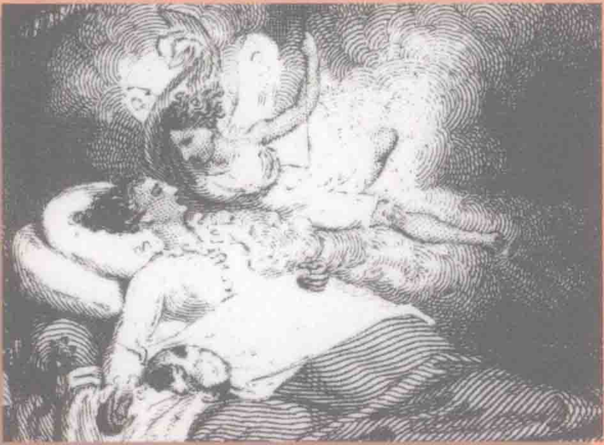
ALEXANDER POPE

Selected Poetry and Prose

Edited by Robin Sowerby



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Robin Sowerby

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Introduction

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF POPE

> As yet a child, nor yet a fool to fame,
> I lisped in numbers, for the numbers came.
> (*An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot,* 127–8)

> He considered poetry as the business of his life; and, however he might seem to lament his occupation, he followed it with constancy; to make verses was his first labour and to mend them was his last.[1]

Alexander Pope, born in 1688, the only son of moderately well-to-do Catholic parents (his father was a linen merchant) had a London childhood in comfortable circumstances. His family moved to Binfield in Windsor Forest when he was about 12. He was educated partly by priests in the home, then at a Catholic school in Twyford near Winchester, and subsequently under the tutelage of a former fellow of University College Oxford who had set up a school near Marylebone. His youthful literary endeavours were encouraged by his father and fostered by influential friends. His first publications (*The Pastorals* in 1709, *An Essay on Criticism* in 1711 and the first version of *The Rape of the Lock* in 1712) brought him immediate fame and success. In this period he made a number of enduring friendships with leading literary figures like the satirist Jonathan Swift, John Gay, author of *The Beggar's Opera*, Thomas Parnell, a poet who later gave him scholarly help with his Homer, and Dr John Arbuthnot, man of letters and the Queen's physician. Together they were members of an association calling itself the Scriblerus Club designed in Pope's words to ridicule 'all the false tastes in learning under the character of a man of capacity enough [Martinus Scriblerus] that dipped into every art and science but injudiciously in each'.[2] Later Pope's *Dunciad* (1728) and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) doubtless owe much to this earlier association.

The great preoccupation of Pope's life from 1714 when he started translating the *Iliad* to 1726 when the final volumes of the *Odyssey* were published was his translation of Homer. On the proceeds of subscriptions to the project (advance payments made to the poet and his publisher by those who wished to see Homer in modern English and had faith in Pope's ability to prove adequate to the task) he became financially secure and therefore independent of aristocratic patronage and free to shape the course of his literary career.

In addition to the rewards of recognition and success both tangible and intangible, Pope had to endure critical attack from the beginning. In the preface to an edition of his *Works* in 1717, he declared: 'The life of a wit is a warfare upon earth', and in the early eighteenth century that warfare was often prosecuted with a ferocity that may surprise and shock us in the twentieth. The malignant spirit of many of the attacks against Pope is illustrated by Dr Johnson in a quotation from John Dennis, no mere literary hack but a leading critic of the day, who later attacked *The Rape of the Lock* but who is here writing about *An Essay on Criticism*:

> Let the person of a gentleman of his parts be never so contemptible, his inward man is ten times more ridiculous; it being impossible that his outward form, though it be that of a downright monkey, should differ so much from human shape as his unthinking immaterial part does from human understanding.[3]

