick in embryo lie,
 How new-born nonsense first is taught to cry,
 Maggots half-form'd in rhyme exactly meet,
 And learn to crawl upon poetic feet.

(*The Dunciad* B i 59-62)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27134-9 - Selected Prose of Alexander Pope

Edited by Paul Hammond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Selected prose of Alexander Pope

Terror and facetiousness are held together in Pope's poetry, and while the prose works at a lower pressure, there are still many unsettling shifts of tone which trip up the reader, keeping him alert and troubled.

The image offered by the visual appearance of the *Works* is confident, even over-weening; but the strange turns in the rhetoric of the preface disclose a deep uncertainty, suggesting that any self is unstable, including the self of the author, and that of the reader as he experiences a text. Each self is continually erased and re-composed.

Four years before the publication of his *Works*, Pope had contributed to *The Guardian* an essay on dedications (no.4). Hyperbolic flattery had long been a feature of dedications, but Pope draws attention to its deep implications. First, it is 'a Deceit upon the Gross of Mankind, who take their Notion of Characters from the Learned'. But besides deceiving their public, the men of letters are also destroying their own language. Even if an author is sincere, he 'can find no Terms to express it, but what have been already used, and rendered suspected by Flatterers. Truth itself in a Dedication is like an Honest Man in a Disguise or Vizor-Masque, and will appear a Cheat by being so drest like one.' The persona has become intrinsically fallacious, so that there is no way of expressing the truth which does not call it into question. Pope then moves on to a paragraph of unsettling implications. He treats with great respect 'the least Instances or Remains of Ingenuity' wherever they are found, and has often discovered 'unvalued Repositories of Learning in the Lining of Bandboxes. I look upon these Pasteboard Edifices, adorned with the Fragments of the Ingenious, with the same Veneration as Antiquaries upon ruined Buildings, whose Walls preserve divers Inscriptions and Names, which are no where else to be found in the World.' This is a complex passage, despite its facetious tone. Is learning in this society only to be found in the lining of bandboxes, reduced to an adjunct of trade and vanity? Or can this writer not distinguish discarded rubbish from real learning? Are antiquarians and archaeologists equally indiscriminate, as *The Dunciad* will suggest? Awkward and oscillating as it is, the passage is also poignant and troubling in its image of art destroyed and then haphazardly collected with an almost childlike labour. Ironically, this fragmentary and partly erased writing which is reconstructed after so much effort turns out to be just another example of the destruction of language by writers themselves.

A way out of this sad labyrinth is fashioned by Pope in a further

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27134-9 - Selected Prose of Alexander Pope

Edited by Paul Hammond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

ironic twist: make a dedication which actually spells out that message which is the sub-text of all other dedications – praise not of the patron but of the poet. This new dedication is also double-edged, revealing writers' simultaneous subservience and pride. Once more, Pope's troubled contemplation of the vulnerability of art is presented inextricably with a proud assertion of the writer's own importance. Pope's solution to the problem of how to write about such a state of affairs is one which will recur: into an accepted literary form he inserts subject matter which is entirely out of place by normal standards, but which is the only suitable subject in the conditions which now prevail. The same strategy will produce the ironic critical treatise in *The Art of Sinking* and the ironic epic in *The Dunciad*.

If we turn to Pope's formal literary criticism from reading these strangely convoluted and almost desperate images of the writer and his art, we may wonder how Pope manages to work with the languages and assumptions permitted by the critical decorum of his time.

