

Pope's Weapon of Choice: The Importance of Print in the Creation of the *Dunciad*

Abstract:

In the highly charged atmosphere of early to mid 18th century literary production, Alexander Pope waged a war of words against a group of writers he scathingly termed dunces. The *Duncaid*, the poem that cataloged the dunces' offenses and failures, was a self-consciously printed text. By contextualizing the feud between Pope and his dunces and by exploring the print construction of the poem in its four primary editions, this paper argues that print mattered to Pope. He used the functions of print, its public nature and wide distribution, its ordering systems for content, and its ability to be manipulated and self-referential, as a weapon in his ongoing battle with the dunces, a weapon as integral and important to his argument as the words and images he used to construct the poem itself.

On Thursday, December 3, 1730 when Colley Cibber kissed the hand of his King and became Poet Laureate, it is doubtful that one of the thoughts racing through his mind was that fourteen years later he would be immortalized as the King of Dunces in Alexander Pope's the *Dunciad*. After all, that honor had been firmly laid at the feet of Lewis Theobald and had remained there for close to twenty years regardless of the antipathy between Cibber and Pope. But Pope was not done with the *Dunciad*, or as it turns out, with Cibber. The well-connected playwright was doomed to live forever, not as a respected writer or even Poet Laureate, but as the object of scathing mockery and a symbol of all that was wrong with English letters. Pope achieved this immortality for his fellow poet by casting him as the "hero" of his mock epic, the 1743 edition of the *Dunciad*, a poem that had a near twenty-year history as a weapon and expressed Pope's keen understanding of the social and physical nature of printed texts.

To understand Pope's use of the *Dunciad*, as both a weapon and a printed text, it is useful to consider the literary culture in which he was mired. Pope's first works, such as the *Pastorals*

(printed in 1709) were written in manuscript, circulated in manuscript, and were revised based on the input of his correspondents over the course of several years. Pope, like his contemporaries, wrote letters, included poems in those letters, and engaged in a literary conversation in letter form. Yet, he also lived in an age where print was becoming increasingly important and at a time when income and prestige were transitioning from a system of patronage to a system of payment. Many of Pope's works were sold by subscription, and thus his reputation and public importance were critical to his income.

He also lived in an age where the ascension of the author, as cultural authority, was possible. Pope manifestly wanted such a role. He wanted to establish himself as one of the, if not the, literary elite of his age. He could do this because printed texts had become so ubiquitous that a writer could indeed be crowned a literary star and judge. Pope's age was a hothouse of print. Publishers and booksellers fought to feed the constant demand of the public, Grub Street writers worked for a pittance to offer "education and political debate, ... scandal and sensation" (Uglow, 11). Genres, plays, poetry, and novels were exploding (*Robinson Crusoe* was published in 1719, *Pamela* in 1740), and forms were merging. Newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets could be written and published within the space of days. Pope, the Catholic son of a merchant, a man who suffered a debilitating bout of tuberculosis and became crippled, moved in an elite literary circle. Jonathan Swift and John Gay were close friends, as were John Arbuthnot and Thomas Parnell. At one time he counted Joseph Addison and Richard Steele among his circle before politics and pettiness overtook the friendship. He knew, or directly worked with, many of the authors of the age and did so in what was frequently a state of antagonism and competition.

While the *Dunciad* is often characterized as an attack on a particular type of literary production, and the ruin and decay that type of writing will bring to the world, it exists as well as a metatext; a work as important for its reflection on itself, its textual apparatus, and social use, as it is a work of literature. Pope published versions of the *Dunciad* four times, in 1728, 1729, 1742, and 1743. The first printing consisted of three books and was 920 lines in total. The ‘hero’ was Lewis Theobald, a poet who had previously criticized Pope upon the publication of Pope’s Shakespeare. The 1728 *Dunciad* set up Pope’s wide-ranging reflection on the writers of his age and the uses of print. It was the product of many years of thinking and working on the topic of dullness and literary sloppiness. In 1713 the Scriblerus Club, whose members included Swift, Gay, and Parnell, was established with the express purpose of “exposing contemporary folly and dullness” (Meulen, 11). The club members created a fictional character, Martinus Scriblerus, whom they used as a focus for the attacks against the culture of the period. Pope would come to use Scriblerus as a reference in the *Dunciad* in support of his own reputation and in castigation of his critics.