As a boy Pope had contracted a form of tuberculosis which resulted in curvature of the spine and stunted growth so that he was never more than 4 feet 6 inches tall. This condition worsened with age and entailed physical pain and dependence upon others. In the 'Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot' he speaks of 'this long disease, my life' (l. 132). His adversaries readily seized upon his weakness and physical abnormality (in the same poem he also refers to 'The libelled person and the pictured shape' (l. 353)) and much play was made with the letters of his name, A.P..E. He had the support of friends, but was always a controversial figure in the literary life of his times. Even the Homer translation involved him in controversy when he quarrelled with the more genial figure of Joseph Addison over the latter's promotion of a rival (and inferior) version of the first book of the *Iliad* published by his protégé Thomas Tickell. His private response was to compose the portrait of 'Atticus' later included in *An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* (1735). He did not intend publication at the time, but the portrait circulated among friends, one of whom, Francis Atterbury, the Bishop of Rochester, encouraged him to employ further the talent it showed for sharp satire. But it was not until Lewis Theobald in his edition of Shakespeare of 1726 pointed out the deficiencies of Pope's own Shakespearian venture published in the previous year that Pope, possibly to forestall further criticism, entered the warfare of the wits with a vengeance that delighted his supporters and dismayed his enemies. *The Dunciad* with Theobald as its hero was published anonymously in 1728 but Pope's authorship was soon suspected. Thereafter he was increasingly drawn to controversial satire, though not exclusively since *An Essay on Man* (1733–4) also belongs to this period. Nevertheless there is a marked change in Pope's literary career after the Homer translation towards the moral, the didactic, and the satiric.

As a result of his literary earnings, in the year after his father died he moved into an elegant country house at Twickenham in 1718, then well outside the city of London, where he lived with his mother until her death in 1733 and then on his own, for he never married, until his death in 1744.

> Here he planted the vines and the quincunx which his verses mention; and being under the necessity of making a subterraneous passage to a garden on the other side of the road, he

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> adorned it with fossil bodies, and dignified it with the title of a grotto; a place of silence and retreat, from which he endeavoured to persuade his friends and himself that cares and passions could be excluded.[4]

He cultivated his own garden with diligence and, detached at Twickenham from the life of business and the court yet near enough the centre to be in touch, he lived out his version of the good life dedicated to friendship, conversation, and books that is recommended in many of his poems, notably the verse epistles and of these particularly *The Imitations of Horace*. A collection of letters in prose extending to four large volumes, some of which he published in his own lifetime, provides a record of the style and values of the man and of his various interests and social relationships. His poetry was always his main preoccupation: he continued composing and revising to the end and was working on a final edition of his poems in the last months of his life. It is reported that three weeks before he died he was sorting out presentation copies of the first volume for his friends with the comment:

> Here am I, like Socrates, distributing my morality among my friends just as I am dying.[5]

At the time, and more so in retrospect, the year of Pope's birth, 1688, was a momentous one in British constitutional history. For the second time in a century an English monarch was deposed. The execution of Charles I in 1649 came after a prolonged civil war and resulted in the rule of Oliver Cromwell followed by the restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660. It must have seemed to those who opposed the absolutism of Charles I that little had been gained after two decades of upheaval, for, although Charles II was invited back by Parliament with whom he negotiated terms, the powers of the monarchy were little restricted. Charles II ruled with greater political sensitivity than his father but the Stuart monarchy came to grief over a question that proved beyond his powers to solve. Charles himself had no legitimate children so that his natural heir on the hereditary principle was his younger brother the Catholic James, Duke of York. The religion of James was seen to be a threat to the established church and to the traditional independence of Britain. Forces in Parliament, predominantly Dissenters (Protestants who separated themselves from the communion of the established Church of England) and low Anglicans proposed to exclude James from the throne. They were opposed by those supporting the royal prerogative (including naturally the King), who were generally high Anglicans. It was at this time that the terms Whig and Tory were first used in opposition as abusive terms to describe supporters and opponents of the Exclusion Bill. To some extent this division echoed the religious and political polarization of the earlier civil war. The King and the anti-exclusionists prevailed, and James succeeded on Charles's death in 1685. His conduct as King, however, confirmed the fears of his opponents and alarmed his supporters, who felt that the established constitution of Church and state was in danger. Whigs and Tories joined forces in 1688 to invite over the Dutch Prince William of Orange, husband of James's daughter Mary who had been brought up on the instructions of Charles II in the Protestant faith. James's army deserted in large numbers and he took refuge in Catholic France at the court of Louis XIV, who continued to uphold his claim to the throne. Parliament offered the throne jointly to William and Mary on conditions set out in a Bill of Rights. The hereditary principle was replaced by a parliamentary succession and the sovereign was required to be Protestant. A number of provisions in the bill shifted power away from the monarch and towards Parliament. Thenceforward the government of the kingdom was more of a partnership between the monarch and the Parliament largely controlled by the nobility. The absolutist tendencies of the Stuart monarchs before 1688 were checked and thereafter England had a more mixed constitution in marked contrast to the absolute monarchy holding sway in France. Nevertheless the monarch continued to exercise great power, and the royal prerogative in appointments and dismissals remained effective throughout the eighteenth century. The Toleration Act of 1689 allowed freedom of worship for Dissenters (though not for Catholics) so that in the so-called 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688–9 a constitutional settlement was achieved without bloodshed that was broadly acceptable to a majority in the kingdom.

