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ESSAYS ON POPE

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*for Richard and Kate Wilson
two more Beverlonians*

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Preface

The essays in this volume have been selected from those written over the past twenty-five years, and they represent about a third of the items published in that stretch of time. One item, Chapter 14, has not previously appeared in print. The others have been published in various places, some in relatively inaccessible locations including books which have been out of print for some time. Essays which were reprinted in *Eighteenth-Century Encounters* and *Literature and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century England* (both 1985) have generally been excluded. There is one exception: Chapter 10, which came out for the first time in the former volume, has been reproduced here as the issues underlying its argument remain matters of strong contention in current historiography. Not more than one essay on any given poem has been included. Whilst no attempt has been made to cover every aspect of Pope's career, the selection is designed to embrace the work of every phase and the broad range of the poet's interests.

For the most part I have confined revision to small acts of refurbishment, by way of an attempt to regularize forms of reference and to correct any mistakes. The main argument has been left undisturbed in every single essay. It would be possible to swell the footnotes by incorporating the findings of recent scholarship, but to do this in any thoroughgoing way would distort the shape of the original. In those cases where the argument of an earlier essay would be called into doubt by subsequent research, I have naturally omitted the essay from this selection. Pope scholarship moves ahead at a steady rate, and important books by critics such as Maynard Mack, Howard Weinbrot and Howard Erskine-Hill continue to affect the way in which we read the poetry. But in only one area, that of feminist scholarship, does the picture seem to have been transformed in a really significant way. As a result I have made some adjustments in passages of the essays which deal with Pope's relations

with women and with sexual politics, drawing on the work of such critics as Carole Fabricant, Ellen Pollak and Valerie Rumbold. In addition, references have been supplied in the notes to a few significant recent works which bear on issues touched on in my argument without, I hope, subverting it.

It may be appropriate to say something briefly on method. In fact, the method adopted varies in accordance with the subject-matter of the essay. There would be something wrong if this were not the case, since doctrinaire method should properly bend before the primacy of the text. The aim is not to test a critical theory, but to explore particular poems and to illuminate aspects of Pope's world – his career, his contacts, his intellectual setting and his imaginative bearings. Certain essays relate Pope to the literature of the preceding century, on the grounds that he seems to me the last great poet of the English Renaissance. But other essays show him firmly rooted in his own time, for example as part of the extended Burlington circle (backward-looking as that group was in some respects).

Pope's work embodies a peculiarly fruitful dialogue between a remarkable individual talent and a highly developed sense of the traditions available to him. It follows that any enquiry into his achievement must be ready to move freely between the personal and the public – between local stylistic concerns and large historical issues. Though the essays I have selected are loosely grouped into sections on text and on context, the division is arbitrary. Robert Darnton has written, 'I confess that I do not see a clear way of distinguishing idiom from individuality. I can only testify to the importance of working back and forth between texts and contexts. That may not be much of a methodology, but it has its advantages' (*The Great Cat Massacre*, 1984, p. 262). That was said in an effort to describe the methods of cultural history, but it applies equally to literary scholarship where a writer such as Pope is involved. If I had sought a fancy title for this selection, 'idiom and individuality' would just about have done it. I hope that putting the essays together will show that what is idiomatic in Pope is both individual and general. His work was acutely conditioned by his private history – his invalidism, his religion, his inner drive to establish a great *œuvre* – but it was also marked by the impress of external matters – his friendships; his contact with the world of booksellers, professional authors and critics; and his involvement with art, architecture and gardening. Finally, it is worth recalling that Pope's supreme talent lay in

satire. Satirists need plenty of friends, for support in their insecure vocation; and they need plenty of enemies for stimulus and for copy. (The sixth essay attempts to illustrate this point, with reference to the *Epistle to Arbuthnot*.)

Every year fresh work continues to pour out on Pope, testifying to his enduring interest for new generations of readers. Each shift in critical ideology confirms his central place in the life and mentality of his age. Most recently, a collection entitled *Pope: New Contexts*, edited by David Fairer (1990), has been assembled entirely by younger scholars, a heartening sign that Pope will go on being read well into the twenty-first century. This emboldens me to think that the material presented in the following fourteen essays may engage the interest of those who have come lately to Pope, and who may in turn move on to examine further aspects of this endlessly fascinating poet. It is a curious fact that the writer who might have seemed most representative of the outdated 'old' eighteenth century of belletrism should prove to be the one whose work yields most to the more advanced probings of contemporary criticism. Pope has somehow earned admission to the 'new' eighteenth century; whatever the ideological slant we give to the notion, Pope refuses to be edged out of the picture.

