A PREFACE TO

POPE

Ian Gordon

SECOND EDITION

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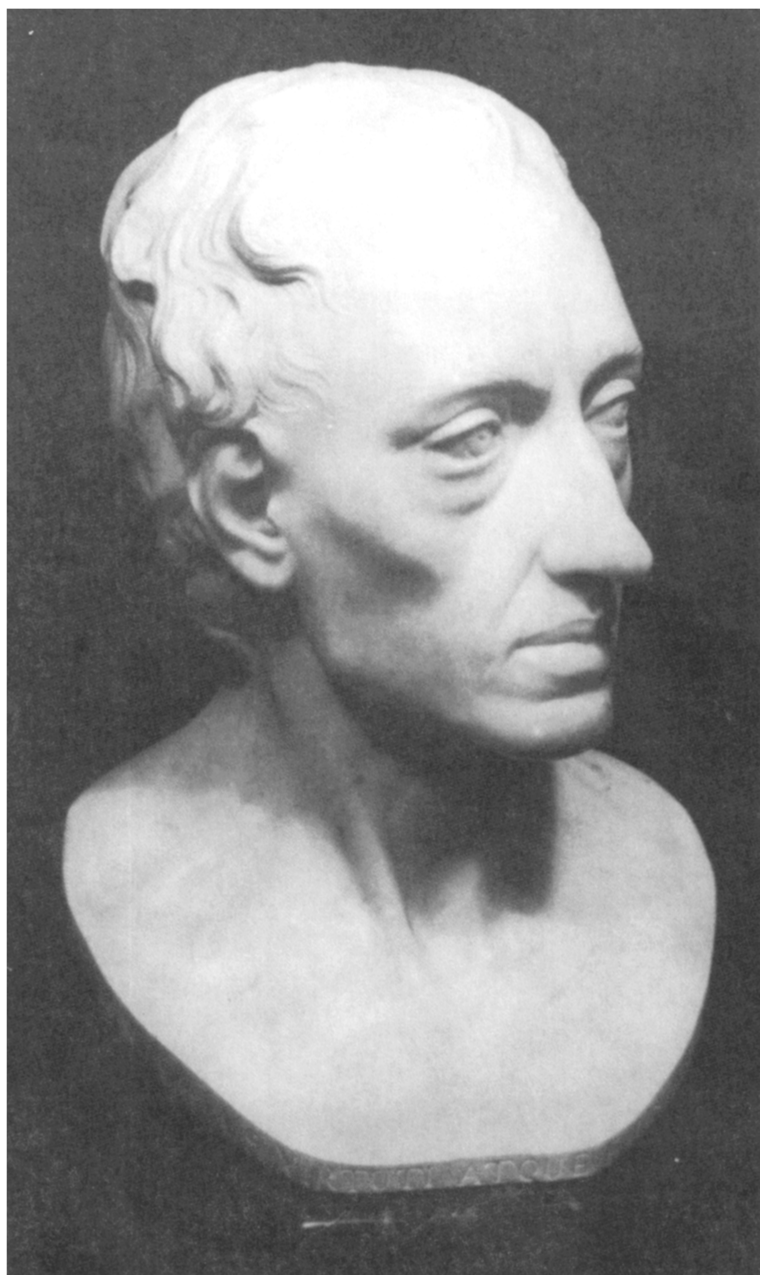

Marble bust of Alexander Pope, 1740, by Louis François Roubiliac

A Preface to Pope

Second Edition

I.R.F. Gordon

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Contents

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS VII
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS VIII
FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION IX
INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION XI

PART ONE: THE POET IN HIS SETTING

Chronological table 2

1 ALEXANDER POPE, THE MAN AND HIS LIFE 7
Early life and education, 1688–1708 8
The experimenting poet, 1709–1717 12
Translator and editor, 1718–1725 17
The Scriblerian fruition, 1726–1733 19
The English Horace, 1733–1744 23
Epitaph 29

2 THE URBAN AND RURAL SETTING 33
The City of London and the moneyed men 34
The City of Westminster and the Court 40
Grub Street and the war with the Dunces 48
The country and retirement 57

