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978-0-521-76123-9 - Swift and Pope: Satirists in Dialogue

Dustin Griffin

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction. Conversing interchangeably*

Any reader who picks up a book on Swift and Pope is likely to know of their long and close friendship, extending from the halcyon days of the Scriblerus Club in 1714 into the darker days of their final years in the 1740s. No such reader needs to be reminded that their friendship was memorialized – as they themselves planned – in their literary correspondence, first collected and published in 1741; that each offered famous verse tributes to the other – Pope in the dedication to the *Dunciad Variorum* and the “Epistle to Augustus,” Swift in the *Libel on Dr. Delany* and *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*; and that they collaborated to produce four volumes of joint *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* (1727, 1728, 1732), as well as the Scriblerian *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* (1741). Students of the eighteenth century have long thought of Pope and Swift as fellow “Augustans,” deploying a shared satiric language and rhetoric,<sup>1</sup> common satiric techniques and targets, a suspicion of the power of the unregulated imagination coinciding with a pleasure in indulging it,<sup>2</sup> and adopting similar and mutually supportive political stances in opposition to the government of Sir Robert Walpole. Literary historians from the time of Johnson have remarked on an affinity in their literary sensibilities, from a shared delight in the “physically impure” to a proud conviction that they were superior to all their contemporaries.<sup>3</sup> Pope himself suggested that the

<sup>1</sup> Pope and Swift are two of the writers used by Paul Fussell to represent “Augustan Humanism” (*The Rhetorical World of Augustan Humanism* [1965]).

<sup>2</sup> See W. K. Wimsatt’s remark on Pope and Swift as “laughing poets of a heightened unreality” in his essay on “The Augustan Mode in English Poetry,” in *Hateful Contraries: Studies in Literature & Criticism* (1965), 158.

<sup>3</sup> Pope and Swift, remarks Johnson, “had an unnatural delight in ideas physically impure.” Swift “took delight in revolving ideas, from which almost every other mind shrinks with disgust. ... disease, deformity, and filth.” From the letters of Pope and Swift one may infer that they “with Arbuthnot and Gay, had engrossed all the understanding and virtue of mankind.” Part of Pope’s “pretended discontent” with the world “he learned from Swift, and expresses it ... most frequently in his correspondence with him” (Lonsdale 2006: 111, 212, 213; 1V, 60, 75).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

publication of their *Miscellanies* would show them “like friends, side by side ... walking hand in hand down to posterity.”<sup>4</sup>

Identifying similarity is often the first step toward discovering crucial difference. Beginning about a generation ago it became commonplace to distinguish between these two “Tory satirists”: to observe, for example, that Swift typically speaks through adopted masks – of Bickerstaff, the Drapier, or Gulliver – while Pope typically speaks out in a voice that he encourages us to regard as his own. Or to argue that Pope typically forms an alliance with his virtuous reader, joined in opposition to fools and knaves, while Swift seizes his “gentle reader” by the nose, and thrusts him into the satire as a target. Or that Swift finds it difficult to take heroic poetry seriously, while Pope is still genuinely engaged by the idea of epic. Or that Pope seems quite comfortable in claiming to be a man of virtue and integrity, while Swift usually displays some kind of nervousness about blowing his own horn. But even those who made such distinctions still in effect regard the two poets as fundamentally aligned.

Specialists have qualified this picture of literary kinship. Those who have worked through the Sherburn and Williams (and now the Woolley) editions of Pope’s and Swift’s correspondence, or the full-scale modern biographies by Mack (1985) and Ehrenpreis (1962–83),<sup>5</sup> know that these two great friends sometimes became irritated with each other, sometimes found that their interests diverged, sometimes even misled each other as they pursued their own goals.<sup>6</sup> Careful readers of the correspondence will also know that the letters between Pope and Swift need to be read critically: as Johnson long ago observed, Pope “may be said to write always with his reputation in his head; Swift perhaps like a man who remembered that he was writing to Pope.”<sup>7</sup> They are literary performances, especially on Pope’s part, written with the knowledge that they will probably be passed around to admiring friends and perhaps eventually published. This does not mean that we now should view with skepticism or suspicion the affectionate words that pass between friends, but it does mean that we must not assume that the writer of a personal letter – especially one so artful and fond of tricks as Pope or Swift – is always telling the whole truth – even to a dear friend. When Pope writes to Swift that his

<sup>4</sup> Pope to Swift, February 17, 1727, in Woolley (1999–2007: III, 76).

