What Ever Happened to… Alexander Pope

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What ever happened to Alexander Pope? He was a popular English poet in the eighteenth century. But what makes him significant, beyond his poetry? He was very influential, being quite a celebrity of his time, and the first English man to make a living as a poet (Ault 11). Even today, he is widely quoted by many different disciplines, such as Education and Psychology, the most recognizable being "to err is human" (Pope, *Essay on Criticism*, l. 525) to help people rationalize errors or failures, as well as many other famous lines even I was surprised to learn were his. He was a very interactive writer who argued with critics and created alternative personas to further interaction (Rogers, Introduction, xvii). But like all celebrities, he was not to stay in the limelight forever, and for a large period of English history this prolific poet was largely ignored. There are a number of reasons for his diminishing popularity, such as disinterest by the following generation, being criticized outside of his cultural context, and simply not being able to produce more work after he had passed. The very traits that made him popular, such as his skill with heroic couplets, aided in the diminished interest in his work. Despite being a success in his life, there was a decline in his popularity after his death, requiring a revival of his work in the late nineteenth century with the rise of Modernism (Lawlor).

Pope suffered much adversity, and yet, he rose to popularity. He was a self-proclaimed Catholic, which was one of many disadvantages he faced, as Catholics had many civil disadvantages (Mack 336). Despite the way Catholics were excluded from society in London, Pope still rose to be one of the greatest of his generation. Pope was disabled: trampled by a cow when he was young (Deutsch 1), and suffering from tuberculosis of the spine (later known as "Pott's

Disease") in his early teen years, (Mack 153). Professor Pat Rogers, who specializes in eight-eenth century literature, describes Pope as "hunchback" and suffering from a number of other ailments, including asthma and chronic migraines, and he required assistance with even simple tasks such as dressing (Rogers, Introduction, xiii). This plagued him throughout his life and had a visible impact on his body. Because of limitations arising from his physical and social condition, relying on his own resources, Pope found alternative forms of education (xiii). Yet, despite a popular belief that what was on the outside reflected what was on the inside, he was quite popu-lar in his time. He was the first English poet to make a living solely from his poetic works (Ault 11). He even had a subscription service similar to today's by which customers would sign up for advanced copies of his work and other such benefits (Mack 266). He was a celebrity; people wanted to know what he was like and what he looked like (Mack *passim*). Pope's life was very much like an eighteenth-century version of the television show *Entertainment Tonight*. As there were no movies in the eighteenth century, artists, writers, poets, and, of course, Lords, Ladies, and Royalty were the stars in the spotlight—or rather, candlelight. Overcoming much adversity, Pope shone in that spotlight, and he knew how to keep it shining on him. He was an inspiration; he was still able to attain upper-middle class status despite being rejected from society, having no formal education, and suffering from disability.

Pope was very interactive with his audience and critics. He would frequently write real people into his poetry. Pope would also talk directly to readers in his poem, instilling values, such as a poet's duty to better society (Mack 331). This gave readers something to engage with beyond poetry: there was depth, lessons in morality and reason, and, very importantly, humour (through satire). Pope was very particular about the persona he put forth to the public; he wanted to be the one in control of his own image, not let his image be formed by his critics (Rudy 19).

There are well-documented cases of written attacks upon Pope; however, Pope rewrites the metaphor used in these attacks, taking it for himself, and "fashioning a crown of heroism out of the cruelest of attacks" (Deutsch viii). Even amidst attacks from his critics, Pope seemed very in control of the image he put out for himself, beyond the physical. From his critics, he drew strength. In some cases, he would include them in his work, which was not with praise. This public, and often published, battlefield is how Pope dealt with his critics, which would only have fed his popularity. People capable of criticizing him included Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Lord Hervey, who criticized him in verse form, only to have Pope turn that criticism back on them ("Alexander Pope" 37:52). In the eighteenth century, this would be very exciting: the great minds of the time engaging in a battle of wits for all to see.

Pope's ability to create drama outside of his poetry would have aided him in remaining in the public eye, by remaining relevant. Like many modern-day celebrities are guilty of, he was the eighteenth-century internet troll: for example, by doing such things as writing something he did not think was true in order to get an emotional response from someone. One such example of this is his work as Martinus Scriblerus, a pseudonym for him and other prolific writers at the time, which includes an "ironic course of instruction in achieving literary depths." These were actually satirical pieces, mocking what the Scriblerians considered bad poetry (Rogers, Introduction, xvii). If someone does not realize something is satire (which can be quite difficult in text format), they may take this seriously, when in fact it serves as a guide to poor thinking and writing poor verse. Trolling is a "deliberate attempt by an individual to create conflict and distress by communicating inflammatory, provocative, and menacing comments to their victim" (March & Marrington 192). Even if something is not what the troll truly believes, they will use it to aggravate others. In works such as *Peri Bathous* and *The Dunciad,* Pope has Martin Scriblerus praise what