3 THE KINDRED ARTS 65
Architecture 66
Landscape gardening 71
Painting 78
Sculpture 86
Music 89

4 AUGUSTAN LITERARY TENETS 95
The kinds 96
Decorum 99
The rules 101
Wit 104
Imitation 109
Satire 112

5 POPE'S BELIEFS 119
Philosophy 120
Religion 126
Politics 130

PART TWO: CRITICAL SURVEY

The closed heroic couplet 141
An Essay on Criticism 145
Windsor-Forest 155
The Rape of the Lock 163
Eloisa to Abelard 174
Epistle to Burlington 181
An Essay on Man 189
An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot 197
Epilogue to the Satires 209
The Dunciad 219

PART THREE: REFERENCE SECTION

Glossary of technical terms used in discussing Pope's poetry 237
Gazetteer of place names in eighteenth-century London relevant to Pope's poetry 244
Short biographies 252
Bibliography 267

GENERAL INDEX 273
INDEX TO POPE'S WORKS 277

List of illustrations

Alexander Pope, 1740. Marble bust by L. F. Roubiliac *frontispiece*
Martha and Teresa Blount, c.1716. Painting by Charles Jervas 17
Alexander Pope, an etching by Jonathan Richardson, senior, for the title page of Pope's *Letters*, 1737 25
A New Plan of the City of London, Westminster and Southwark, c.1720 38-39
The frontispiece to *Pope Alexander's Supremacy and Infallibility Examined*, 1729 50
The Tom-Tit episode. Frontispiece to the third edition of *A Letter from Mr Cibber to Mr Pope* 56
Palladio's Rotonda at Vicenza. Photograph by the author 67
Burlington's Villa at Chiswick. Design by Earl of Burlington 67
The Shell Temple in Pope's garden. Drawing by William Kent 74
Plan of Pope's garden. Re-drawn from Serle's plan of 1745 76
'The Cave of Spleen', illustration for *The Rape of the Lock*, Canto IV. Designed by L. Du Guernier and engraved by C. Du Bosc, 1714 167
Part of the manuscript of *An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* 199
Bedlam, *The Rake's Progress*, Plate VIII, by William Hogarth, 1735 245

The *cover* reproduces an oil portrait of Alexander Pope painted by his friend Charles Jervas. The painting shows the poet in reflective mood with a lady, possibly Martha, 'Patty', Blount replacing a book on a shelf behind him. If it is Martha then her shadowy background position may be intended to suggest that she is the subject of his reverie.

Acknowledgements

My indebtedness to the many colleagues and students at Anglia Polytechnic University who have shared my enthusiasm for Pope's poetry is too extensive to list in full. They have contributed to my appreciation and understanding of Pope, over more than quarter of a century, and it gives me pleasure to warmly acknowledge their help and support. I should also like to thank Mike Salmon, Vice-Chancellor of the University, and Steve Marshall, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Education for granting me a term's study leave to complete this second edition of *A Preface to Pope*.

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D. Baxter (page 25); The British Library (pages 50, 56 and 167); British Museum (page 74); The Syndics of Cambridge University Library (pages 38-9, from John Stow, *A Survey of Cities of London and Wetstminster* Volume I, Book I, London, 1720, p. 1; pages 67 *bottom*, 76; frontispiece from W. K. Wimsatt, *The Portraits of Alexander Pope*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1965, p. 238); J. J. Eyston and the Tate Gallery (page 17); I. R. F. Gordon (page 67 *top*); The Huntington Library, San Marino, California (page 199); The Mansell Collection (page 245).

Foreword to the First Edition

Alexander Pope, unquestionably the leading English poet of the first half of the eighteenth century, was an intriguing and paradoxical character: a man of wrath, full of recrimination and accusation, and at the same time a poet of the virtues of friendship, reasonableness, good sense and social responsibility. Ian Gordon's *Preface* pulls out, one by one, the strands in that artistic and social temperament, and offers a biographical and intellectual portrait of a man, cultivating his famous grotto and garden down by the Twickenham riverside, who remained at the centre of metropolitan culture and wit: a man whom the Whigs reviled and the Tories admired, both to an exorbitant degree.