<sup>5</sup> Earlier biographical treatments of the relationship include Norman Ault, “Pope and Swift,” in Ault 1949.

<sup>6</sup> Mack (1985: 915) acknowledges that Pope was on one occasion “genuinely irritated” at Swift and that Swift must have been “equally annoyed” by Pope’s “maneuverings to obtain the letters.”

<sup>7</sup> “Life of Pope,” in Lonsdale (2006: IV, 38).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76123-9 - Swift and Pope: Satirists in Dialogue

Dustin Griffin

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction. Conversing interchangeably*

3

“principal aim” in writing the *Dunciad* was “to perpetuate the friendship between us” (October 9, 1729, in Woolley 1999–2007: III, 257), we need not take him literally. When Swift praises (while pretending to envy) Pope for fixing more sense in one couplet “than I can do in six” (*Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*), we should observe the layers of irony, not the least of which depends on the fact that Swift here writes not six couplets but three, and writes in tighter octosyllabic couplets that make Pope’s more expansive pentameters seem almost long-winded.

More recently, other scholars have reminded their colleagues of some fundamental and underappreciated differences, both demographic and psychological, between Pope and Swift – one an Anglican and the other a Roman Catholic; one an Irishman and the other an Englishman; one by temperament a reckless extremist, the other by temperament moderate and cautious; one committed to politics, and especially Irish politics, throughout his career, and the other reluctant (until his final years) to engage in partisan politics – differences that help to produce quite different kinds of writings.<sup>8</sup>

It is my contention that we ought to pay more attention to these differences, if only because Pope and Swift were themselves fully aware of them, and drew our attention to those differences both in their correspondence and in their poems. The point is not just that they, like any two close friends, occasionally disagreed, or discovered that defining differences was a way of expressing affection and of articulating how the two of them are bound in a reciprocal relationship with each other. More than that, each of them seemed to find that he could more clearly discern his own path as a writer by marking the difference between his own way and that of his friend.<sup>9</sup> In various ways Pope and Swift each found it useful to maintain a kind of productive tension between themselves, to keep their distance, even as the other sought to draw his friend into his own orbit.

Thus, Swift invited Pope – only half-mockingly – to convert to the Church of England, but Pope politely declined. Thus Pope urged Swift to give up Irish politics – both because they were politics (rather than poetry) and because they were Irish, but Swift persisted. Thus both writers, despite repeated invitations and half-promises from 1727 until the

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Harth 1985 and 1998 and Hammond 1998. For earlier attention to differences, see Winn 1977: 177–80. Barnett (2007: 6) recently drew attention to Swift’s posthumous birth and early separation from his mother, and Pope’s close relations with his parents through their lives.

<sup>9</sup> Harth notes “a process of self-definition, sometimes delineating their own norms and attitudes by contrasting them with those of their opposite number” (1998: 240).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76123-9 - Swift and Pope: Satirists in Dialogue

Dustin Griffin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

end of their lives, kept finding reasons why a relatively short trip across the Irish Sea was more than either of them could possibly conceive of managing.<sup>10</sup> (Ill health may have accounted for it.)<sup>11</sup> Orrery, who knew them both well, speculated that, given their prickly natures, Swift's distance from Pope in England was in fact good for their friendship: "Such a separation prevented all personal dissensions, and fixt them in a correspondence, that constantly tended to establish their endearments; when, perhaps, a residence near each other, might have had a very contrary effect" (Orrery 1752: 232).<sup>12</sup>

Adopting this angle of vision, I want to read the works of Pope and Swift in tandem, on the assumption that to read them in isolation is in part to misread them, to fail to hear part of what is being said. Each often wrote for the other, sometimes addressing him directly. Such direct address is a form of praise, but also an invitation for a response. Each sensed that the other was his best reader, his most important critic. And each freely imparted his critical opinion, opinions that have usually been regarded as acutely discerning: Swift readily told Pope of the risks he assumed in attacking obscure dunces, and let Pope know that he suspected him of forming "Schemes ... of Epistolary Fame," while Pope warned Swift of being consumed by Irish politics. Each was in some sense constantly "replying" to the other, sometimes even taking up the other's language. Failing to recognize the dialogic nature of their writings can lead a critic astray.