Pope's first critical essay (if we are to believe his dating of it to 1704) was the *Discourse on Pastoral*, an essay which reveals with particular clarity some of the chief assumptions of his criticism. 'The original of Poetry', he says, 'is ascribed to that age which succeeded the creation of the world', and the pastoral poetry which flourished then was 'afterwards improv'd to a perfect image of that happy time; which by giving us an esteem for the virtues of a former age, might recommend them to the present'. Here we see the need for some notion of origin; poetry is ascribed to a happy state, a golden age from which any Christian idea of the fall of man has been elided. Pope knows that this account is a myth: the words 'ascribed', 'seems' and 'imagine' point to this explanation as a fiction, and one which serves a social function. Pastoral poetry is to image the tranquillity of the country life, so it should not represent the lives of shepherds as they 'at this day really are, but as they may be conceiv'd then to have been; when a notion of quality was annex'd to that name, and the best of men follow'd the employment'. Hence Theocritus himself, the original writer of pastoral, is rebuked for a lack of decorum: his manners are defective, for 'his swains are sometimes abusive and immodest, and perhaps too much inclining to rusticity'. The expression should instead be humble but pure, and 'comparisons drawn from the most agreeable objects of the country'. There is a great difference 'betwixt simplicity and rusticity, so the expression of simple thoughts should be plain, but not clownish'. This requires a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27134-9 - Selected Prose of Alexander Pope

Edited by Paul Hammond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Selected prose of Alexander Pope

rigorous selectivity in writing English, for many country phrases used by Spenser were 'spoken only by people of the basest condition'. Finally, 'that Air of piety to the Gods should shine thro' the Poem, which so visibly appears in all the works of antiquity'. The word 'all' here may be a pardonable exaggeration, but it is interesting that Pope uses the word 'piety' (which, though Latin in origin, has strong Christian connotations) to describe Greek and Roman religion, implying a continuity of religious devotion across the centuries and across cultures.

And all this is 'natural', for Pope begins his account of the elements of pastoral with the words, 'If we would copy Nature'. He assumes that Nature is 'there' to be copied; moreover, that it is unchanging and accessible via these different cultures. 'Nature' here is a carefully edited version of the country and of human society, and becomes an authentication of social organization. The form of poetry which images the original of Nature shows us a happy world of shepherds (Pope interestingly censures Theocritus for including reapers and fishermen, workers whose tasks are in fact more dangerous) who are pious and genteel, and the eighteenth-century notion of social rank ('quality', 'the best') is endorsed by the ascription of this arrangement to Nature, and to mankind's origins. Pope's essay is a curious piece of writing, aware that pastoral is a myth, but conscious of only some elements in that myth, leaving other crucial concepts unexamined.

But more significant than pastoral as an example of cultural origins was Homer. For Pope, as for Virgil, 'Nature and Homer were, he found, the same' (*An Essay on Criticism* 135). The preface to Pope's translation of the *Iliad* begins by describing Homer's great distinguishing characteristic as his *invention*. This is a classical rhetorical term (*inventio*) for the first of the elements of composition, and its etymology implies that the writer does not make up but discovers material, which is thus thought to be there waiting to be used. Accordingly, Homer as the greatest poetic inventor is the writer who is closest to Nature; invention 'furnishes Art with all her Materials... For Art is only like a prudent Steward that lives on managing the Riches of Nature.' (The economic, regulatory function of art betrayed by that image is noteworthy.) Pope is concerned to praise not so much the judgement (that faculty which organizes and orders, pre-eminently represented by Virgil) as the invention, represented by Homer. Critics, says Pope, are uneasy when confronted by this kind of writer, 'because they find it easier for themselves to pursue their Observations through an uniform and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27134-9 - Selected Prose of Alexander Pope

Edited by Paul Hammond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

bounded Walk of Art, than to comprehend the vast and various Extent of Nature'. Homer's work is 'a wild Paradise'.

Pope himself has difficulty judging Homer by the rules of neo-classical criticism, and is compelled to think about the function of these rules. He offers us an explanatory image: in an ordered garden the flowers produced by Nature are arranged by art so that they are set off to advantage in the eyes of a human onlooker; the rules are therefore principles of arrangement. 'True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest' (*An Essay on Criticism* 297), where 'drest' is as much a metaphor from gardening as from tailoring: true wit does not dress up Nature, but arranges it. False wit, by contrast, smothers it in all manner of flashy ornaments (*ibid.*, 292-6). Homer is Nature unadorned and unarranged, like a great tree, or like the Nile.