That other arts than literature should play a large part in a survey such as this will occasion no remark, but the reader unfamiliar with its subject may be surprised by the importance attached in literature between the times of Pope and Jane Austen to landscape gardening. In this pursuit lies the blend of the aesthetic with the practical, an art much lower than architecture but ideally planned together with it in the same perspective. As we discover from pp. 181–8 Pope accused the landlord figure he calls Timon of exceeding all good taste, not least in the size of his operations that 'brings all Brobdignag before your thought'. Yet, on the other hand, he supports the planning projects, also vast, of his friend Burlington:

> Let his plantations stretch from down to down,
> First shade a Country, and then raise a Town.
>
> (*Epistle to Burlington*, 189–90)

He goes further and imagines whole navies, harbours, temples, the entire solid texture of a community. The distinction between these two men is important. What Timon's building lacks is an ideal dimension, an attempt to reduce the wildness of nature to provide the context for a civilized city. Such a vision is at the core of Pope's art as a way of stemming the onrush of dulness, madness, corruption and universal darkness which were his obsessions in the years when he was completing *The Dunciad.* Such an art, replete with social responsibility, provides the modern searcher with a perfect model of a literary art in close touch with the ultimate problems of its day, a relevance, and a justification.

As expressed in his *Essay on Man*, which Dr Gordon analyses in chapter 5, Pope's ideas assumed a more systematic though not original form. He can always produce the epigrammatic statement

and build a series of them into a credible, if encapsulated, species of dogma. To hold an entire poetic structure in our imagination and respond to it adequately, so as to appreciate the overall design, may be for some readers a most demanding activity, especially where the freer forms and more glowing images of romantic poetry still cling to the mind. Yet it is, as Dr Gordon's readers will discover, a poetic vision, much crisper though less emotionally intense, and probably no less exciting when we come across such a couplet as:

> The spider's touch, how exquisitely fine!
> Feels at each thread, and lives along the line;
>
> (*Essay on Man*, I, 217–18)

The poems and passages chosen for the Critical Survey are examined in depth as all Pope's verse should be. A single canto or epistle at a time is as much as the new reader should undertake. Here, informed by the author's experience in teaching Pope's poetry to several types of student, readers are equipped with the ideas and skills desirable to promote their own expanding enjoyment of a major poet.

MAURICE HUSSEY
General Editor
(1975)

Maurice Hussey died suddenly in June 1991. The Publishers and author would like to pay tribute to his wisdom, inspiration and friendship as Editor of Preface Books. He will be sadly missed.

Introduction to the Second Edition

This book, first published in 1976, has been substantially re-written for this new edition. I have taken account of the considerable body of Pope scholarship and criticism that has been published since I first wrote it nearly twenty years ago, in particular of Maynard Mack's masterly life of Pope.[1] In addition I have taken the opportunity to correct errors that have been pointed out to me by reviewers and readers, and to revise and expand sections where my views of what I wrote then have changed. The most substantial additions are to Part Two, where I have included short introductory essays to a selection of Pope's major poems.

In Part One, which places Pope in his own time and attempts to give the reader a sense of the historical, intellectual and cultural climate in which his poetry developed, each chapter has been updated and references have been provided. Chapter 1 is a short biography that pays special attention to those bonds of friendship and duty that shaped Pope's life. Chapter 2 deals with his responses to the city and the country and the ways in which those responses take on allusive and metaphoric significance at the same time as they establish a concrete reality for his poetry. Chapter 3 shows how an understanding of Pope's relationship to the kindred arts of his day enriches our appreciation of his work, while chapter 4 deals with literary criteria and expectations that eighteenth-century readers took for granted but that we in the twentieth century no longer do. Chapter 5 considers the intellectual context of Pope's thought and the way it affected his writing.

Part Two offers brief introductory essays, together with close readings of some key passages, on a selection of Pope's major poems chosen to represent the range of his achievement and the development of his art. Part Three is a reference section intended as a tool to help those readers who may feel discouraged by the frequent naming of contemporary persons and places in Pope's poetry. Though we can never entirely regain the full trenchancy of a poetry much of which was written to be topical, we can go a long way towards doing so as we extend our knowledge of early eighteenth-century social and political history.