An example drawn from the correspondence of the two friends can perhaps suggest the degree to which their writings must be read, as it were, responsively – each letter, and each poem, taken as a response to an earlier one by the other. In a well-known letter of September 29, 1725, Swift writes to Pope that "the chief end I propose to my self in all my labors is to vex the world rather than [*sic*] divert it" (Woolley 1999–2007: II, 606). Some

<sup>10</sup> Swift of course made the passage a number of times. It could prove to be an onerous journey. In 1727 it took him six days to make the roughly 200-mile trip from London to Holyhead, where he just missed the boat, and was delayed a week by bad weather. The crossing from Holyhead to Dublin itself normally took less than a day, but in this case the journey took two days, since he disembarked at Carlingford, and had to ride 60 miles to Dublin. See Swift's account in his "Holyhead Journal" (Davis 1939–68: v, 207–08). But in August, 1726, the journey from London to Dublin only took eight days (see Swift's letter to Pope, in Woolley 1999–2007: III, 18 and n2).

<sup>11</sup> Pope wrote to Swift in 1737 that his doctors advised him that because of a "weakness in my breast," any seasickness might "indanger my life" (Woolley 1999–2007: IV, 404).

<sup>12</sup> "It is much easier to rectify any mistake, or to cool any animosity that may have arisen, in a letter, than to recal a passionate verbal answer, especially if uttered with all the actions, and vehemence of anger" (1752: 150). Cf. Winn: "there were so many differences between the two in personality and philosophy that their geographical separation may have been an important factor in their managing to remain friends" (1977: 176).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76123-9 - Swift and Pope: Satirists in Dialogue

Dustin Griffin

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction. Conversing interchangeably*

5

critics assume this to be a programmatic declaration that, as a satirist, he aims more at provoking and disturbing not only “the world” but also his readers, rather than amusing or delighting them with his wit. Twenty-five years ago, Philip Harth pointed out (1985: 117) that Swift’s paired terms – “vex” and “divert” – are not his own: they are taken from Pope’s letter of two weeks earlier, to which Swift’s is a response. In that letter Pope had lightly remarked, after reflecting on the “dispersions” and “divisions” among friends, that he hoped “two or three of us” might one day gather not “to vex our own or others hearts with busy vanities ... but to divert ourselves, and the world too if it pleases” (Woolley 1999–2007: II, 597). To understand Swift’s remark, you need to read it not as an incipient theory of satire, but as a *reply to Pope*. Is Swift replying in Pope’s facetious vein, or is he discovering in Pope’s own casual words a way to redeploy them in order to provide a serious definition of his own satiric project?

If we read the ninety-five letters in the Pope–Swift correspondence in this way we can see more clearly that the two friends are engaged in an ongoing conversation from their first acquaintance in 1713 to the final letter in 1741, often literally responding to the previous letter, each sometimes replying with a witty riposte, sometimes offering a gentle or veiled rebuke, reproach, or corrective,<sup>13</sup> sometimes seeking to draw the interlocutor into his orbit. (In his criticism of the obscurities in *The Dunciad*, Swift might be said to try to make Pope’s poem more Swiftian, just as Pope’s edited version of Swift’s *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift* seeks to make the poem more like something Pope would have written.) We should also pay as much attention to a correspondent’s silences as his words, what he chooses to tell his friend and what he chooses to keep to himself. By the same token, it is useful (as widespread scholarly practice has shown) to align the flow of correspondence closely with the flow of literary projects upon which each writer is engaged. Indeed, their letters are as much literary works themselves as they are biographical documents. Arguably ‘literary’ from the outset, they clearly become ‘literary’ when they are edited and presented to the world as part of Pope’s prose *Works* in 1737 and 1741.<sup>14</sup> Yet, especially because some manuscript letters were excluded from

<sup>13</sup> For example, Swift’s June 28, 1715, letter to Pope: “I am angry at some bad Rhymes and Triplets [in his translation of the *Iliad*], and pray in your next do not let me have so many unjustifiable Rhymes to *war* and *gods*” (Woolley 1999–2007: II, 133). Johnson remarks that Pope proceeded in his translation “without regard to Swift’s remonstrances.”

<sup>14</sup> Raymond Stephanson 2007, following the lead of Howard Erskine-Hill, has recently argued that we need to pay more attention to the Pope–Swift letters in the form in which they were published in 1737 and 1741.