Critics were something Pope did not lack. Ironically, the *Dunciad* was not shaped only by the reactions of Pope and his contemporaries to the newly born excesses of hack writers and insidious publishers, but also the contemporary reaction, in print, to Pope. From almost the start of his writing career, Pope had been criticized fairly harshly and frequently. The attacks were markedly personal, including remarks on his religion and physical deformity (Meulen, 12-13). As the newly powerful print world established itself, Pope found himself not just a critic of the culture, but a subject of the criticisms of that culture. The textual conditions now controlling Pope’s world – the relative ease of printing and the commonplace nature of newspapers and

pamphlets – were also shaping Pope’s reputation, a reputation that he held dear. The instruments of a public and active press damaged that reputation repeatedly. Three examples critical for the *Dunciad* illustrate this point and show how vicious the engagement between authors could become.

The first involves Lewis Theobald; the man Pope would crown King of Dunces in 1728. Theobald was a writer of some reputation and often in conflict with Pope. Six years before the publication of the *Dunciad*, they had engaged in a tug of war over who would assemble the works of the first Duke of Buckingham and write a biography of his life. Theobald, along with Edmund Curll, the publisher of the work Theobald was to edit, lost that battle. Pope, with the support of the Duchess of Buckingham, gained clear rights to the publication (Mack, 430). Four years later, Theobald enacted a stinging revenge. In 1725, Pope edited a collection of Shakespeare’s plays for a subscription edition published by Jacob Tonson, an important publisher of the day. While it had many good points, it was also sufficiently lacking in critical rigor that Theobald, clearly the more knowledgeable expert, published a volume entitled *Shakespeare Restored* one year later. It was a well done variorum but also, “a clear-cut act of war” (Mack, 431). Theobald titled his work “SHAKESPEARE restored: Or, A SPECIMEN of the Many ERRORS, As Well *Committed*, as *Unamended*, by Mr. POPE In his Late EDITION of this POET. DESIGNED Not only to correct the said EDITION, but to restore the True READING of SHAKESPEARE in all the *Editions* ever yet publish’d” (Mack, 427). Theobald went on to slyly attack Pope at every turn, pointing out all his errors and casting aspersions on Pope’s lack of critical care (Mack, 426-433). Adding insult to injury, Theobald published his own collection of Shakespeare’s plays with Pope’s publisher in 1733 (MacKenzie).

The second example involves Edmund Curll more directly. Curll, an unscrupulous bookseller and publisher, was particularly problematic to Pope. He published both pornography and religious tracts. He “stole” materials and printed them himself. Of particular offense was that he published Swift without his permission and also produced unauthorized keys to Swift’s work. In 1716, Curll published a poem by Pope against his wishes for which Pope designed a fiendish revenge. He poisoned Curll with an emetic and then quickly published a “history” about the incident, mocking and vilifying Curll. After this, their battle was engaged. Curll published more work by Pope against his wishes, including a collection of “youthful unbuttoned” letters Pope wrote to Henry Cromwell (Mack, 511) and an indecent version of the First Psalm. Curll also announced that he would be the publisher of all future works by Pope, thereby aligning Pope’s work and reputation with his own (MacKenzie).

Finally, Colley Cibber tangled with Pope in 1717 when he briefly appeared in the play by Pope, Gay, and Arbuthnot entitled *Three Hours after Marriage*. The character Cibber played was written to be a caricature of Cibber himself. Once Cibber caught on, he enacted his revenge by staging his own play and including a burlesque version of parts of *Three Hours after Marriage*. Pope was irate, and after castigating Cibber backstage, sent Gay to beat him up. The altercation was so violent the police were called (Salmon). Pope and Cibber engaged in open warfare from this point on, and the two took swipes at each other in plays, poems, and printed letters.

