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Edited by Pat Rogers

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Introduction

It would not be quite true to say that Pope has proved a poet for all the ages, if only because some late Victorians thought him safely dead and buried in terms of any active presence in the poetry of their day. Even then, however, Pope refused to lie down, and for the past three hundred years he has shown surprising resilience in the face of condescension, assumed indifference, or outright hostility. Recent generations of poets and critics have joined the scholars in helping to recover some of the ground he had lost. A look at his reputation as it stood 100, 200, and 300 years ago may help to make the point.

In the first quarter of the eighteenth century, Pope had seen his career take off with a series of major poems: *An Essay on Criticism*, *Windsor-Forest*, *The Rape of the Lock*, and *Eloisa to Abelard*, which would all be packaged in the sumptuous collection of the poet's *Works* in 1717. Scarcely anyone without a personal grudge then doubted that a poet of the highest excellence had arrived on the scene – in the view of most dispassionate observers, the greatest English writer since Milton and Dryden in the late seventeenth century. A hundred years later, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, his position had undergone serious challenge, but he remained a potent influence for Wordsworth, and earned the vehement support of Byron:

Neither time, nor distance, nor grief, nor age, can ever diminish my veneration for him, who is the great moral poet of all times, of all climes, of all feelings, and of all stages of existence. The delight of my boyhood, the study of my manhood, perhaps (if allowed to me to attain it), he may be the consolation of my age. His poetry is the Book of Life.¹

This may seem hyperbolic, with its calculated reworking of a tag from the Roman moralist Cicero in the second sentence. But a similar tribute came from Byron's contemporary, the essayist Charles Lamb, when he remarked that Pope paid the finest compliments ever devised by the wit of man – "Each of them is worth an estate for life – nay an immortality."² Pope's reputation

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reached its low point in the late 1800s. Then, just a hundred years ago, things began to look up for the poet in the first decades of the twentieth century. His admirers were not critics who set the blood raging today – figures such as Austin Dobson and George Saintsbury, whose learning and love of poetry may be disguised from us by their blimpish personae. But the tide turned between the two world wars, as poets such as Edith Sitwell and W. H. Auden recognized Pope’s outstanding technical accomplishments, and scholars such as George Sherburn began to reappraise his legacy. In the heyday of “New Criticism”, around the 1940s and 1950s, Pope prospered mightily, enjoying the esteem of writers like Cleanth Brooks and W. K. Wimsatt; and even the ranks of Cambridge could scarce forbear to cheer, as these were represented by influential pioneers of twentieth-century literary analysis such as F. R. Leavis and William Empson. Pope also gained in public recognition through the efforts of modern scholarship, especially the imposing Twickenham edition of his complete poems spearheaded by John Butt from the 1930s to the 1960s, and the massive contributions to Popian study of Maynard Mack right up to the late 1980s.

But that was then and this is now. Against all expectations, Pope has made it into the early twenty-first century with very little, if any, loss of momentum. New approaches in the post-structuralist era have confirmed just how central a place he holds in the narrative of poetic history. Scarcely any critical school has managed to sideline his work: all our new terms and favored concepts turn out to fit Pope’s practice with startling precision. It is no accident that so many of the shibboleths of modern criticism repeatedly turn up in the criticism of Pope. Nor, for that matter, that these keywords have come to the fore in this volume. The reason that the *Companion* is organized in part around issues such as identity, gender, the body, the history of the book, crime, and the other, goes back to a simple fact: Pope’s work raises these issues in a peculiarly direct and pervasive way. No work of the time adumbrates the concerns of modern feminism more immediately than the *Epistle to a Lady*; no poem dramatizes the march of the literary, journalistic and publishing profession so richly as *The Dunciad*. We should find it hard to name any considerable body of poetry so replete with images of crime and punishment as the *Imitations of Horace*. Few writers have confronted the nature of heroism in the modern world so searchingly as did Pope in his translations of Homer. If there is a single text in the entire canon which brought the topic of consumerism and commodification into the western mind, then it must be *The Rape of the Lock* – as innumerable modern readings serve to confirm. Luxury, politeness, effeminacy, private and public spaces, neuroticism – they all come into question during the course of the *Rape*, in a text that lasts less than 800 lines (you could recite it within the

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span of a half-hour television programme, with commercial breaks between the cantos.) It is as though Pope had a land line to the twenty-first century and intuited the nature of our modern obsessions.

With his meticulous attention to detail – the tone and texture of words, the sound and syntax of verses, the shape of longer poems – Pope repays the kind of detailed attention that a *Companion* of this sort is designed to provide. A love of Pope starts with a love of words, and it is readily accountable that poets should long have relished the effects he taught himself to achieve. But his work repays close observation on other grounds, for anyone who wishes to explore the recesses of the human heart, or to appreciate the comedy of men and women in their social dance.