Dr. S W I F T, &c.

53

to add to the new volume. I have reason to chuse the method you mention of mixing the several verses, and I hope thereby among the bad Critics to be entitled to more merit than is my due.

This moment I am so happy to have a letter from my Lord Peterborow, for which I intreat you will present him with my humble respects and thanks, tho' he all-to-be-Gullivers me by very strong insinuations. Tho' you despise Riddles, I am strongly tempted to send a parcel to be printed by themselves, and make a nine-penny jobb for the bookseller. There are some of my own, wherein I exceed mankind, *Mira Poemata!* the most solemn that were ever seen; and some writ by others, admirable indeed, but far inferior to mine, but I will not praise my self. You approve that writer who laughs and makes others laugh; but why should I who hate the world, or you who do not love it, make it so happy? therefore I resolve from henceforth to handle only serious subjects, *nisi quid tu docte Trebati, Dissentis.*

Yours, &c.

L E T T E R XXII.

March 8, 1726-7.

**M**R. Stopford will be the bearer of this letter, for whose acquaintance I am, among many other favours, obliged to you: and I think the acquaintance of so valuable, ingenious, and unaffected a man, to be none of the least obligations.

Our Miscellany is now quite printed. I am prodigiously pleas'd with this joint-volume, in which methinks we look like friends, side by side, serious and merry by turns, conversing interchangeably, and walking down hand in hand to posterity; not in the

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1.1 Pope's March 8, 1727 letter to Swift, *Works of Mr. Alexander Pope, In Prose. Vol. II* (1741).

Cambridge University Press

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Dustin Griffin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

stiff forms of learned Authors, flattering each other, and setting the rest of mankind at nought: but in a free, un-important, natural, easy manner; diverting others just as we diverted ourselves. The third volume consists of Verses, but I would chuse to print none but such as have some peculiarity, and may be distinguish'd for ours, from other writers. There's no end of making Books, Solomon said, and above all of making Miscellanies, which all men can make. For unless there be a character in every piece, like the mark of the Elect, I should not care to be one of the Twelve-thousand signed.

You receiv'd, I hope, some commendatory verses from a Horse and a Lilliputian, to Gulliver; and an heroic Epistle of Mrs. Gulliver. The Bookseller would fain have printed 'em before the second Edition of the Book, but I would not permit it without your approbation: nor do I much like them. You see how much like a Poet I write, and yet if you were with us, you'd be deep in Politicks. People are very warm, and very angry, very little to the purpose, but therefore the more warm and the more angry: *Non nostrum est, Tantas componere lites*. I stay at Twitnam, without so much as reading news-papers, votes, or any other paltry pamphlets: Mr. Stopford will carry you a whole parcel of them, which are sent for your diversion, but not imitation. For my own part, methinks, I am at Glubdubdrib with none but Ancients and Spirits about me.

I am rather better than I use to be at this season, but my hand (tho' as you see, it has not lost its cunning) is frequently in very awkward sensations, rather than pain. But to convince you it is pretty well, it has done some mischief already, and just been strong enough to cut the other hand, while it was aiming to prune a fruit-tree.

Lady Bolingbroke has writ you a long, lively, letter, which will attend this; She has very bad health, he very good. Lord Peterborow has writ twice to you; we fancy some letters have been intercepted, or lost by accident. About ten thousand

Fig 1.1 (*Cont.*)

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

the printed editions in their lifetime, those originals can be examined as the raw biographical materials from which literary works were shaped.

Correspondence is not the only form of conversation. Swift and Pope of course famously collaborated on several major literary projects, from the Scriblerian *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* to the several volumes of *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* and on minor pieces such as “Bounce to Pop.” In a famous letter to Swift, Pope imagined that the first two volumes of their *Miscellanies* would show them “conversing interchangeably” (Woolley 1999–2007: III, 76), suggesting that their readers would be right to see the joint project as a “conversation” between two writers, a poem by Pope “answering” one by Swift, and vice versa (See Illustration 1.1).

