

A Review of “Pope, Swift, and the Poetics of Posterity” by Seth Rudy

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Review of Seth Rudy, “Pope, Swift, and the Poetics of Posterity.” *Eighteenth-Century Life*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2011, pp. 1-28. *eDuke Scholarly Collection, Expanded*.

The lure of posterity, the promise of being revered by individuals in the future, may encourage one to lose one’s grasp on the wonder existing within the present moment. In “Pope, Swift, and the Poetics of Posterity,” Seth Rudy discusses both authors in terms of how they approached posterity. Both, Rudy notes, took very different approaches, but have both been remembered by successive generations of people. In his article, Rudy chronicles the relationship between Pope and Swift, revealing how their publicized friendship was feigned (1). Rudy’s article reveals the differing approaches Pope and Swift took to secure their place as individuals deserving of reverence from future generations. Of particular scrutiny is the peculiar dynamic existing within the relationship between Pope and Swift, where Pope acts as an authoritative figure trying to control how Swift would be perceived by future generations. Rudy views Pope as overbearing, critical of Swift’s political inclinations, and blunt about existing as a politically autonomous author (6-7).

The article begins with Pope writing to Swift: “Methinks we look like friends... side by side, serious and merry by turns, conversing interchangeably, and walking down hand in hand to posterity” (1). This statement gives readers a glimpse into the relationship between Pope and Swift, with Pope acting as the dominating figure. Rudy notes how Pope misleads, stating that “[t]he [closeness] Pope describes remains very much a textual construction, more hoped for than

actual” (1). This notion, of Pope’s affinity for Swift not being reciprocated, becomes an integral aspect of Rudy’s article.

Rudy then provides largely separate accounts of each author’s approach to posterity, beginning with Swift and his various pseudonyms (8). Rudy states “the absence of [Swift’s] own voice from the text creates the possibility of a problematic closeness to the objects of his satire” (3). Rudy also notes how Swift acknowledged the eroding nature that time had on one’s texts (3-4): that his texts would not necessarily garner praise in the future, no matter how astounding they may have been. In terms of posterity, “Swift’s lack of faith in a textual future and his inability to preserve the past gave him the liberty to direct his energies toward the present,” where posterity could be reached “outside the material remnants of writing” (5). Rudy contrasts Swift’s philosophy with Pope’s, noting Pope’s belief that he would reach posterity by emulating the acclaimed ancients (4). Pope, unlike Swift, focused primarily on his texts as a means of garnering praise from posterity (4-5). For Pope the emphasis was on making sure his works had an essence that had already been met with approval and reverence (4-5).

Rudy proceeds by refuting Pope’s “idea of walking hand in hand down to posterity as coauthors of a literary text” (7-8). Although Pope and Swift shared the pseudonym Martin Scriblerus for works they wrote individually (8-10), they never coauthored a text, instead settling on creating compilations showcasing both of their works (8). Rudy primarily discusses Pope’s *The Dunciad Variorum* and Swift’s *A Tale of the Tub*, focusing on the apparatuses to both texts. Both authors included criticisms on their texts for readers to consider, but their apparatuses differ in terms of how they contribute to each author’s respective identity (9). Rudy notes “[t]he information [Pope’s apparatus] contains is by turns factual, fictional, reliable, and incredible; most of the notes add nothing useful to the forming of a correct understanding of the poem” (9).

The apparatus to Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* contributes to his lack of a stable authorial identity (11), functioning primarily to confuse the reader, while the annotations to Pope's text appear in smaller print than the actual poem, making his words more salient and more important than those of his critics (10-11).

The latter part of Rudy's article reinforces Pope's overbearing presence on Swift, and the measures Pope took to depict Swift primarily as a poet to future generations. Rudy refers to a passage of Pope's poetry where he tries "aligning Swift with poetry and the Muses[,] instead of statecraft and the associated services he had already [performed]" (15). Rudy provides more instances where Pope tries to portray Swift as a poet and returns to the notion of both authors reaching posterity in different ways (24).

Rudy's fascinating article runs twenty-four pages, contributing insightful sentiments supported by evidence. I feel the beginning of his article is a very strong feature of his work, as he provides readers with a glimpse of the dynamic characterizing Pope and Swift's relationship. I also feel as though the middle of the article, where Rudy discusses Pope and Swift's compilations of works, was very intriguing. I would recommend this article as suitable for upper-level undergraduate courses as prior exposure to Pope's and Swift's works would be required in order to understand their different approaches to posterity. I appreciated the various instances of correspondence between Pope and Swift, which helped Rudy ground his claims. In "Pope, Swift, and the Poetics of Posterity" it becomes clear that although both poets took different approaches to posterity, both will be remembered, in different ways, for contributions they made to literature.



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