Supporters of the exiled James, known as Jacobites from the

Latin version of his name Jacobus, were thereafter always a small minority including many Roman Catholics, some Tory Anglicans who questioned the legitimacy of the succession in 1688 and later, largely for dynastic reasons, many Scots. As Catholics, Pope's family might have felt excluded from the settlement of 1689, for Catholics experienced a variety of restrictions relating to property and residence, education, politics and professional life. Technically they were required to live ten miles from the centre of London. The universities were not open to them, nor could they hold public office. Nevertheless their minority status did not hinder their economic activity even though they were subject to special taxes. Pope's father was a successful businessman. The poet himself retained the religion of his upbringing. In his letters and his poems his Catholicism is not much in evidence, and it is apparent that his religious beliefs were tolerant and enlightened. Nevertheless his religion must have set him apart to some extent from the mainstream of English life. In practice, there was increasing toleration of Catholics doctrinally and at the same time continuing suspicion of them politically in view of the perceived threat from the king over the water. In 1689 James landed in Ireland and was defeated by William at the Battle of the Boyne. In 1708 there was an abortive French invasion. In 1715 came the first Jacobite uprising in Scotland in support of James's son James Edward whose claim was recognized by the French King and who was known subsequently as the Old Pretender, and in the year after Pope died came the final uprising in 1745 in favour of Charles Edward, grandson of James II and called the Young Pretender.

When Pope began his literary career, the childless William and Mary had been succeeded by Mary's younger sister Anne. England was heavily involved in foreign campaigns prosecuted by the Duke of Marlborough, who had succeeded William III as leader of the grand alliance of English and Dutch forces against the power of France. Party rivalry in this period was intense and centred upon Tory resistance to religious toleration promoted by the Whigs and upon Tory attempts to bring to an end the long foreign campaign, which was a drain upon the resources of the gentry. Whig views on foreign policy were promoted by Joseph Addison in *The Spectator* and by Richard Steele in *The Tatler*. The Tory view was promoted in pamphlet form by Jonathan Swift. The Tories were in power when the peace of Utrecht celebrated in 'Windsor Forest' was signed in 1713. Tories and Whigs were not formally organized into parties and the terms are only loosely connected with easily defined values and interests. In this period the Tories are usually identified with the established Anglican Church and the squirearchy and the Whigs with the interests of Dissenters, with the landowning aristocracy, and with the commercial interests of the rising middle classes.

An issue that divided Whigs and some Tories concerned the succession to Queen Anne, none of whose offspring had survived childhood. Even before she came to the throne, Parliament had decreed in 1701 that the succession should go to her nearest Protestant relative, Sophia, the Electress of Hanover, the granddaughter of James I. The Tories reopened the issue in the last year of her reign when illness made her demise likely, making overtures to James Edward, the son of James II, which foundered when he refused to give up his Catholicism. Nevertheless when the Queen died the Tory cause was greatly damaged. One of their leaders, Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, was imprisoned in the Tower and another, Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, fled the country for France where he became James's Secretary of State. He forfeited his estates and his peerage. Pope had known them both from association in the Scriblerus Club and there seems to be an allusion to their fate at the close of the 'imitation of Horace' addressed to Bolingbroke in 1737 and included in this selection. The new King George, the son of Sophia who had just predeceased Anne, naturally chose his ministers from among the Whigs who had staunchly supported his succession and who remained in the ascendancy for the next fifty years. Many Tories had supported the Hanoverian succession but they were seriously weakened by association with their Jacobite brethren particularly in the wake of the Jacobite uprising in Scotland in 1715.