Even when they are not formally collaborating, I would argue that Pope and Swift are engaged in conversation as poets, and that it would be illuminating (but not sufficiently practiced by critics) to read their poems and prose as a series of “replies,” advertising sometimes an affinity between two close friends, sometimes a crucial difference. Critics often note that Pope’s *Dunciad Variorum* (1729) implicitly acknowledges, in part by means of an elaborate apparatus of mock-footnotes, Swift’s *Tale of a Tub* (1704, 1710) as a crucial literary ancestor and a formative influence in its satire on modern writing. And it is common for critics to remark on the ways in which Swift’s pictures of a lady’s dressing room in effect re-write the scene of Belinda at her toilet table in *The Rape of the Lock*. Sometimes the “reply” takes the form of admiring imitation. Pope himself suggests that his own imitations of Horace “in the manner of Dr. Swift” are intended to be read as emulative tribute. (Swift, interestingly, thought them not a very good imitation.)

The principle of reply can be extended to other pairs of works. As I will suggest below, we can read *Cadenus and Vanessa* as a reply to *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope’s “Epistle to a Lady” as a reply to Swift’s poems to Stella (addressed, like Pope’s, to a middle-aged spinster), and Swift’s *On Poetry. A Rapsody* as a reply to *The Dunciad*. And for my purposes – observing and assessing the interaction of two writers who share their work with each other – it will be just as important to look at early and unpublished drafts of poems, if they have been exchanged by mail or viewed in manuscript. Thus, Pope’s *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* can be regarded as a reply to Swift’s *Verses on the Death of Dr. Swift*, written earlier, though published later, than Pope’s *Epistle*. (The Pope-revised edition of Swift’s *Verses* is another reply, and Swift’s quickly published edition in turn a reply to Pope’s truncated one.) I will not limit my attention to pairs of major (and often-studied) poems. I will pay more attention than critics usually do

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76123-9 - Swift and Pope: Satirists in Dialogue

Dustin Griffin

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction. Conversing interchangeably*

9

to lesser-known (and less-discussed) works – Pope’s pamphlets on Curll as shaped in part by Swift’s earlier Bickerstaffian pieces, his Gulliverian verses as a reply to Swift’s *Travels*, and *Windsor-Forest* (1713) as an oblique reply to Swift’s prose pamphlet, *The Conduct of the Allies* (1711).

Before engaging further on an extended discussion of the running “conversation” between Swift and Pope, it is worth trying to determine what Pope might have meant when he imagined “conversing interchangeably.”<sup>15</sup> It is well known that his contemporaries took great interest in face-to-face “conversation” and that they aimed to cultivate it as an art. In 1737 Swift wrote to Pope about an *Essay on Conversation* in verse he had just read.<sup>16</sup> Steele’s ideal, in an essay on the topic in the *Tatler*, is polite conversation, as in a drawing room or coffee house, and emphasizes setting one’s interlocutors at ease. Hence, even in conversation with a “Bosom Friend,” it is necessary “that we should always be inclined rather to hide than rally each others Infirmities.” Such politesse was thought too refined later in the century, at least by such stout conversationalists as Johnson, who famously regarded good talk (at least among male social equals) as a strenuous battle of wits.

Reports of the conversational practice of Pope and Swift are inconclusive. Swift seems to have been the better conversationalist, and to have valued it more. He loved puns and thought raillery “the finest Part of Conversation.”<sup>17</sup> Johnson reports that he “told stories with great felicity,” and took care not to dominate,<sup>18</sup> apparently sharing Steele’s view that “Equality is the Life of Conversation.”<sup>19</sup> Swift’s early *Hints Toward an Essay on Conversation* declares that the “Ends” of conversation are to “entertain and improve those we are among, or to receive those Benefits ourselves.”<sup>20</sup> In good conversation we learn to shed our prejudices and “correct” our judgement. At its best, an exchange between those who disagree can even

<sup>15</sup> Pope may have remembered the *Guardian*, No. 24 (April 8, 1713): “The Faculty of interchanging our Thoughts with another, or what we express by the word *Conversation*, has always been represented by Moral Writers as one of the noblest privileges of Reason” (*Guardian*, 2 vols., 1714, p. 140).

<sup>16</sup> Woolley (1999–2007: iv, 433). For earlier examples, see Laurent Bordelon, “Of Conversation,” in *The Management of the Tongue* (1707); *The Art of Pleasing in Conversation* (1708), attributed to Richelieu, and translated from the French by M. de Varmonière, Sir Richard Bulstrode, “Of Company and Conversation,” in *Miscellaneous Essays* (1724).