Pope's life

The salient facts of Pope's life are set out in summary form on pp. xiii–xvii above, and later essays in this book explore many detailed aspects of his career. We need to remember first that he did not set out with great advantages: while this does not affect the intrinsic quality of his poems, the fact does reinforce our sense of the great human achievement which his life as a writer represented. He was born a Roman Catholic in 1688, the year that an alliance of political, military and church leaders drove the last Catholic monarch from the English throne. His father, a retired London merchant already well into middle age, had to move his family out of the city because of harsh new measures directed against the papist community under the new monarchs, William III and Mary II. An invalid from his early years, the boy grew up in Windsor Forest, about thirty miles from the centre of the capital. There he developed a taste for poetry, communed with nature in what was then a wholly rural environment, and acquired some elderly mentors, including the retired diplomat Sir William Trumbull, the dramatist William Wycherley, and the actor Thomas Betterton. They encouraged his first literary efforts, culminating in a precociously brilliant set of *Pastorals* organized around the four seasons. Pope may have started on these as early as the age of sixteen, but they did not appear in print until 1709, just before his twenty-first birthday, in a volume of miscellanies put out by the greatest publisher of the age, Jacob Tonson. Having gained attention and started to make a mark in the London literary world, Pope soon followed up with the dazzling epigrammatic wit of *An Essay on Criticism* (1711). These works brought him to the notice of two Whig authors who now dominated the scene, Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, then at the height of their popularity through two innovative journals, *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*. However, Pope was tending to gravitate towards an alternative camp, including his fellow-members in the

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high-spirited writers' workshop known as the Scriblerus Club, Jonathan Swift and John Gay. This group had close links with the Tory ministry which had come to power in 1710. Pope would maintain an intimate friendship in later years with the leaders of this government, the moderate Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, and his uneasy colleague in a sometimes uneasy coalition, the mercurial Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke. In 1712 came the first version of *The Rape of the Lock*; then *Windsor-Forest*, a work on the long-awaited Peace in 1713 which blends descriptive, historical, and political elements; and finally in 1714 the expanded *Rape*, a mock-heroic poem utilizing all of the young man's accumulated poetic skills. It exhibits wit in language, poise in tone, elegance in its simulation of heroic diction, ingenious parody of epic structure, and devastating powers of social observation.

But Pope's golden youth came to an abrupt halt. In 1714 Queen Anne died, the ministry collapsed, and the accession of the Hanoverian kings left the Tories on the political sidelines for almost fifty years. The unsuccessful Jacobite rising of 1715/16 involved a number of Pope's friends and co-religionists. When the dust settled, Oxford found himself in the Tower of London on charges amounting to treason, while Bolingbroke was exiled in France and stripped of his honours. Swift, too, went into a kind of exile as Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, safely remote from the day-to-day battles of party politics at Westminster. Meanwhile Pope's own family was hounded by the measures taken against Catholics as a result of the Jacobite scare, and they had to leave their cherished home at Binfield for the more humdrum (if not yet suburban) surroundings of Chiswick, to the west of London. For the next few years Pope concentrated on his ambitious plan to transform Homer's epic, *The Iliad*, into a contemporary classic by re-laying its ancient and in some sense "primitive" outline on the template of Augustan poetics. Opinions have always differed about the degree of his success, but there is no doubt of the commercial coup which the translation delivered. Pope negotiated strict terms from the publisher Bernard Lintot, and gained enough subscribers to ensure that he was set up for life. As a result he could disdain patronage by the court in a way that no other considerable writer had managed for a very long time. His position at the head of English letters was further ratified in 1717 when a sumptuous volume of collected poems appeared. This contained a few new items, notably *Eloisa to Abelard*, but for the most part it represented a summation of major poetry written before the death of the Queen.

Pope's own father died in 1717 and not long afterwards he took his aged mother to live with him in a new house in the Thames-side village of Twickenham. Here he was to spend the last quarter-century of his life, and "Twickenham" was to become as familiar an address in the public mind as Gad's

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Hill for Dickens or Ayot St Lawrence for Bernard Shaw. Strictly the villa did not embody a new structure but rather two rebuilt cottages, planted on five acres of rented land, and the house was a conscious miniaturization of the great Palladian mansions of the aristocratic friends he had begun to acquire. Pope gave even more attention to the garden, which included a lawn by the riverside and a parcel of land at the back, across the road towards Hampton Court. To connect these two segments Pope built his famous subterranean grotto, and along with the garden's own features and ornaments this served as a personal and family shrine, dedicated to the poetic and political values he held most dear.