Clearly Pope used the *Dunciad* as a weapon. It is no coincidence that writers contemporary with Pope and historians of his legacy all describe the exchanges between Pope and his dunces in

military terms. This was a war. There were allies (Swift) and enemies (Curll, Theobald, and Cibber) and weapons (pamphlets, newspapers, essays, books, acquired manuscripts, created texts and stories). The writers Pope excoriated in his poem (and their allies) launched printed attacks of their own in what amounted to a textual war of words and forms. Joseph Guerinot, in *Pamphlet Attacks on Alexander Pope*, lists over forty different published reproofs of Pope from 1727 to 1730 (Meulen, xii). It became so heated when the 1728 *Dunciad* was published that Pope took to walking with both a gun and a dog. In an almost direct reversal of his poisoning of Curll, Pope was forced to refute publicly a story that he was attacked and beaten to the extent that he voided large amounts of blood and gall. (Mack, 489-90).

Pope fought his battles, not only thorough his acid satire, but via the textual apparatus of the *Dunciad* itself. The 1728 version is densely packed with a textual critique of his enemies. It was published as a pamphlet, one of the least expensive and most common forms of publication. By making this choice, Pope launched his assault directly onto the playing field his enemies occupied. He published it anonymously. This was in keeping with the current literary climate, where attacks were issued via anonymous writings. As Pope's "publisher" put it in the introductory letter to the reader, addressing the tendency to write anonymous critiques, "every week for these two Months past, the town has been persecuted with Pamphlets, Advertisements, Letters, and weekly Essays, not only against the wit and Writings, but against the Character and Person, of Mr. Pope" (Meulen, iv). The anonymous publication of the *Dunciad* turned the tables on Pope's critics, dishing out to them the same veiled attack.

The poem also served as a layered commentary on literary production. The imprint information reads, “DUBLIN, Printed, LONDON Re-printed for A. Dodd. 1728” (Meulen, title page).

Michael Treadwell contends that Pope appropriated A. Dodd as his printer, using her name without her consent. Anne Dodd ran a well known pamphlet shop and her name appeared on hundreds of publications (Treadwell). Pope’s appropriation of her name was a sly wink at the state of publishing and the over abundance of printed material. After all, what was one more pamphlet in her vast inventory?

Pope went on to use Dodd as the “author” of “The PUBLISHER TO THE READER” letter that he inserted before the poem. In this letter Pope decries the unfairness of the attacks against him, praises himself, sets up the next edition of the poem, and slyly plays a game of spot the author, all in the guise of Dodd. The letter illustrates Pope’s manipulation of text. His fake letter, dressed up in the clothes of a hack printer, is a textual *trompe l'oeil*. It looks real but instead it is a metatext. It comments upon itself and its apparatus all the while commenting upon the literary climate. Pope began his letter to the reader with a testy complaint, “It will be found a true observation, tho’ somewhat surprising, that when any scandal is vented against a man of the highest distinction and character either in the State or in Literature, the publick in general afford it a most quiet reception, and the larger part accept it as favorably as if it were some kindness done to themselves: Whereas if a known scoundrel or blockhead chance to be but touch’d upon, a whole legion is up in Arms, and it becomes the common Cause of all Scriblers, Booksellers, and Printers whatsoever” (Meulen, iv).

Having surveyed the unfair ground in which his pamphlet entered the fray, he goes on to decry his lack of supporters, “And that of all those men who have received pleasure from his Writings (which by modest computation may be about a hundred thousand in these Kingdoms of England and Ireland, not to mention Jersey, Guernsey, the Orcades, those in the New world, and Foreigners who have translated him into their languages) of all this number, not a man hath stood up to say one word in his defense” (Meulen, iv).

Then he makes the turn, furthering his *trompe l'oeil* and commenting upon the existence of the text, the appropriation of texts without authorization, the urgency of its publication, and, with what could only have been great glee, speculating on its authorship: “How I became possess of it, is of no concern to the Reader; but it would have been a wrong to him, had I detain’d this publication; since those Names which are its chief ornaments, die off daily so fast, as must render it too soon unintelligible. If it provoke the Author to give us a more perfect edition, I have my end. Who he is, I cannot say, and (which is great pity) there is certainly nothing in his style and manner of writing, which can distinguish, or discover him. For if it bears any resemblance to that of Mr. P. ‘tis not improbable but it might be done on purpose, with a view to have it pass for his. But the frequency of his allusion to Virgil, and a labour’d, (not to say affected, shortness, in imitation of him, I should think him more an admirer of the Roman Poet than of the Grecian, and in that, not of the same taste with his Friend” (Meulen, v).

