

# Pope-lexing Contradictions: Alexander Pope's Many Identities

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Review of Flavio Gregori "Alexander Pope: A Poet on the Margins and in the Center" *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2005, pp. i-xliv, EBSCO.

Alexander Pope was and remains full of contradictions. He is simultaneously one of the most quoted and attacked poets in the English tradition. His poetry made him wealthy, but his religion barred him from higher circles of society. He was a towering poet, translating revered poems into English and contributing voluminously to the canon. He was also very sick, suffering from marginalizing disabilities. This bundle of opposing identities makes the task of categorizing Pope, with respect to his social position, hopeless. Flavio Gregori enigmatically titles his paper "Alexander Pope: A Poet on the Margins and in the Center." The paper recognizes this futility; instead of attempting to put Pope in a box, he, through diligent scholarship and panoramic thinking, makes lucid the profound contradictions in Pope's life.

Gregori divides his paper into several sections, an appropriate choice for his task of elucidating precisely what makes Pope impossible to categorize, because a series of analyses is a perfect arrangement for the purposes of highlighting contradictions. The first section is about Pope's reception among the famous critics and poets of his era. Gregori, in a scholarly diligence present in the entire paper, catalogues the names of Pope's contemporaries and immediate successors who held Pope to be one of the greatest poets of their time, perhaps one of the greatest poets ever. To assert that the appeal of Pope's poetry extended far beyond Pope's own

fans, Gregori also includes in the same list names of people who, during Pope's lifetime, were his "archenemies" (3). Resting on the praise heaped upon Pope's work by both his friends and his enemies, Gregori's conclusion about the reception of Pope's poetry is persuasive and leaves very little room for counterargument. Throughout this analysis, Gregori is clear that he is standing on the shoulders of giants. He copiously draws from other scholars, communicating that this conclusion is something he shares with many others who have studied Pope in the centuries since his death.

Pivoting to Pope's place in his society, Gregori is careful to generously share Pope's biographical details with the reader. These details make clear the distance between Pope and nobility, and this sets the stage for his analysis of Pope's self-consciousness and aversion to his origins. He cites Pope fabricating his own family history, attributing to it the nobility it never had. Sharing this immediately after historical details about Pope's family has the effect of viscerally communicating Pope's insecurity about his social status, but this comes after a discussion of the centrality of his poetry. Gregori makes sure not to just make us read the contradictions. He wants to make us feel them, slowly fostering in us a conviction about Pope. The various pieces of his life do not sum up to a symphony, so much as a series of vastly different notes, some joyous and others melancholy. Just as this starts to become clear, Gregori turns our attention to an aspect of Pope's life that fully contains this contradiction: his physical disabilities.

Of all the sections Gregori covers in his paper, the section devoted to Pope's physical marginality is perhaps the most emotionally visceral. He begins with how this aspect of Pope's life – his short height and poor health stemming from tuberculosis contracted at a young age – was the most frequent target of Pope's critics. Gregori pulls no punches here, citing several

instances where Pope's critics hurled many epithets at him, most of them centered on his body. This discussion prefaces the analysis of how, despite his disabilities being made very clear to him by his enemies, Pope resisted fully owning his physique. He chose instead to perceive the body "as distinct from the self and not integral or constitutive of the self" (16). Gregori highlights subtle details in Pope's work that illuminate this resistance: Pope's translation of the *Iliad*, for instance, shies away from discussing "the various bodily and psychological deficiencies of the heroes," opting instead to emphasize an intangible "manly Mind" (16). Gregori memorably captures Pope's denial: "Instead of looking for the meeting point between his deformity and titanism (a painful task, it must be admitted), Pope labored to keep them separate" (16).

This segmented analysis of Pope's life serves as a remarkably good aid in understanding his paradoxical centrality and marginality. It briefly surveys those aspects that made him central – namely, his poetry and his readership – and those that marginalized him: his lack of nobility and physical disability. Through focusing on each of these aspects sequentially, Gregori manages to create an appropriate amount of indecision in the mind of the reader regarding a conclusive assessment of Pope's place in the English tradition. For any reader of Pope interested in further understanding the man beneath the verse, reading Gregori's paper is a comprehensive start. While it has some disturbing revelations, it also shows Pope at his most vulnerable and flawed, making it a truly touching description of the great poet's life.



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