In his new "retirement" at Twickenham, Pope continued to work on Homer, having taken on a version of the *Odyssey*, and on Shakespeare, whose works he edited in 1725 with moderate distinction. Around 1722–3 he had been distracted by the fallout from the Atterbury affair, yet another Jacobite plot and yet another banishment of a friend in the person of Francis Atterbury, Bishop of Rochester, and ringleader of the conspiracy. By the later 1720s Pope had gone over a decade without composing a single original poem to rank with the major works of his early twenties. A new burst of energy may have been inspired partly by a renewal of his intimacy with Swift. The Dean paid his only return visits from Dublin in 1726 and 1727, bringing with him some dangerous contraband in the shape of *Gulliver's Travels*, an explosive work whose origins went back to the convivial days of collaborations in the Scriblerus Club. So, too, did *Peri Bathous*, a collective work of Scriblerian fun at expense of bad writers, published in 1728, where Pope took the leading authorial part. Soon afterwards came the first version of *The Dunciad* in three books, a poem long meditated but only recently actualized by Pope. Unlike *The Rape of the Lock*, this leaves its mock-epic plot behind as it portrays the fate of literature and learning in a modern Babylon. Little escapes the torrent of satiric invention as it envelops the court of George II, the ministry of Robert Walpole, the church of cozy latitudinarian divines, the theatrical establishment led by Colley Cibber (an actor–manager and playwright eventually advanced to the throne of the dunces), the world of education and scholarship symbolized by the bullying pedant – as Pope saw him – Richard Bentley, classicist and would-be improver of Milton. At the heart of the plot come the doings of a tribe of so-called dunces, Pope's name for writers, journalists and publishers, whose combined activities threaten to sink literature into a squalid branch of commerce, marketing and scandalous gossip.

The government of Robert Walpole became one of Pope's prime targets in the 1730s, even though the poet and the prime minister appear to have maintained decent personal relations. In the early part of the decade Pope

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hit a rich vein of form with two series of poems he initiated. First came the *Moral Essays* (1731–35), four richly allusive and skilfully argued discourses on topics such as the use of riches. There followed the *Imitations of Horace* (1733–38), taking on a range of contemporary social issues. Though following the poems of Horace quite closely, Pope injects a vein of sharp localized commentary on individuals, couched in a language that is often spiky and abrasive. Also published in separate instalments was *An Essay on Man* (1733–34), issued anonymously to confuse and distract Pope's critics. It incorporated his most extensive disquisition on philosophic, cosmic, and social themes, and entered into a Europe-wide debate over the nature of the good, the beneficence of nature, and the rôle of the individual in society. For generations it remained one of the poet's most admired and most quoted works, although in recent years the *Essay* has slid towards the margins of most readers' interests. After this there was time only for a revised version of *The Dunciad*, with a new fourth book devoted mainly to some cultural crazes of the day. By 1740 all of Pope's old friends in the Scriblerian gang had passed on, with the lone exception of the distant Swift, who had in any case sunk into senile decay. Pope himself suffered a number of illnesses that ultimately crushed his fragile constitution. He died in May 1744 at the age of fifty-six.

Summary of essays

Many of the Cambridge Companions to Literature have placed a strong emphasis on readings of individual works written by the author under discussion. This volume by set purpose departs from that scheme, as it is organized topically. There are two main reasons for this decision. First, while there is no shortage of commentary on poems such as *The Rape of the Lock*, the epistles *To a Lady* and *To Arbuthnot*, or *The Dunciad*, it seems desirable to set these well-known works within the context of the full range of Pope's poems. By this means we have attempted to ensure that items such as the *Imitations of Horace* (e.g. *Sat.*, II.i) receive their share of notice. We have also been able to give a little more space to the *Essay on Criticism* and the *Essay on Man* – once regarded as central planks in Pope's achievement – than many recent accounts of his work have done. Second, Pope's oeuvre constitutes a kind of sustained enterprise, or magnum opus in which the separate parts make up an interactive system. (Something far less true of writers like Samuel Johnson or Alfred, Lord Tennyson.) The shape of this volume is meant to allow readers to establish fruitful connections between different texts, as these poems are exposed to a shifting light from one essay to another. More than once it happens that the same passage of verse is analyzed by two or

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three different contributors and we have left it to readers to make their own cross-references and comparisons.