A revisionist Pope has some attractions, and it might be felt that a credible Pope for the 1990s must be subject to a process of destabilization and disruption. There is indeed apparent potential for such a critical strategy in the work of Maynard Mack and David Foxon especially. In his examination of the poetic manuscripts, *The Last and Greatest Art* (1984), Mack explores evidence to show how we can occasionally glimpse 'some hint of the creative chaos from which ... Pope could eventually cause a poem to "rise".' Equally, in his important survey, of *Pope and the Early Eighteenth-Century Book Trade* (1991), Foxon demonstrates that Pope adapted his poetic plans to the requirements of his publishing programme, and tailored his current work to the bespoke needs of *Works* in the press.

On the surface these findings may suggest an author radically unstable in this methods and constantly prone to changes in creative mind. But they should not be pressed too far. Mack's examination is confined to a minority of the poems, and even amongst these there are more cases where the manuscript reveals a steady progress from original conception to final version. Pope's habitual care in revision naturally produces alterations in detail and occasional shifts in

emphasis; but in the majority of instances there is no dramatic reordering of the material, and there is not a shred of evidence in the poems where no manuscript survives that there was any greater degree of reconsideration. (I exclude from account here the famous process of rewriting which yielded the altered versions of *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Dunciad*: we have no manuscript evidence for the former and rather little for the latter.) Only in the case of the *Epistle to Arbuthnot*, which we now see to have emerged from an earlier poem which Pope had intended to address to William Cleland, can one speak of wholesale reorganization. In general, the evidence is negative as regards a disintegration of Pope's canon. When I remark below (p. 25) that Pope's poetry 'always knows where it is going', I mean as it ultimately appears on the page. This is not to deny that the text often had been arrived at after a laborious series of trials and errors, as is true of so many great works of literature. The point is that Pope does finally achieve a clearcut and unambiguous sense; the earlier struggles have had to be unearthed, like the lower levels of Troy, and are invisible to a reader without access to the buried manuscript drafts. It would be perverse to suggest that the published text has no stability simply because we happen to be able to disinter the hidden foundations.

The findings in Foxon's book provide stronger signs of an habitual tendency on Pope's part to change his mind on large creative issues. It is clear from this study that in the 1730s Pope sometimes started or suspended a poem partly in response to external factors, such as the availability of a given work for a forthcoming collection (depending on the copyright situation), and seems to have written items to fill gaps of a given size. Foxon takes us beyond what we already knew from such books as Miriam Leranbaum's study of *Alexander Pope's Opus Magnum 1729–1744* (1977). Leranbaum had followed the twists and turns of Pope's irresolute schemes with regard to his planned series of philosophical poems branching out from the *Essay on Man*. It is fully apparent now that the standard layout of Pope's canon, as exemplified in Warburton's edition of 1751 and almost all subsequent editions, relates to a late reconceptualization of the *œuvre* by Pope and Warburton. There are inescapable consequences for an editor here; and indeed in my volume of Pope for the Oxford Authors (1993) I have departed from precedent by printing the *Moral Essays* and *Imitations of Horace* as they appeared, spaced out chronologically, not recombined in their familiar groupings. But editing is one thing, and

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criticism another, and I am not convinced that this rearrangement either obliges or empowers us to read the individual poems as peculiarly tentative, provisional or unstable. That Pope was uncertain about where he might put the *Epistle to Burlington* in his *Works* does not prove that he was uncertain about what he was saying in the midst of the poem.

Recent scholarship has certainly enhanced our understanding of the context in which Pope worked, and there are some important debates under way as to where precisely he stood in relation to contemporary issues. (One thinks of essays on his politics by scholars including Howard Erskine-Hill, H. T. Dickinson and J. A. Downie.) However, apart from the fact we have generally reached no consensus on these matters, it remains the case that the main sense of the poetry is commonly not at issue in these enquiries. Much of the scholarship turns on isolated passages, on remarks in the correspondence or in Spence's anecdotes, or in the external testimony of contemporaries and subsequent biographers. It is seldom that the material reviewed would promote a wholesale recasting of one's reading of the poem, from the ground upwards. It is for this reason that the analysis of Pope's poetic response to the social world of his time (reprinted pp. 129–67 below) seems to me to preserve whatever validity it may have had on its first appearance, disregarding a few details where I have made small adjustments. If one were to write such an essay today, one might well select a few different instances, and lay slightly more emphasis on this or that aspect of the subject, in the light of twenty years' ongoing scholarship: John Cannon's study of the peerage, *Aristocratic Century* (1984), supplies a new synthesis of the facts, and several historians have filled out our understanding of the country gentry. But, as indicated, only in respect of the position of women have we come to a new recognition of phenomenological and existential realities which offer a totally fresh vista on the subject.