Pope also included footnotes in the poem, and while there are less than twenty such notes, many of them are extensions of the *trompe l'oeil*. For example, Pope, who controls the entire text, pretends that Dodd is explicating the text in line 98 of the first book, explaining to the reader the

reference to Tibbald, “This, I presume, alludes to the extravagancies of the Farces of this author. See book III. vers. 170, etc” (Meulen, 6). The metatextual *trompe l’oeil* here is clear; Pope is annotating his own work to extend the insult to Theobald in the guise of a pamphlet printer and in aid of a fictitious reader.

Clearly Pope had an understanding of the materiality of his work and how it intersected with other texts. By creating the initial 1728 version that, on the face of it, was presented as an unauthorized edition – no author attribution, small, slipshod printing as a pamphlet, and a note from the publisher hinting at the need for an authorized version – Pope set up the 1729 edition to be the grander copy (Mack, 458). Pope was playing the system, exploiting not only the textual tools of his time, but also the literary community. By issuing the 1728 edition, he primed the pump for the 1729 version and ensured that his name was on the lips of everyone who mattered.

It worked. Neither the text of the *Dunciad* nor its textual apparatus was something the dunces took lightly. In the period between the 1728 publication and the 1729 Variorum edition many print counter attacks were launched. Of particular note was *A Compleat KEY TO THE DUNCIAD* by Edmund Curll. Curll’s text was a direct response to Pope’s. He credits A. Dodd as his distributor and begins his work with a “letter” as well. Curll’s letter, while addressed “To the Public,” is actually addressing Pope. Curll names Pope as both the author of the *Dunciad* and its fake introductory letter. Turning Pope’s text and apparatus against him, Curll begins, “I BELIEVE it may with great Modesty be affirmed, that, the Publisher of the DUNCIAD pays Mr. Pope, but an awkward Compliment in saying, that of all those Men who have received Pleasure from his Writings (which he as Numberer calculates to the Amount of about a hundred

Thousand) of all this Number, says he, not a Man hath stood up in his DEFENCE. i.e. Because they could not. With all due Deference to this Publisher, in Masquerade, and to use his own polite Epithets, what Man that lays the least claim either to Honour or Conscience can stand up in the Defense of a Scoundrel, or Blockhead...” (Curll, iii).

The 1729 edition of the poem, the second version Pope created, was not simply a reworking of the poem’s poetic content, but a reworking of the physical manifestation of the poem in textual form. Pope wanted this edition to mock the production values of classical editions in the Eighteenth century so he filled the *Dunciad* with parodies of those texts. It was also printed in a different form. Banished was the pamphlet and in its place came a quarto with pages more than double the size of the 1728 version (Mack, 477). The page count expanded as well. Where the 1728 printing was fifty-nine pages, the 1729 edition ran to one hundred and forty-nine. Pope lengthened the poem by twenty-eight pages and added seventy pages of textual apparatus. The poem itself was expanded through a set of remarks and imitations. The remarks are presented primarily as comments from Martinus Scriblerus, the fictitious pedantic fool Pope helped create with Swift, Gay, and Parnell, but also include comments by other writers of the day, including Curll, Theobald and Dennis. The imitations are nods to classic references.

The remarks work in concert with the poem, expanding the ideas, planting new ones, and sometimes quoting the work of the dunces at length. These additions are a metatextual coup. The textual space they demanded gave Pope more room for comment and enabled the creation of what amounts to a second text in dialogue with his verse. For example, the opening page includes just two lines of the poem but fifty-five lines of commentary. Pope, who we must

remember is creating all of this, pulls off the fiction that both Theobald and Scriblerus have added commentary to the text. Theobald argues about the spelling of the *Dunciad*, insisting that the title lacks an “e.” Scriblerus answers, deciding that the addition of an “e” is correct but commenting that as the manuscript includes none, readers will have to do without the “e” and understand that it was not an error on the part of Scriblerus (Pope, 1729 facsimile, 1). Pope’s pleasure in mixing textual forms literally flows over his pages and, at times, shoulders aside his actual lines, as in line 104, “And all the Mighty Mad in Dennis rage.” The note explaining this line takes three pages to conclude and ranges from a defense of Pope, extensive quotes from Dennis’s work, references to other notes in the text, and references to several other noted publications of the day (Pope, 1729 facsimile, 9-11).