We begin with two essays which examine facets of Pope's literary personality. In recent years writers on the eighteenth century have devoted considerable attention to issues of identity. A neat summation of this concept is provided by Dror Wahrman: "an essential core of selfhood characterized by psychological depth, or interiority, which is the bedrock of unique, expressive individual identity."³ But students of Pope had begun some time ago to explore the poet's sense of self, in the wake of Maynard Mack's Northcliffe Lectures, delivered in 1972. An essay entitled "The Least Thing like a Man in England", reprinted in Mack's volume, *Collected in Himself* (1982), focused interest on Pope's complex response to his medical history. Mack brought to light some of the stratagems Pope devised to cope with illness, along with the shrivelled and invalid body which his ailments had left him.⁴ One book that followed up on this lead was Helen Deutsch's *Resemblance and Disgrace* (1996), which went into many aspects of the poet's life as they expressed the limitations of his condition – his deformity, his poor health, his miniaturized stature, his Catholicism, and his exposure to public ridicule through hostile prints and writings. All these things made Pope an outsider in his society, and to some extent a feminized and aberrant individual with reduced agency and authority – a state that his lifetime achievement as a poet could mitigate but not wholly control. In her essay for this volume, Deutsch shows how Pope "transformed his marginality into a source of creative self-reflection, self-possession, and self-legitimation." She also examines the various projections of self which the poet adopted, as "the young would-be libertine and love poet, the dutiful translator and ambitious emulator of the classics, the mature moral arbiter and ultimately the great negator of English satire."

In fact, the privacies of day-to-day existence invade the best known work more often than readers generally recognize. David Nokes, a novelist as well as a critic, has written biographies of Swift, John Gay, and Jane Austen. Here he considers a number of Pope's friends and enemies, such as respectively Jonathan Swift and Edmund Curll, not forgetting ambiguous cases such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Joseph Addison, who moved in and out of favor. For Pope, as Nokes tells us, "the desire to establish around himself a circle of virtuous men, to correspond with constantly, became a vital element in his desire to fix forever the image of his life as a virtuous crusade." Nokes shows, too, how the relationships fed into poems such as the *Epistle to Arbuthnot* and *The Dunciad*.

The two succeeding essays examine the form and style of Pope's verse. His masterly technique, once a favorite topic for critics, has suffered

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comparative neglect over the past twenty years. John Sitter, author of major studies including *The Poetry of Pope's "Dunciad"* (1971), asks pertinent questions here about the manner in which we should read Pope, that is to say aurally, in order to get the right noises sounding in our heads as we encounter the highly polished and regular-seeming texture of his verse. As Sitter points out, "Deciding how to perform a line, if only for our own ears, will require decisions about meaning and psychological emphasis." Sitter emphasizes, too, the varied voices which Pope projects in his work. In allied fashion Cynthia Wall, a critic who has edited *The Rape of the Lock* and has also charted the literal and imaginative spaces of eighteenth-century literature, shows how the structure of the couplet enables Pope to fix meaning and suggest connotations. She argues that "within the strict form of the heroic couplet [in *The Rape of the Lock*] the verbs are wriggling and the images escaping," while *Eloisa to Abelard* "employs the couplet structure and off-rhymes to generate an unremitting pattern of confinement and rebellion that resists final reconciliation." Both these essays show that there are abundant ways to get behind the apparently rocking rhythm and smooth syntax to find the complex inner core of the poetry.

Another development, clearly visible over the last few decades, is a renewed interest in Pope's translations of the two great epics of Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. This process has gone alongside a major reevaluation of the output of his great predecessor John Dryden, whose versions of writers such as Virgil, Juvenal, and Ovid have come to seem some of his most significant "creative" works. A major advance in taking the Homeric translations seriously came with R. A. Brower's *Alexander Pope: The Poetry of Allusion* (1959). However, the main starting point for this reappraisal was the appearance of the Twickenham edition of these poems in 1967 (*TE*, VII-X), an enterprise in which Mack again took a leading part. Since then numerous scholars have brought a series of insights to the text of Pope's work. A key figure has been Steven Shankman, both through his book *Pope's "Iliad": Homer in the Age of Passion* (1983), and through his own edition of Pope's translation (1996). In this volume, Shankman reveals the ways in which Pope's experience as a translator affected his entire career, and in which the presence of Homer permeates his oeuvre. Even the mock epics he composed provide a parallel with the aims of the ancient heroic poet, whose "dual achievement of glorifying through poetry and yet at the same time analyzing the sources of psychic and social disorder finds expression in *The Rape of the Lock* as well." Equally, much debate in the recent past has gone on around the nature of Pope's putative "Augustanism," or in broad terms the extent to which he approved of the civilization of ancient Rome, whose major writers

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served as some of his principal models. Two key documents here are books by Howard D. Weinbrot, *Augustus Caesar in "Augustan" England: The Decline of a Classical Norm* (1978) and Howard Erskine-Hill, *The Augustan Idea in English Literature* (1983), which take rather different approaches and reach different conclusions. In his essay for this volume Weinbrot, author of another well-known study, *Alexander Pope and the Traditions of Formal Verse Satire* (1982), investigates some of the further complexities in Pope's relation to the admired (but not always sacrosanct) masters of ancient poetry, especially Horace. As the essay argues, "Pope learned to compartmentalize and to continue his affection for Greek and Roman literary achievement. In each case, however, he distinguished between often morally or politically unacceptable content, and generally brilliant literary talent that had given pleasure for thousands of years."