Homer was remarkable for his invention in several areas. First, in the area of fable, where he originated a number of human stories which have supplied his successors; but he also created allegorical fables, and this is another instance of his close proximity to Nature, showing 'those innumerable Knowledges, those Secrets of Nature and Physical Philosophy which *Homer* is generally suppos'd to have wrapt up in his *Allegories*'. He also excelled in the variety of his characters and the appropriateness of speech to speaker. Perhaps most characteristic is his use of images from nature, where he brings disparate things together: 'each Circumstance and Individual of Nature summon'd together by the Extent and Fecundity of his Imagination; to which all things, in their various Views, presented themselves in an Instant'. For Homer 'found out *Living Words*', as Pope puts it: 'An Arrow is *impatient* to be on the Wing, a Weapon *thirsts* to drink the Blood of an Enemy', and Pope sees the use of compound epithets as a further example of 'the Fruitfulness of his Invention', since they are 'a sort of supernumerary Pictures of the Persons or Things they are join'd to'. Finally, Homer is full of sublime thoughts; this was recognized by Longinus, but is also demonstrated by his ideas having 'so remarkable a Parity with those of the Scripture'. He has defects, but these are wholly attributable to the times in which he lived.

The inventive use of nature in Homer's language is brought out in many of Pope's notes to the *Iliad*. He points to the exactitude with which Homer makes his similes, such as the comparisons of an army to cranes in flight, to waves beating against a rock, or clouds poised in the sky. But also remarkable, says Pope, is Homer's habit of breaking off the simile, so as to allow the reader to complete the comparison for himself: this makes reading an activity, forcing the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-27134-9 - Selected Prose of Alexander Pope

Edited by Paul Hammond

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Selected prose of Alexander Pope

reader to think and respond, not just to absorb. And yet there are images from nature (or perhaps we should say, from country life) which disturb Pope, such as the comparison of Greek soldiers to a swarm of flies round a shepherd's cottage, or the suggestion that a hero has the boldness of a fly. In both these cases Pope points to how changing social organization and values have altered the way we look at the natural world. 'Our present Idea of the Fly is indeed very low, as taken from the Littleness and Insignificancy of this Creature', but 'there is really no Meanness in it'. Homer was writing at a time when 'Agriculture was the Employment of Persons of the greatest Esteem and Distinction'. Pope's notion of this dignity in agriculture is shaped in part by his importation into the Homeric period of eighteenth-century ideas of nobility and social quality, and yet an attentive reading of Homer also forces Pope to articulate, and sometimes to challenge, the values of contemporary art. He knows that readers will be offended by certain similes, so he explains that our perception of nature is socially conditioned; indeed at one point he uses language of incisive honesty to define the change which has taken place in the social valuation of art: Homer was writing 'before Politeness had rais'd the esteem of Arts subservient to Luxury, above those necessary to the Subsistence of Mankind'.

This question of decorum is raised again in the Postscript to the *Odyssey*. Noting that the *Odyssey* is more concerned than the *Iliad* with domestic and everyday matters, Pope asks how a poet should handle a 'low action'. The 'representations of common, or even domestic things, in clear, plain, and natural words, are frequently found to make the liveliest impression on the reader'. But the language used must be plain and not figurative, since 'the low actions of life cannot be put into a figurative style without being ridiculous, but things natural can'. In view of his careful use of inappropriate figurative language in *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Dunciad*, the reasons which Pope gives for this are worth attention. Laughter implies censure, but only rational beings are the object of censure; so inanimate aspects of nature lie outside the sphere of moral judgement and may therefore be treated with lofty figurative language. But when human beings, who are rational creatures, are represented 'above their real character' this is 'ridiculous in Art, because it is vicious in Morality'. The 'because' in that phrase is worth pondering; so too is Pope's assumption that men have some 'real character', some absolute position in the social order which cannot be misrepresented without committing an error which is at once moral and artistic. A fly has no 'real' meanness, but men do have a 'real'