<sup>17</sup> *Hints Toward an Essay on Conversation*, probably written as early as 1710–12 although not published until 1763 (Davis 1939–68: iv, 91).

<sup>18</sup> “Life of Swift,” in Lonsdale (2006: III, 212). But Johnson disapproved of Swift’s “affectation of familiarity with the Great” in his conversation (2006: 212).

<sup>19</sup> *Tatler*, No. 225 (September 16, 1710). See also *Guardian*, No. 24 (April 8, 1713), with its several “Rules of Conversation.”

<sup>20</sup> Davis (1939–68: iv, 92). For a discussion of Swift on conversation, see Kelly (1988: 37–56).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-76123-9 - Swift and Pope: Satirists in Dialogue

Dustin Griffin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

promote personal and political reconciliation,<sup>21</sup> although in practice it can just reinforce prior opinion: “That was *excellently observed*, say I. . . , where his Opinion agrees with mine. When we differ, there I pronounce him to be *mistaken*.”<sup>22</sup> His *Polite Conversation* (1738) suggests that he savored the difference between good witty talk and bad formulaic talk, but also that he might have been as acutely aware of his own contributions to conversation as he was of those of others, and even self-conscious about them. Pope’s famous story about Swift’s “odd, blunt way” (obliging Pope and Gay to take money for wine they would have drunk at his table) suggests that even with close friends he could be difficult to read, and to respond to.<sup>23</sup> At its best, Pope’s talk was thought “easy.”<sup>24</sup> Swift himself wrote to Gay that Pope’s conversation was defective because he was inattentive.<sup>25</sup> Remembering his two visits to England years earlier, he complained to another friend that Pope had “utterly disqualified [himself] for my conversation,” because he “hath always some poetical Scheme in his head.”<sup>26</sup> Johnson noted simply that Pope was not known for his wit, wisdom, or repartee: “In familiar or convivial conversation, it does not appear that he excelled. He may be said to have resembled Dryden, as being not one that was distinguished by vivacity in company.”<sup>27</sup> Perhaps Pope thought that his ability at “conversing” might be best found in his writing. One guesses that Swift agreed with him.

One might “converse” in a face-to-face encounter or by means of letters. “You see how I like to talk to you,” Pope wrote to Swift, “(for this is not writing).”<sup>28</sup> Both he and Swift sometimes persuaded themselves

<sup>21</sup> *Examiner*, 19, in Davis (1939–68: III, 35–36).

<sup>22</sup> *Thoughts on Various Subjects*, in Davis (1939–68: IV, 248).

<sup>23</sup> Osborn (1966: I, 53). Johnson repeats the story in the “Life of Swift.” It seems plausible that in these conversations recorded on May 1–7, 1730, Pope was in effect retaliating for Swift’s remark in his March 19, 1730, letter to Gay about Pope saying, as he left his guests with the wine all but gone, “Gentlemen I will leave you to your wine” (Woolley, III, 292).

<sup>24</sup> Boswell reports Marchmont telling him that Pope “was not *un homme à bons mots*. His conversation was something better – more manly. A flow of vivacity. But it was necessary he should lead the conversation. If other people talked together, he fell asleep” (Weis and Pottle 1970: 333). For reports by Chesterfield, Somerville, and Warton, see the notes in Hill’s edition of Johnson’s *Lives of the Poets* (III, 201). For reports by Ruffhead, Hervey, Birch, and others, see the notes in Lonsdale (2006: IV, 307).

<sup>25</sup> Woolley (1999–2007: III, 501).

<sup>26</sup> Woolley (1999–2007: III, 677). Johnson repeats the report in the “Life of Pope,” in Lonsdale (2006: IV, 59). Swift does not mention that, on at least one of those visits to Pope, he himself, because of an attack of deafness, was not fit for conversation, and that Pope for that reason devoted himself to writing. For Swift’s verses about that visit, see below, ch. 2, pp. III, 113.

<sup>27</sup> “Life of Pope,” in Lonsdale (2006: IV, 56).

<sup>28</sup> Woolley (1999–2007: III, 759). Cf. Pope’s May 28, 1712 letter to Caryll: “It is not only the disposition I always have of conversing with you that makes me so speedily answer your obliging lines” (Sherburn 1956: I, 143). The preface to a 1726 collection of Pope’s letters to Henry Cromwell