From his youth Pope cared greatly for poets of the Elizabethan and Jacobean era, including Edmund Spenser, John Donne, and Ben Jonson. This aspect of his work remains something of a black hole in the critical legacy, and David Fairer's essay here is designed to plug the gap. In addition to writing several studies on Pope, Fairer has carried out extensive work on Thomas Warton, the critic whose *History of English Poetry* (1774–1781) helped to create the canonical eighteenth-century view of earlier literature and on Joseph Warton, brother of Thomas, whose *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* (1756–82) did most to influence the tide of critical taste. In the present volume, Fairer considers a number of ways in which Elizabethan poetry (broadly defined) left its mark on Pope. As his essay illustrates in depth, Pope "valued humanist argument with its sceptical wit and its respect for individual experience and intelligent conscience. But it is clear from his poetry that he also relished another side of Renaissance culture, the rich symbolic language that the Elizabethan world in particular offered him." My own essay on Pope in *Arcadia* seeks to trace some of the ways in which the poet's use of pastoral reflected his own early experience in rural Berkshire, and to show how this vision of spiritual harmony was shattered by reverses in political and personal life.

Both of the next pair of essays confront the wider public debates which raged in Pope's time. Brian Young has specialized in the intellectual and theological controversies of the early Enlightenment. Here he situates Pope in the crucial matrix of issues which would soon come to be defined as "ideological" in nature. The essay shows how Pope moved from one oppositional stance, associated with his roots in the Catholic community, to one centered on the "Patriot opposition" directed against the Prime Minister Robert Walpole and on the freethinking philosophies of his friend and

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mentor Lord Bolingbroke. From this exposed position, casting him as a heretic in terms of political and religious norms of his day, Pope was “saved” near the end of his life when William Warburton, “a Whig cleric who subsequently shaped Pope’s posthumous reputation,” reinterpreted his poems along the lines of Anglican orthodoxy. After this comes an essay by Howard Erskine-Hill, whose many important contributions to the field include *Poetry of Opposition and Revolution: Dryden to Wordsworth* (1996), as well as some widely read studies of the Jacobite climate in which much of Pope’s work was performed. Here he turns to the latter half of the poet’s career, starting with the Atterbury crisis of 1722–3, and moving into the 1730s, when Pope was associated with the opposition to Robert Walpole, nurtured by the so called “Patriot” ideology. Fixing on William Fortescue, a lawyer who mediated between Walpole and the opposition, Erskine-Hill carries out the most thorough investigation yet attempted of the role that this important figure in Pope’s life played in literary politics. The enquiry prompts a wider conclusion about the public and private aspect of the poetry: “As with other aspects of his personality, [Pope’s] political identity was made up of many different components, all registered in the subtle modulations of his poetry.”

Some wider social and cultural matters occupy the remaining essays. In the first of these Paul Baines investigates an undertow of references to crime and punishment in the poems. Baines, author of *The Complete Critical Guide to Alexander Pope* (2000), has made a special study of this aspect of the age. Starting from the insight that “Punishment was more physical, and more visible, in Pope’s day than it is in ours,” he reads a number of major texts with an eye for the presence of penal concerns in the texture of the verse, and illustrates some of the ways in which satire especially was construed as an alternative mode of social retribution – Pope’s works indeed constituting a “supplement to the public laws.” After this Malcolm Kelsall, well known for his work in the field and author of *The Great Good Place: The Country House and English Literature* (1997), analyzes the landscapes and estates which formed a part of Pope’s life (often as the object of his own skills as a garden designer, as with his own small villa at Twickenham) and which became the subject of major poems, such as the *Epistle to Burlington*. While there were certainly ideological components within Pope’s notion of taste, we should not dismiss the pleasure principle which was also at work: as Kelsall says, “To emphasise the elements of moral allegory in the Popeian landscape is not to deny the keen sensitivity of his eye for natural beauty. It was this exquisite sensibility which led his friends to value his contribution to the planning of greater demesnes.”