Few English poets have led a life so completely devoted to poetry as Pope. Keats is another who springs to mind, but then his life was cut even more tragically short than Pope's, and there is no knowing how it might have developed had it run a fuller course. By saying that Pope led a life completely devoted to poetry I mean that it was

everything, or very nearly everything, to him. He lived almost entirely for poetry, not just reading and writing, but also translating and editing it. Except for a brief flirtation with painting, he was never really tempted to follow any other pursuit. He had other interests and pastimes of course, especially landscape gardening and his loving construction of the elaborately decorated grotto that became his private retreat, but from his earliest days it was poetry that was his abiding love and passion. As he puts it in *An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*:

> As yet a Child, nor yet a Fool to Fame,
> I lisp'd in Numbers for the Numbers came.
> I left no Calling for this idle trade,
> No duty broke, no Father dis-obey'd.[2] (127–30)

The playfully light-hearted tone here appears to dismiss poetry as an 'idle trade', in contrast to the high-minded 'Calling' attributed to other professions, but one feels that the coded thrust behind the ironic self-deprecation is that it is poetry that involves the true 'Calling' and other professions that are mere 'idle trades'.

Pope is, above all else, an ideological[3] and idealistic poet who, if his whole life makes him aware of the pains and pressures of everyday reality, nevertheless clings to one especial idea and one great ideal: the idea that the poet has a central moral role to play in society and the ideal of a well-run society as a reasonable human aspiration. He sees himself in his earlier poetry, and especially in *Windsor-Forest*, as a defender of the ideal of the decently ordered state and a promoter of the fame of 'Albion's Golden Days' (424); while in his later poetry, particularly in the *Imitations of Horace* and *The Dunciad*, the various spokespersons he creates become public prosecutors of all those who seek to disregard, subvert or destroy this ideal.

One of his most passionate utterances in this respect comes in the *Epilogue to the Satires: Dialogue II*, written towards the end of his life, where he casts himself in the role of a divinely appointed public watchman forced to take the law into his own hands, brandishing his satiric pen to stir into wakefulness those who should be guarding the well-being of the state:

> O sacred Weapon! left for Truth's defence,
> Sole Dread of Folly, Vice, and Insolence!
> To all but Heav'n-directed hands deny'd,
> The Muse may give thee! but the Gods must guide.
> Rev'rent I touch thee! but with honest zeal;
> To rouze the Watchmen of the Public Weal,
> To Virtue's Work provoke the tardy Hall,
> And goad the Prelate slumb'ring in the Stall (212–19)

A strong religious quality, general rather than specifically Christian, imbues the language of these lines. Satire is a 'sacred' weapon placed in the poet's hands at 'Heaven's' direction. The poet may be inspired by the Muse but he relies for guidance on the 'Gods'. Satire is a weapon that is seen as the last defence of Truth and only handled by the poet with due 'reverence'. It is a weapon used, as the verbs in particular indicate, for active, even militant, combat; to 'rouze', 'provoke' and 'goad'. Thirty lines further on the metaphor of the pen as a sword becomes even more explicit as the satirist proudly, if somewhat self-consciously, pulls it from its scabbard:

> Yes, the last Pen for Freedom let me draw,
> When Truth stands trembling on the edge of Law (248–9)

It is an heroic, even epic, concept of the satirist's role, infused with high moral and prophetic purpose, that Pope puts forward here.

Such a position undoubtedly presents today's readers with difficulties. It can seem an unconscionably complacent, even pious, role to adopt. Who is Pope, a modern reader might well say, to assume that his satirist's hands are Heaven-directed and guided by the Gods? A similar objection might be made to the poet's rousing injunction in *An Essay on Man*:

> Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;
> The proper study of mankind is Man. (II, 1–2)

Who is Pope to tell us what we should, or should not, know, and what is, or is not, the proper study of mankind? The voice of rational exhortation presumes as much as that of passionate conviction, and the modern reader, reared in a culture constructed around the sanctity of individual freedom, is not used to being told so peremptorily what he or she should, or should not, do.