Surrounding the poem is an elaborate structure that mocks the overly decorated and lavish books of the period. Pope wrote to Swift that he planned to fill the *Dunciad* with “all pomp” (Mack, 477), and in it he mocks Theobald for owning De Lyra’s “five vast Folio’s” and the twelve-volume set of the complete works of the Duchess of Newcastle (Mack, 489). While Pope’s 1729 *Dunciad* does not reach five or twelve volumes, its textual apparatus does extend Pope’s metatextual commentary while mocking form and convention. Pope includes eleven items before the poem and eleven items after it. Of particular note in the front matter is the opening advertisement. The note is in direct dialogue with his 1728 letter from the publisher and the attacks that edition elicited, in particular the key published by Curll. The advertisement, again “written” by A. Dod, addresses the key and the use of real names in the text, “. . .the Names being now not only set at length, but justified by the authorities and reasons given. I make no doubt, the Author’s own motive to use real rather than feign’d names, was his care to preserve the

Innocent from any false Applications; whereas in the former editions which had no more than the Initial letters, he was made, by keys printed here, to hurt the inoffensive..." (Pope, 1729 facsimile, 3).

The advertisement also continues the *trompe l'oeil* Pope began in 1728. Pretending, within the pretense of the advertisement itself, that the contents of the book are real, the printer (via Pope) slips in a sly hit against the hack writers who took aim against him: "The Commentary which attends the Poem, was sent me from several hands, and consequently must be unequally written; yet will it have one advantage over most commentaries, that it is not made upon conjectures, or a remote distance of time..." (Pope, 1729 facsimile, 3). The text also is also an internal joke, calling attention to the metatext Pope is undertaking. The commentary is complete conjecture, as it is a fiction, and also of the highest authority, because Pope wrote it. The same pattern of text and textual referent continues throughout the rest of the added apparatus, providing Pope a multi-level textual space to answer his critics, extend his own attacks upon them, and comment on his previous text and that of others.

This same textual play continues in the back matter. Two examples illustrate Pope's engagement with the metatextual possibilities of print. The first is the errata page in which Pope inserts a bitter reference to Theobalds' *Shakespeare Restored*, "THE Errata of this Edition we thought (gentle reader) to have trusted to thy candor and benignity, to correct with thy pen, as accidental Faults escaped the press: But feeling that certain Censors do give to such the name of *Corruptions of the Text* and *false Readings*, charge them on the Editor, and judge that correcting the same is to be called *Restoring*, and an *Achievement that brings Honour to the Critic*; we have

in like manner taken it upon ourselves” (Pope, 1729 facsimile, 81). The second example of Pope’s understanding of the manipulations of print, and its self-referential nature, is the re-print of his original 1728 “PUBLISHER to the READER” letter. Pope updates the letter with footnotes that point out his critics stupidity: “(c) *About a hundred thousand*] It is surprising with what stupidity this Preface, which is almost a continued Irony, was taken by these Authors. This passage among others they understood to be serious: (d) *The Author of the following Poem, etc.*] A very plain Irony, speaking of Mr. *Pope* himself. (f) *This is certainly nothing in his Style, etc.*] This Irony had small effect in concealing the Author. The *Dunciad*, imperfect as it was, had not been publish’d two days, but the whole Town gave it to Mr. *Pope*” (Pope, 1729 facsimile, 88). The annotation of the letter also illustrates Pope’s focus on the retrospective intertextual play of his work, which would continue in all the editions of the *Dunciad* that followed.