The Whig ministry was soon dominated by the personality and policy of Sir Robert Walpole, who held the offices of First Lord of the Treasury and Chancellor of the Exchequer continuously from 1721 to 1742. He aimed through continuing Whig supremacy to secure the Hanoverian succession against any aspirations to the contrary among Tory Jacobites. The twin pillars of the policy by which he gained several electoral victories were economic success with low taxation and a peaceful foreign policy. He gained the confidence of George I (1714–27) and of his son who succeeded him, and was able to use their power of royal patronage to party advantage. Never before had so much power been concentrated in any of the monarch's ministers, and this great power itself was often the main target of attack on the part of his critics. To opponents his extensive network of patronage was corrupt, and his peaceable foreign policy an expediency which appeased Britain's commercial rivals. The unpopularity of individual financial measures could be exploited by the opposition, but in general Walpole's economic management was successful. Many historians look back upon his rule as a time of political stability and growing national prosperity. One of his main opponents was Pope's friend Bolingbroke who had been pardoned in 1723 and allowed to return to England. In the early 1730s Bolingbroke sought to build up a new Country party made up of former Tories and Whig opponents of Walpole, with the aim of protecting the independence of Parliament against what they regarded as the corruption of Walpole's government. In the later 1730s a new opposition group of self-styled 'patriots' gathered around George II's son Frederick, the Prince of Wales, for which Bolingbroke wrote his most famous work, *The Idea of a Patriot King*. But none of his political aspirations came to anything, and when Walpole was eventually removed it was because in the eyes of his own supporters he had outlived his usefulness. The Whigs then regrouped under new leadership.

Pope had always had friends and social contacts across the main religious and political divisions, though his own inclinations were undoubtedly Tory, as his early association with the Scriblerians and his continuing friendship with Bolingbroke might indicate. To what extent he may from time to time have had Jacobite leanings it is difficult to say. In 'Windsor Forest' he happily identified himself with the ruling powers in the land and praised the peace of Utrecht recently negotiated by the

Tories and disapproved of by some of the Whigs. After 1714, he was no longer a political 'insider', but since as a Catholic he was not eligible for office he could never have contemplated the kind of career in which literature went hand in hand with government service as in the case of the Whig Addison or the Tory Swift. Hence the events of 1714 were not the personal blow to Pope that they were to his Protestant friend Swift. In an age when most literary men had some clear political affiliation and when poets were courted by politicians, perhaps because of his religion and his health, Pope remained more detached than most. In this of course he was aided by the financial independence he achieved through his Homer translation. He was never a party man and never addressed political issues as directly as, for example, John Dryden, who as poet laureate at the court of Charles II had written many poems in support of the government, notably *Absalom and Achitophel* in 1686. Pope always prided himself upon his independence, and in his poems his expression is often teasingly elusive:

> My head and heart thus flowing through my quill,
> Verse-man or prose-man, term me which you will,
> Papist or Protestant, or both between,
> Like good Erasmus, in an honest mean,
> In moderation placing all my glory,
> While Tories call me Whig, and Whigs a Tory.
> ('To Mr Fortescue', ll. 63–8)

Nevertheless part of that independence was not merely detachment but conscious opposition to Walpole and all his works. *The Imitations of Horace* are not exclusively political poems, but one of the more marked ways in which they differ from their originals, in which Horace represents himself in broad sympathy with the ruling order, stems from Pope's oppositional stance.

INTRODUCTION TO THE POEMS

The best introduction to the literary career of Pope is one of his own earliest works, *An Essay on Criticism*, published in 1711 when he was only 23, in which the young poet sought to

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