And yet this is exactly the point. Pope lived at a time when the poet was held in such high esteem in educated society that it was accepted that he had a right to assume such a voice. The poet was invested with privilege through the very nature of his being a poet. This privilege had been proclaimed and elaborated by the great English Renaissance apologists for poetry – Sidney, Ben Jonson, Milton and Dryden – who preceded Pope, so that he and his Augustan contemporaries inherited an accepted belief in the poet's important place within the state's moral, civilized and hierarchical structure. 'Now therein of all sciences', says Sir Philip Sidney in his *Defence of Poesie*, first published in 1595, 'is our poet the monarch'.[4] 'The study of it [Poesy]', says Ben Jonson in *Timber, Or Discoveries*, written some thirty or forty years later, 'offers to mankind a certain rule, and pattern of living well, and happily; disposing us to all civil offices of society.'[5] Note the inclusive 'all'. The authority for the

assumed weight and grandeur of so many of the voices that Pope adopts in his poems had been clearly established by the major English poet-critics of the preceding period.

Pope's poety attracts our admiration in a variety of different ways. Sometimes it is the wit and sweep of its rhetorical and imaginative structures that strike us most forcefully; at other times it is the ease and eloquence of its numbers; and on still other occasions it is the cutting compactness of its language that has the strongest effect. But above all, for this reader, it is the poet's passionate concern for the state of society and his undying commitment to a moral order in civilized life that compel continuing respect and attention. Pope's pointed couplets and poised rhythms confront his readers with critical choices that require them to re-examine their own position with regard to the world they live in. As Dr Johnson says in his *Life of Pope*, 'he did not court the candour, but dared the judgment of his reader'.[6]

IAN GORDON
August 1992

Notes

1. Maynard Mack, *Alexander Pope: A Life* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1985).
2. All quotations from Pope are taken from the Twickenham Edition of *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed., John Butt *et al.*, 11 vols (Methuen, London, 1938–68). Where the particular poem referred to is named in the text the line numbers alone are given in parentheses at the end of the quote; where the poem is not named in the text the name is given in parentheses, together with the line numbes, at the end of the quote.
3. For a fuller discussion of this somewhat neglected aspect of Pope's poetry see Brean Hammond's stimulating study *Pope* (The Harvester Press, Brighton, 1986).
4. Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesie* (1595; A Scolar Press Facsimile, Menston, 1968).
5. Ben Jonson, *Timber, Or Discoveries* (1641); ed. G. B. Harrison (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1966), p. 90.
6. Samuel Johnson, 'Pope' in *Lives of the English Poets* (1779–81), ed. G. B. Hill, 3 vols (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1905), Vol. III, p. 221.

For Felicia

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Part One

The Poet in his Setting

Chronological table

	MAIN EVENTS OF POPE'S LIFE	RELATED HISTORICAL AND LITERARY EVENTS
1688	(May 21) Pope born, Lombard St., London.	'The Glorious Revolution' William of Orange becomes King of England. James II flees to France.
*c.*1696	At school in a Catholic seminary, at Twyford, Hants.	
*c.*1700	Pope's family moves to Binfield in Windsor Forest.	Death of Dryden.
1702		Death of William III. Accession of Queen Anne. Declaration of war on France.
*c.*1705	Becomes acquainted with Wycherley, Walsh, and other literary persons.	
1709	*Pastorals*	Peace negotiations.
1710	Beginning of friendship with Caryll.	Fall of Whigs. Tory Ministry formed under Robert Harley, later Lord Oxford.
1711	*An Essay on Criticism.* Friendly with Addison and Steele.	Swift's *Conduct of the Allies.*
1712	*The Rape of the Lock* (2 Canto version). First meets Swift, Gay, Arbuthnot, Parnell and Oxford. Beginning of Scriblerus Club.	
1713	*Windsor-Forest.* Proposals issued for translation of the *Iliad.* Painting lessons from Jervas.	Peace of Utrecht. Harley and Bolingbroke struggle for power within Tory party.