Indeed, Pope continued refining the text of the *Dunciad* and its textual apparatus in both the 1742 and 1743 editions. He also added to his metatext, illustrating that he was exquisitely conscious of the nature of print and its particular manipulations. In the 1743 edition, the most complete version of the *Dunciad* Pope oversaw, the continued focus on the text’s relation to itself and its predecessors is clear. In the 1743 version of the mock missive by William Cleland, entitled “A LETTER to the PUBLISHER,” which first appeared in the front matter of the 1729 variorum, Pope inserts a new footnote and edits another. The new note supports Cleland and crafts for him a favorable biography, “He was a person of Universal Learning, and an enlarged Conversation; no man had a warmer heart for his Friend, or a sincerer attachment to the Constitution of his Country” (Rumbold, 39). The edited footnote adds more accolades to Pope’s career, updating the list of translators of the “most eminent rank and abilities in their respective

nations” who have deemed him worthy of attention: “Essay on Man, by the Abbé Reynel, in verse, by Monsieur Silhouet, in prose, 1737. And since by others in French, Italian, and Latin” (Rumbold, 37).

Pope continues in this vein, updating the 1743 edition in various ways. He adds several authors to the TESTIMOY OF AUTHORS, particularly those of Mr. MALLEY, Mr. HAMMOND, and Mr. THOMSON (Rumbold, 58). He deletes entirely the errata by Scriblerus as well as several other of his 1729 inventions. He repositions the indices to the end of the text, rather than keep them in the oddly interleaved position of the variorum. He creates new textual elements such as the commentary on the POET LAUREATE and a 1730 ADVERTISEMENT. Referencing his transparent slight of hand in 1728, when he slyly suggested via textual clues that perhaps Swift had been the author of the first *Dunciad*, he suggest that the 1743 had been “found” in 1742 (Rumbold, 21). He inserts a mock coat of arms into the edition, featuring a grinning lion with a human face. This was printed over the words “By AUTHORITY” and was followed by a mock invocation, shooing Theobald out of the text and ushering in Cibber: “By virtue of the Authority in Us vested by the Act for subjecting Poets to the power of a Licenser, we have revised this Piece; where finding the style and appellation of KING to have been given to a certain Pretender, Pseudo-Poet, or Phantom, of the name of TIBBALD; and apprehending the same may be deemed in some sort a Reflection on Majesty, or at least an insult on that Legal Authority which has bestowed on another person the Crown of Posey: We have ordered the said Pretender, Pseudo-Poet, or Phantom, utterly to vanish and evaporate out of this work: And do declare the said Throne of Posey from henceforth to be abdicated and vacant, unless duly and lawfully supplied by the LAUREATE himself. And it is hereby enacted, that no other person do presume to fill the

same” (Rumbold, 27-28). This trompe l'oeil is perhaps Pope’s most expressive and illustrative; what began in 1728 with a mock letter from an appropriated publisher has advanced to a graphical invocation of peerage, a claiming of literary power, and an adroit exhibition of his deft manipulation of text.

Over the long life of the *Duncaid’s* various editions it is clear that Pope continued to play with the idea of the metatext of his text. He adjusted its pieces and language, added elements to respond to the changing literary scene, and kept his work in dialogue with itself and that of other authors. His *Duncaids* create a reading experience that is hyper-aware of the nature of reading and of texts themselves. All of this, of course, would have been impossible to pull off if Pope had kept the *Dunciad* as a manuscript, sent to Swift and others, as a semi-private joke on the dunces of the age. Pope needed the *Dunciad* in wide circulation to make his point. He needed the poem to have the same currency as the production of the dunces, a printed text easily accessed by all he wanted to court and offend. Ironically, Pope would not have become what he is today, counted as one of the greatest poets in the canon, or what he was then, a literary figure of significance and power, had he not lived in an age of expanding print. It was the explosion of demand, the ready nature of the pamphlet and its ability to elevate authors who, in Pope’s view, had no standing to be elevated that created the culture in which Pope could create his satire. Print mattered to Pope. None of Pope’s aims could have been as well fulfilled or argued in manuscript form. He needed the public nature of print, its easy access and distribution, its weight and significance, and its ability to be revised and manipulated. Letters, sent from one person to the next, would not suffice. Manuscripts were not public enough, not bold enough weapons for the

arguments Pope put forth. He needed a siege machine in his battle against the culture of the dunces. In the end, even as the tools of print fueled his concerns, they fueled his fight.

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