Mask, Mirror, and Weapon: Pope's Versatile Satire

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The history and life of a writer are often a monumental influence on their works and opinions. Alexander Pope is no exception, and he had a great deal of experience to draw from. Pope was a person closely acquainted with hardship from a multitude of sources, including religious discrimination, harsh critiques of his writing, and an extreme physical disability. Instead of dwelling on miserable events and pouring his suffering into his work emotionally, Pope uses his poetry to correct the prejudice thrown his way through calculated vocabulary choices and direct analogies of those for whom he had ample distaste. Pope elevates his most desirable qualities while simultaneously criticizing and pushing down his rivals and enemies, all under the cover of satire and fiction. Through his writing, Pope reverses the multitude of prejudices that he has experienced through judgement of his faith, his writing, and his physicality, both to preserve his dignity and status as well as to pursue the contentedness that he was never able to obtain.

From a young age, Pope endured a physical disability that left him at under five feet in height. This is something that was clearly a struggle for him both as a label and a physical complication, because he experienced several severe health conditions as a result (Deutsch 2). He also expressed his pain, both physical and emotional, in several letters to the close people in his life. Damrosch examines these correspondences with special attention to one addressed to Bathurst, in which Pope lamentingly describes his body as a burden to himself and others, claiming it is as useless as dead weight (21). However, unlike most authors, Pope did not choose to portray a character with his same physicality in any of his poetry. This could have given him a platform to create a positively represented disabled character that could potentially have driven forward a more progressive way of thinking, but that method could have certainly turned sour extremely

quickly. Especially with Pope being a small person himself, the inclusion of a similar character would open a door to project the representation of the character back onto the author. The fact that so-called "lameness" and disability was so ridiculed and mocked in Pope's time is likely another large contributing factor to this abstinence from including representation. Both characters and real people below average height were often made out as the punch lines of jokes or viewed through a lens of performance, never actually seen as human (Deutsch 145). Instead of explicitly showcasing his disability as something to be celebrated, Pope found several other ways to level the playing field between himself and his rivals. Damrosch suggests that Pope intends to displace his body from his mind, instead "mak[ing] his personality and experience central to his poems" (19). Achieving this would isolate Pope's success purely to his mind or soul, something he would much rather be remembered for over his body. To obtain this isolation, Pope employs several rhetorical strategies. While many may focus on his scathing commentary on others, Pope also used more subtle humour to separate himself from the tribulations of his body. His use of the word "short" is abundant, and it does not fit the atmosphere in some phrases, such as this excepted from the *Essay on Man*, "While still too wide or short is human wit" (3.90). Here, describing wit as "narrow" so that it becomes parallel with wide and also alludes to "narrow-mindedness" would be a more appropriate word choice, yet Pope chooses "short," a word more commonly used to represent height. He uses it similarly in his *Essay on Criticism* several times, such as saying critics "form short ideas" (287). Where an adjective such as "brief" may have matched better with the rest of the text, Pope still uses "short." This appears to be some form of accepting the inevitability of judgement on his appearance, an act of self-preservation and ownership over the word. In other works, he uses other synonyms or wordplay to convey his possession of the word. "A little house with trees arow, and like its master very low" (quoted in Ditchfield, 245)

describes Pope's family house and conveys some of his lightheartedness in addressing his stature in pun and double entendre, and could also be a self-deprecating joke about the class of both himself and his family. However, it is beneficial to note that Pope does not directly address his height through his word choice. It is an extremely distanced form of humour that may not be immediately apparent. By employing this subtlety, Pope is able to acknowledge his disability without tying himself to it, causing readers to focus more on his clever wordplay than his actual height.

With a last name with religious connotations like Pope, the church was also a complicated subject. Pope grew up in a Catholic family, which was yet another unfortunate position to be in during the eighteenth century in England. The Test Acts "which prevented Catholics from teaching, attending universities, voting or holding public offices" (Eltahir Ibrahim 22) were a cause for Pope to be ostracized due to his Catholicism. Pope's poetry seems to have an interesting relationship with religion and the representation of god, particularly in *Eloisa to Abelard*. In this fictional letter, the character Eloisa laments her position in which she is caught between being faithful to her religion and her love for Abelard, a priest with whom she had previously had an affair:

> In these deep solitudes and awful cells,
> Where heav'nly-pensive contemplation dwells,
> And ever-musing melancholy reigns;
> What means this tumult in a vestal's veins? (1-4)

The imagery is so melancholy and heart-wrenching that few readers' sympathies are bound to lie with the church, which Eloisa pictures as a gloomy prison. In this storyline based on true events, the rules of the church appear to be an antagonist, separating Eloisa from her desires. Even in

bringing up this affair, Pope immediately takes a jab at the church in just the mere existence of this poem. The story that he tells revolves around the representation of nuns and priests as fueled by the same carnal and romantic desires that many people are told to repress, instructions that usually come through people of faith. “See my lips tremble, and eye-balls roll / Suck my last breath and catch my flying soul” (323-324) has clear connotations of sexual intimacy, and these thoughts of Eloisa’s appear to be a form of solace for her, an escape from the walls of the convent. Pope then contrasts that through the immediately following lines, “Ah no -- in sacred vestments must thou stand, / The hallowed taper trembling in thy hand” (325-326). Imagining Abelard in religious garments banishes all thoughts of love and intimacy from Eloisa’s mind, but, although she accepts the reality of the church, her faith is undercut by her admission that she would rather die and be reunited with her lover. These jumps between piety and longing for physical or emotional comfort show Eloisa’s internal fight to hide her desires and the implied possibility that many other members of the church who appear content in their faith could be struggling in the same way. However, Damrosch describes Pope’s relationship with faith as a matter of loyalty and community rather than the theology itself, much as it was for many others at this time (167). As such, Eloisa’s portrayal is much more like a pitiable figure than a stupid one: her desire is not shamed and is viewed with legitimate understanding and vivid emotion. Acknowledging Eloisa’s struggles does not stop Pope from adding fuel to the fire by pointing out the hypocrisy of those who lord their piety over others. One of the other discrepancies within the church that Pope brings up in *Eloisa to Abelard* is the duality of love and its representation through faith. Many religions, including Catholicism, describe God as an all-loving being and a fulfilling, pure, divine depiction of love. However, that idea is a stark contrast to the descriptions of Eloisa’s turmoil: “See in her cell sad Eloisa spread, / Propp'd on some tomb, a neighbour of the dead.” (303-

304). Even without the explicit imagery of the tombstone, Pope still invokes a great deal of death imagery when describing the convent.

> Now warm in love, now withering in thy bloom,
>
> Lost in a convent's solitary gloom!
>
> There stern religion quenched th'unwilling flame,
>
> There died the best of passions, love and fame. (37-40)

In Pope's poem, there seems to be a clear difference between the love of God and the love between mortals. Coupled with the previous message of Eloisa preferring death to religious captivity, the imagery and use of words such as "unwilling" and "solitary gloom" paints the church as completely devoid of love, replaced by hopelessness. Although this is a very bleak and inescapable picture of the church, Pope implies a subtle commentary here once again to reinforce the effectiveness of religion. The complexity of emotions that Eloisa feels is a direct sign of the power that the church is able to hold over her. If she was in such turmoil and simply left the Catholic Church altogether, it would completely undermine the church's power, but her desire to stay makes the church an equally competent rival to her desire for Abelard. This brings into question Pope's own experiences with the church and his exile (Eltahir Ibrahim 22). He could have denounced the Catholic church or religion in general very easily through *Eloisa to Abelard*, and yet he still maintains that the church is an important part of many people's lives. It is clear that Pope still feels a great connection to religion, despite his critiques. However, this respect is not without the same edge of satirical bitterness that surfaces in a great number of Pope's addresses to other adversaries in his life.

It is no surprise that Pope has no qualms about responding to various criticisms of him, especially in a scathing manner. He is very well known for reflecting criticisms of himself back

on the presenter, or simply using his rhetoric and satirical language to tear down those that he thinks less talented or intelligent than himself. The grandest form of mockery that Pope ever delivered to his rivals is the creation of *The Dunciad*, one of his most famous works. The text details a world in which the queen Dulness passes on her throne to the hero Bays, who is a stand in for Colley Cibber. Cibber was the poet laureate at the time, and in the later expanded and reissued copy of *The Dunciad*, he bears more solely the brunt of Pope's criticism. Pope's bitterness at Cibber's acquisition of this role instead of himself is extremely evident in how he describes Bays and the impact he has on the world of literature. In describing Bays's writing, Pope makes the creative process for the chosen poet extremely chaotic and desperate:

> Swearing and supperless the hero sate,
> Blasphemed his gods, the dice, and damned his fate;
> Then gnawed his pen, then dashed it on the ground,
> Sinking from thought to thought, a vast profound!
> Plunged for his sense, but found no bottom there,
> Yet wrote and floundered on in mere despair. (1.115-120)

Bays sounds as if he is quite literally drowning in his work, because there is a great deal of water imagery in this passage. Words such as "sinking," "floundered," and "Plunged…but found no bottom," show the desperate struggle of the writer simply to keep his head above the metaphorical surface and finish his work. Pope was very vocal about his disrespect of Cibber and his unflattering thoughts on the poet laureate's intelligence, so it is only fitting that Cibber's stand-in character in *The Dunciad* has a very cluttered creating process. The disarray of Bays's movements implies a lack of inspiration and purpose for his writing, turning the author into a desperate scrambling mess who is only focused on finishing his work rather than ensuring its quality.

Pope does not describe this mentality as a beneficial one, as Bays even tries to burn his literary works before the queen puts out the fire and holds him to his position (1.260). Here, Pope creates a limited-omniscient narrative in which both he and his audience know the true thoughts and regrets of Bays, and by extension, Cibber, implying that both the real figure and the character is subconsciously aware of his own idiocy. As the world falls to ruin and divine forces crumble under the rule of the character Bays, Pope uses the events of his text as an analogy for what would happen to the world in the hands of Cibber, in the leadership role of poet laureate. Stupidity and "dunces" are celebrated in the second book of *The Dunciad* through an account of a bizarre form of Olympic games, one of which being a urination contest (2.161-162). Within the crude imagery, Pope describes merriment and celebrations of the highest order under the crown of Bays and his muse Queen Dulness. Through the crude details of these events, Pope indirectly points back to his analogy for Cibber in a judgment of Cibber's taste in humour and merriment. Since this is what Bays and Cibber deem high entertainment, they are looked down upon by Pope, who attempts to impress this disdain on his readers. The slew of insults Pope throws indirectly at Cibber is not simply limited to just idiotic humans and the questioning of taste and intelligence: great mythological figures are twisted and destroyed in the wake of Bays's rule. The third book of *The Dunciad* details an event of great importance and devastation that consumes and dismantles great mortal and divine literary influences: "See graceless Venus to a virgin turned, / Or Phidias broken, and Apelles burned!" (3.111-112) are just several of the many examples. Venus being the goddess of love and the muse for many artists, betrays her divine purpose by being turned into a virgin. Phidias and Apelles embody their works of art and sculpture, respectively, and are subsequently broken and burned. Even Rome, the source of old literature and inspiration for many European authors and artists of the eighteenth century, fights against heathens and is a

"proud mistress now no more" (3.101). The speaker describes everything as grim and bleak in this section, a clear diversion from many other poetic works of Pope. It shows the shattering of the great artists and divine inspiration of the past, something highly prized by Pope and other writers of his time period who identified as Ancients. Cibber was a Modern, opposing the Ancients, which contributes to Pope's disdain towards him. As this world crumbles around the newly appointed Bays, Pope makes it clear that Bays is not only impacting his immediate surroundings, but also destroying the greatest sources of art and creation.

Many authors use their works as a means to an end, and, although Pope is not an exception to this, he achieves this goal with a method fueled by spite. Through various literary devices, Pope overturns the judgements and criticisms on his personal life and poetry alike, reflecting the respective critiques on those involved. By comparing Cibber to a mock hero who plunges the world into darkness, Pope not only tears down Cibber's status through *The Dunciad*, he positions the poet laureate as both a threat and a rival. When Pope criticizes the stifling atmosphere of the church in *Eloisa to Abelard*, he takes care to highlight the similarities to prison and the irony in those who preach love through entrapment, yet still solidifies the church and religion as a force to be reckoned with. His mockery of his own form places his sensitivities out of reach where others cannot offend him as deeply as he criticizes himself, acknowledging the power that other people's opinions have over him. Although Pope does a brilliant job of biting back at those who have posed a threat to him, his attempt to distance himself from them through his criticisms only proves how much their competition and discrimination have had an impact on him and how much his dignity and self-worth has truly been damaged.

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