1714	Enlarged (5 Canto) version of *The Rape of the Lock*. Scriblerus Club breaks up on death of Queen Anne.	Death of Queen Anne. Accesion of George I. Tories fall from power. Swift sent to Ireland.
1715	*The Temple of Fame. Iliad*, Vol. I (Books I–IV). Friendship with Lady Mary Wortley Montagu begins.	Impeachment of Oxford and Bolingbroke. Oxford put in Tower, Bolingbroke flees to France. Jacobite rebellion.
1716	*Iliad*, Vol. II (Books V–VIII). Family move to Chiswick.	Septennial Act.
1717	*Iliad*, Vol. III (Books IX–XII). Pope's *Works* including *Eloisa to Abelard* and *The Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*. (October) Death of Pope's father.	
1718	*Iliad*, Vol. IV (Books XIII–XVI).	Death of Parnell.
1719	Pope and his mother move to Twickenham	Death of Addison. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.
1720	*Iliad*, Vols. V and VI (Books XVII–XXIV).	South Sea Bubble.
1721	Pope's edition of Parnell's *Poems* with 'Epistle to Oxford' as preface. Begins work on edition of Shakespeare.	Robert Walpole becomes Lord Treasurer.
1722	Begins work on translation of the *Odyssey* with Fenton and Broome.	Atterbury charged with complicity in a plot to reinstate the Pretender.
1723	Pope's edition of Buckingham's *Works*, seized by Government on suspicion of Jacobite passages. Pope appears before House of Lords as witness at Atterbury's trial.	Atterbury found guilty of Jacobitism and exiled. Bolingbroke pardoned and returns for brief stay.

1725	Pope's edition of Shakespeare in 6 volumes. *Odyssey* Vols I–III (with Fenton and Broome).	Bolingbroke returns from exile and settles near Pope at Dawlay Farm.
1726	*Odyssey* IV–V. Swift visits Pope. Friendship with Spence begins.	Bolingbroke begins *The Craftsman*. Theobald's *Shakespeare Restored*. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.
1727	Pope–Swift *Miscellanies*, I–II. Swift's second visit to Pope.	Death of George I. Accession of George II.
1728	Pope–Swift *Miscellanies*, III, including *Peri Bathous. The Dunciad*, in 3 Books, with Theobald as hero.	Gay's *Beggar's Opera*. The War with the Dunces reaches a peak.
1729	*The Dunciad Variorum.*	Swift's *Modest Proposal.*
1731	*Epistle to Burlington.*	
1732	Pope–Swift *Miscellanies*, IV.	Death of Gay. Hogarth's prints of *The Harlot's Progress.*
1733	*Epistle to Bathurst. Imitation of Horace, Satire II, i. An Essay on Man*, Epistles I–III. (June) Death of Pope's mother. Pope becomes more committed to the Patriot opposition.	Walpole's Excise Scheme defeated. Bolingbroke's 'Dissertation upon Parties' appears in *The Craftsman.*
1734	*Epistle to Cobham. An Essay on Man*, Epistle IV. *Imitation of Horace, Satire II, ii.*	
1735	*An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot. Epistle to a Lady*. Pope's *Works*, Vol. II. Curll's edition of Pope's letters. Prince of Wales visits Pope at Twickenham.	Death of Arbuthnot and Lord Peterborough. Bolingbroke returns to France. Hogarth's prints of *The Rake's Progress.*
1737	*Imitation of Horace*, *Epistle II*, *ii*. Authorized edition of Pope's letters. *Imitation of Horace, Epistle II*, *i.*	Death of Queen Caroline. Prince of Wales heads Patriot opposition. Crousaz attacks *An Essay on Man.*

1738	*Imitation of Horace, Epistle I, vi. Imitation of Horace, Epistle I, i. Epilogue to the Satires.*	Bolingbroke returns from France and stays with Pope at Twickenham. Dr Johnson's *London.*
1739	Spends winter with Ralph Allen at Prior Park near Bath.	Warburton's *Vindication of the Essay on Man* defends Pope against Crousaz.
1740	First meets Warburton. Refurbishes his grotto.	Cibber's *Apology for his Life.*
1741	Publishes *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus.* Works closely with Warburton on revised edition of his poems.	
1742	*The New Dunciad* (i.e. Book IV).	Walpole resigns. Handel's *Messiah* receives its first performance, in Dublin. Cibber's *A letter from Mr Cibber to Mr Pope.*
1743	*The Dunciad, in Four Books*, with Cibber replacing Theobald as hero. Pope's health deteriorates.	
1744	(May 30) Pope dies at Twickenham.	