As has also been indicated, essays have not been reprinted where the progress of scholarship leads me to lose any degree of faith in the argument originally proposed. In other words, this selection incorporates only those essays where I stand by the original assertions. Later work might be adduced which would refine or qualify details, but in no case has the march of Popian criticism superseded the findings. One has constantly to rethink one's earlier opinions, but one does not always have to revise them. Three hundred years have now passed since the birth of Pope: we need to go on exploring his mind

and art, but we should not expect to find him dissolving into a new entity every decade. These essays may help to show that the poet who was available for inspection a quarter of a century ago still remains within our gaze and still challenges us, as he did then, to confront his energy, imagination and wit. He always manages to stay ahead of efforts to limit him or relegate him to a marginal role; the more we learn of the essential history of his time the less we can afford to patronize him. Any sustained attempt to come to terms with his work is likely to end up as a mode of celebration for his astonishing achievement, and the selection of essays offered here may have the slender merit of showing cause for that celebration, whatever defects they may individually display.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for permission to reprint essays which have previously appeared in print, in a slightly different form, as follows:

- 1 *Literary English since Shakespeare*, ed. G. Watson (New York, 1970), pp. 236–65.
- 2 *An Introduction to Pope* (London, 1976), pp. 9–19.
- 3 *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, xiv (1980), 1–17.
- 4 *Studies in Philology*, lxxvii (1980), 282–99.
- 5 *Review of English Studies*, xxv (1974), 25–38.
- 6 *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, ii (1979), 63–5.
- 7 *The Use of English*, (1973), 142–6.
- 8 *Anglia*, xcii (1974), 79–112.
- 9 *Writers and their Background: Alexander Pope*, ed. P. Dixon (London, 1972), pp. 101–42.
- 10 *Eighteenth-Century Encounters* (Brighton, 1985), pp. 75–91.
- 11 *The Library*, xxvii (1972), 326–31.
- 12 *Publishing History*, iii (1978), 7–36.
- 13 *Durham University Journal*, xxxvi (1975), 219–26.

Item no. 14 has not previously been published; an earlier version was given as a lecture at the Pope bicentenary conference at the Yale Center for British Art in 1988.

Abbreviations

<i>Corr</i>	<i>The Correspondence of Alexander Pope</i> , ed. George Sherburn, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1956)
<i>EC</i>	<i>The Works of Alexander Pope</i> , ed. W. Elwin and W. J. Courthope, 10 vols. (London, 1871–90)
<i>Mack, Garden and City</i>	Maynard Mack, <i>The Garden and the City: Retirement and Politics in the Later Poetry of Pope 1731–1743</i> (Toronto, 1969)
<i>Mack, Life</i>	Maynard Mack, <i>Alexander Pope: A Life</i> (New Haven and London, 1985)
<i>Prose Works</i>	<i>The Prose Works of Alexander Pope</i> , vol. 1, ed. Norman Ault (Oxford, 1936); vol. 2, ed. Rosemary Cowler (Oxford, 1986)
<i>Spence</i>	Joseph Spence, <i>Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men</i> , ed. J. M. Osborn, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1966)
<i>TE</i>	<i>The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope</i> , ed. J. Butt et al., 11 vols. (London, 1939–69)

The Dunciad is quoted, unless otherwise indicated, from the ‘B’ text, that is the four-book version of 1743.

The following abbreviations are used for journal titles:

<i>ECS</i>	<i>Eighteenth-Century Studies</i>
<i>JEGP</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
<i>MLQ</i>	<i>Modern Language Quarterly</i>
<i>N&Q</i>	<i>Notes & Queries</i>

List of abbreviations

<i>PBA</i>	<i>Proceedings of the British Academy</i>
<i>PLL</i>	<i>Papers on Language & Literature</i>
<i>PQ</i>	<i>Philological Quarterly</i>
<i>RES</i>	<i>Review of English Studies</i>
<i>SEL</i>	<i>Studies in English Literature 1500–1900</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Studies in Philology</i>
<i>YES</i>	<i>Yearbook of English Studies</i>