

Mimetic Theory and *The Dunciad*: A Novel Approach

Aklima Minsariya

Review of Doolittle, Allan. “Deceit, Desire, and *The Dunciad*: Mimetic Theory and Alexander Pope.” *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, vol. 17, 2010, pp. 1–26.

Allan Doolittle bravely intervenes the literary field of eighteenth-century England by attempting, for the first time ever, to apply Girard’s mimetic theory to the literary life and works of Alexander Pope. Subsequently, this article focuses on Pope’s rivalry with Lewis Theobald amongst others from the “Age of Authors” and Pope’s fascination with mythic texts, specifically *The Dunciad*. This previously unidentified connection between Girard’s mimetic theory and Pope broadens the scope of literary studies performed on the labyrinthine subject of Alexander Pope and carves novel pathways for aspiring authors. This article promises to be groundbreaking, but struggles to lead up to a definite conclusion; therefore, the article’s own contribution to literary criticism is elusive.

This article is extracted from Doolittle’s MA thesis at Simon Fraser University and published in *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*. The audience of this journal consists of scholarly readers from various academic backgrounds. The journal publishes articles that employ Rene Girard’s mimetic hypothesis with various subject matters to explore the relationship between the genesis and maintenance of culture. This mimetic theory consists of a pair of hypotheses theorizing the nature and origin of human culture. The first hypothesis defines desire as a product of imitation based on wanting what another person has. The second

hypothesis constitutes a competition for the object of desire, and this crisis is resolved by what Girard calls a scapegoat mechanism.

In his article, Doolittle uses mimetic theory to reveal Pope's motivation behind writing *The Dunciad*, a poem that "cost [Pope] as much pains as anything [he] ever wrote" (2). *The Dunciad* is a mock epic poem written in heroic couplets, and the article aims to address how this poem is Pope's attempt to shape the literary culture of early eighteenth-century England. Doolittle points out that as with technology today, books in the eighteenth-century were a source of information-overload. The difficulty of distinguishing books of scholarly discourse from the numerous books that were being published thus caused anxiety among scholars of the eighteenth-century. Nevertheless, the most challenging task for Doolittle is to translate the social and intellectual rivalries between Pope and Theobald from the physical world into the literary world of *The Dunciad*. Doolittle argues that Pope used his advanced knowledge of mythic texts as a scapegoat mechanism to resolve his mimetic crisis with Theobald and other rivals. Since Pope did not receive a formal education, his object of desire is the philological scholarship that Theobald possessed with university education. In *The Dunciad*, Pope uses his expertise in classical texts to scapegoat rivals and restore his textual and culture authority, a role that Theobald is not able to similarly uphold (18).

The first section of Doolittle's article presents information about Pope's literary career, including his educational background, rivalries, and accomplishments, and relates these to Girard's first hypothesis. The first notable aspect of this section is the meticulous presentation of contextual information. While there is a flood of information on this subject matter, Doolittle's ability to organize and present biographical data with credible sources is commendable. Doolittle's large collection of historical information affirms his knowledge on the subject matter.

On one hand, this gives him the credibility required to intervene in the literary field of Alexander Pope, but on the other, this network of information derails the article from its central argument. For instance, the rivalry between Theobald and Pope is of utmost importance to the article, yet prior to establishing its connection to mimetic theory, Doolittle unnecessarily addresses Bentley, another one of Pope's rivals. In like manner, Pope's biographical information on pages 6 and 7 appears relevant, but is abandoned in Doolittle's analysis of *The Dunciad*, making clear that the purpose of including this historical information is to facilitate Doolittle's analysis of the poem. By his tendencies to digress, Doolittle risks facing two major repercussions: first, scholarly readers could be aware of this information and lose interest. Second, scholarly readers from a different academic background may experience information overload and fail to retain all this information. Unfortunately, both situations harm readers' ability to follow Doolittle's analysis of *The Dunciad*.

The second section of Doolittle's article focuses on the mock-epic and how stylistic features of the text represent the mimetic depiction of Pope's life, particularly with his rivalry with Theobald. While the previous section of the article presented existing literature on Pope and mimetic theory, this section deals with a different method of analysis: close reading. By providing textual evidence to support his claims, Doolittle closes the door on critics who would say close reading is purely a novel analytics approach. As Doolittle begins to prove that *The Dunciad* is a scapegoat mechanism, he further complicates his description of Girard's mimetic theory. Doolittle is unclear whether the five stereotypes identified in mimetic theory belong in the first, second, or both stages (14), but more importantly, I argue that these details are better suited in the first section of the article. Doolittle's ambition to cover the entirety of a new critical

approach, is a subject matter too broad for the length of this article. His attempts at doing so have negated his ability to develop an in-depth analysis of *The Dunciad* until late into the article.

As the reader seeks to understand Doolittle’s analysis in a broader context, they arrive at a disappointing conclusion towards the final paragraph. Doolittle concludes “[my analysis] adds depth and color to an *already* deep and colorful literary career” (20; my italics). By employing the term “already,” the author reduces the significance of his contribution to the literary field of Alexander Pope.

Overall, the article achieves what it sets out to do and leads the academic discourse of Alexander Pope in a new direction. However, the thread of Doolittle’s argument is difficult to follow due to the excess biographical data in the first section. The analysis of *The Dunciad* in the second section is the most interesting part of Doolittle’s article, but the content is dense in comparison to the first section. Like Pope, Doolittle attempts to achieve what his subjects have done better – i.e., the novel approach –, but without broader implications of the significance of his analysis to the academic study of Pope, the article falls short of a unified conclusion.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

© Aklima Minsariya, 2019

Available from: <http://journals.sfu.ca/courses/index.php/eng420>