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1 Alexander Pope, the man and his life

> Lord Bolingbroke's usual health after dinner is 'Amicitiae et Libertati'. I should like to have it for a motto to my door, with an 's' added after it. (Pope to Spence, April 1742)[1]

> I believe, if any one, early in his life should contemplate the dangerous fate of authors, he would scarce be of their number on any consideration. The life of a Wit is a warfare upon earth; and the present spirit of the learned world is such, that to attempt to serve it (any way) one must have the constancy of a martyr, and a resolution to suffer for its sake.

When Pope wrote these words in the Preface to the first edition of his collected *Works* in 1717 he was not overdramatizing the vulnerability of the poet's position, nor was he exaggerating the degree of forbearance necessary to serve the learned world. 'The life of a Wit', in post-Restoration England, truly was 'a warfare upon earth'. Dryden had received similar, if not as savage, treatment a generation earlier, and both Swift and Gay had to come to terms with it during Pope's own time. Each of these writers found themselves attacked for reasons that only too often had little or nothing to do with their published work. The Augustan man of letters' private life became a public concern, much as a politician's does in our own day. Any scandal that could be dredged up, whether fictional or factual hardly mattered, was useful ammunition in the continual warfare that attended the Augustan literary scene. As a result contemporary accounts of early eighteenth-century writers' lives were frequently deliberately distorted or confused. Swift, we are told, was mad, whereas Pope was seen as having a warped mind in a warped body. Such impressions, however partisan they may originally have been, tend, like mud, to stick, and we can find Pope described as recently as 1925 and by Lytton Strachey as a 'fiendish monkey' ladling out 'spoonfuls of boiling oil' at an upstairs window 'upon such of the passers-by whom the wretch had a grudge against'.[2]

Furthermore the beginning of the eighteenth century was a period in which political parties were establishing themselves in England, and literature found itself closely connected with such a development. Writers were in heavy demand as purveyors of propaganda and, even if an author managed to avoid becoming a paid party hack, the author's duty to the public was sufficiently strongly felt

that he was more or less forced to commit himself to either a Whig or Tory position.[3] Either way the author was bound to make enemies as well as friends, and although Pope strove hard for a number of years to maintain a posture of Party independence his essential Tory sympathies were bound to create enemies for him. Such persons leapt at the slightest chance to vilify him (see chapter 2), and though his conduct was by no means spotless (he was certainly capable of giving at least as good, and generally better, than he got) it was far more attractive and praiseworthy than common literary lore has, until comparatively recent times, held it to be. It seems to be worthwhile, therefore, beginning this introduction to his work with a brief account of the major events of his life.[4]

Early life and education, 1688–1708

Alexander Pope was born, of Catholic parents, in Plough Court, off Lombard Street in the City of London on 21 May 1688. He was the only child of his parents' marriage and was born when his mother was already forty-six and his father forty-two. His lifelong devotion to his elderly parents, whom he cared for till the time of their respective deaths, is one of the most moving and significant aspects of his life. This admiration and love is poignantly expressed in the final forty lines of *An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*, composed just before his mother's death in 1733, where he celebrates his parents' 'unspotted names' and in particular their virtue, gentleness, honesty and independence.

The Pope family lived in Lombard Street until Alexander was five years old. By all accounts he was a very healthy and happy child of a particularly sweet temper who showed no signs of the illness that later disfigured him. Spence tells us that a portrait of him painted when he was about ten years old shows his face as 'round, plump, pretty, and of a fresh complexion. I have often heard Mrs Pope say that he was then exactly like that picture . . . and that it was the perpetual application he fell into about two years afterwards that changed his form and ruined his constitution.' (9).