Pope and the other Scriberians thought of as bad poetry, in an attempt to discredit their own critics (Rogers, Introduction, xvii). There are a number of current celebrities who engage in trolling behaviour; however, if I were to name them, they might troll me! I imagine Pope would engage in a similar activity if he were alive today because of his use of Martinous Scriblerus. To me, this is synonymous with creating another social media account, known as a burner account, to critique or engage in arguments in the public eye in order to increase your own popularity and sales. Unbeknownst to society at the time, Pope used such tactics as false personas (Rogers, Introduction, xvii), and other underhanded tactics to increase his overall popularity. He would often publish things under false names to trick critics into admitting they liked his work, and fake letters, even those from friends (Rudy 18), causing a stir of drama, overall increasing his popularity. Just like an internet troll, Pope enjoyed feeding off the attention. Pope was acting in this troll-like fashion in the eighteenth century, and it is possible that it had the same popularity-increasing effect that it does today. With such interest from the public eye when he was alive, people would have been very interested to see how Pope defended himself against such attacks and purchased his publications. After his death, his popularity declined. This is to be expected, since he was no longer active in the public eye. No activity from Pope allowed for new art and gossip to emerge. He was also no longer around to troll his critics. These feuds between author and critic could no longer be fueled on both sides because he had passed away, removing the anticipation of seeing each other's responses. Without his active participation, his self-promotion (even though Warburton tried to prolong it after Pope's death), it is understandable why his popularity declined.

Alexander Pope was always under scrutiny. He was criticized for his political alignment, his religion, even the low level of passion he exhibited in his pieces. This was because Pope liked to walk a neutral path, and in doing so, he was often accused of being something he was

not; because he rode the middle path, it is to be expected that each side would take issue with his stances, either in his poetry or his politics (Mack 83). The Romantics criticized him for not being passionate or reasonable enough (Lawlor 5). He was quite passionate, but not in the same way as the Romantics (5). A Romantic period critic known as Warton took issue with Pope's ideals because they reflected the self in "reconstituting the myths in which they exist" (Rogers, *Pope and Destiny*, 182). Warton's ideology was based on having a mind free from the embedded culture, and find "pure subjectivity," and it was this clashing of style of thought that lies at the heart of the repudiation of Pope (182).

Ultimately, after his death was when his work was mostly criticized and rejected. The generation following Pope's had different values than Pope's with the rise of Romanticism. They believed in order for poetry to be considered great, the poet had to be kept out of the work (Aldridge 414). This is known as Romantic subjectivism (414). Most, if not all, of Pope's work incorporated aspects of himself, so Romantic subjectivism may have served as Pope's greatest downfall because you cannot separate the poet from the poem in his case. The Romantics also rejected Pope's work because it seemed to lack passion (Lawlor 5). It seems odd today because Pope's poems are full of passion and reason; however, that was not how the Romantics viewed him. The Romantics had also searched for cultural identification, settling on the ballad style and form rather than the heroic couplet form favoured by Pope. I find this ironic because Pope's couplet form is a beautiful example of a cultural style of poetry, but it was rejected.

It is beneficial to understand the socio-political activities during his time because Pope's work has many mentions of political figures such as Queen Anne, and the characters of *The Rape of the Lock* were based on real people with status. He also wrote many Epistles directed explic-

itly (or implicitly) to others, and his poem "Eloisa to Abelard" was based on a true story. However, as time passed and the people Pope had written about were no longer involved in current events, the knowledge of them became less significant. Simply put, people "wouldn't want to bring up a dead politician to read something your parents read" ("Alexander Pope" 36:07). To the newer generation, Pope was no longer culturally significant. His work may have seemed old and stale, and not quite a classic to them. Once again using a contemporary analogy, this is similar to how some people from younger generations disliking music from older generations. It could be for many reasons, e.g. it is simply overplayed or has embarrassing memories or, simply put, *sounds* old. Every generation has their sound, and Pope was not part of theirs. And so, Alexander Pope diminished in popularity.

It was not until the nineteenth century that a revival of Pope's work emerged. Literary historians began to re-evaluate artists, including Alexander Pope, with a *New History Approach,* taking into account the social events and culture that Pope's work was embedded in (Mack 186). Prior to this, critics had used their own cultural or temporal values to assess the quality of Pope's work. For example, the aforementioned belief that the poet should be kept out of poetry, so the poem be unaffected by their biographies (Aldridge 414). During that time, Pope would have been considered a bad poet because he did include himself within his poetry, and his biography is almost required to understand him in his complexity. For example, in the last verse paragraph in "Eloisa to Abelard" he inserts himself into the poem, calling attention to the "bard" who is telling their story some centuries later, which is referring to himself (l. 359). This analysis largely ignores his talent, his popularity at the time, and his overall influence by focusing solely on what values are important during the time of this evaluation. This is called a traditional historical approach, which occurs when critics apply their values to events from the past (Bazregarzadeh

130). Working backwards through time, 20/20 vision occurs from knowing significant historical events. This approach ignores much of the context the events have occurred within to focus on the events themselves, and not just events occurring by chance. Literature requires understanding the context in which something was written; in recent decades, the historical approach has been revived after another period of rejecting the author's biography in Structuralism and Poststructuralism, in New Historicist criticism. By using a new history approach, we can construct historical events in the context they occurred. We build from the ground up with our knowledge, looking from past to present. Pope was very much a social commentator, so we need to understand what was happening in the era he was writing in. We need to know his biography, his life, and his struggles. We cannot just value his work with a present-day lens and discard something from history because it does not fit in with our values. How many other great artists have we lost to imposing our values onto them and discarding them because they do not fit? This act is not wrong in itself, but we are losing out by it. Pope believed we will never have great poetry unless we believe that poetry serves great ends (Mack 331). As time progresses and values change, what we consider valuable to society also changes, and therefore some poetry may not be considered great anymore, but that does not mean it never was or that the ends it served no longer have value to us.

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