His father had been a successful linen merchant for almost twenty years prior to his son's birth, but had been forced to retire early in life owing to the anti-Catholic laws passed after the arrival of William III. In the same year as Alexander was born an Act of Parliament came into being which prohibited Catholics from living within ten miles of the City of London. This Act, which received renewed prominence from royal proclamations issued in 1696, 1715 and 1744, became a major factor in determining the course of Pope's life. We do not know for certain where the Pope family lived from the time they left Lombard Street in 1693 to the time

they moved to Binfield in Berkshire about 1700. There is some indication they lived at Hammersmith, which although not far enough out of the city of London legally to satisfy the anti-Catholic laws, would probably have been far enough out to indicate the right intention.

Pope received his first education when he was about eight years old from a priest named Edward Taverner who instructed him in Latin and Greek. He then went to Twyford School, near Winchester, which was one of the best schools available for Catholic boys at the end of the seventeenth century. He only stayed there for one year, however, being expelled at the end of that time for writing a satire on one of the masters – an omen, perhaps, of things to come. When Pope was twelve his father complied with the anti-Catholic legislation and moved his family from London. He purchased Whitehill House, together with nineteen acres of land in Windsor Forest, at Binfield in Berkshire.

The move to Binfield brought Pope's formal education to a close and henceforth he largely educated himself. In June 1739 he told Spence that:

> When I had done with my priests I took to reading by myself, for which I had a very great eagerness and enthusiasm, especially for poetry. In a few years I had dipped into a great number of the English, French, Italian, Latin and Greek poets. This I did without any design but that of pleasing myself, and got the languages by hunting after the stories in the several poets I read, rather than read the books to get the languages. I followed everywhere as my fancy led me, and was like a boy gathering flowers in the woods and fields just as they fall in his way. I still look upon these five or six years as the happiest part of my life. (24)

They may have seemed in retrospect the happiest years of his life but they were also the years that saw the beginning of what he later referred to, in *An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*, as 'this long Disease, my Life'. Until the move to Binfield Pope was a perfectly healthy child, but about the age of twelve he contracted a tubercular disease of the bone which became known later as Pott's disease (after Dr Percival Pott, 1714–88, whose observation and treatment of it were famous in the eighteenth century). This disease, which was contracted through milk and was widespread in the days before pasteurization, gradually reduced Pope to a humpbacked condition and dwarfed his growth, so that at his most fully grown he never attained a height greater than four foot six. It finally left him a permanent cripple in need, as Dr Johnson tells us, of wearing stays in order to be able to stand.

Marjorie Nicolson and G. S. Rousseau, who have made a detailed study of Pope's illness, point out in *This Long Disease, My Life* that as a result of this weakness 'he felt the cold severely, and wore three pairs of hose and heavy under garments, sometimes of fur'.[5] Pope remained a chronic invalid and eventually required constant attention from maid-servants in dressing and undressing. The fragility of his 'little, tender, and crazy carcase', as William Wycherley affectionately referred to it, brought other weaknesses with it. Pope suffered continually from severe headaches, coughing, and fevers, and, towards the close of his life, from a whole series of compound illnesses.

But it would be a mistake to end this discussion of Pope's health with the impression that his illness affected his life in a totally negative way. It is true that he could never escape it, and true that occasionally it reduced him to a state of intense gloom, but one of the most striking things that any reader of Pope's *Correspondence*[6] must feel is the power of his struggle to overcome these difficulties and his determination to travel as much as he could and lead as full a life as possible within the limitations forced on him by his body.

About 1704, when Pope was sixteen and already suffering from the tubercular affliction just described, his perpetual application to his studies began to reduce him to so bad a state of health that he believed he was going to die. He sat down and wrote last farewells to his friends, including the Abbé Southcote. The Abbé immediately went to Dr John Radcliffe, the most eminent physician of his time, told him about Pope's illness, and then rode down to Binfield with Radcliffe's directions. The chief part of Radcliffe's advice was that Pope should take more exercise and should ride every day. This advice not only restored him but seems to have been the origin of the horseback rambles through Windsor Forest which he took with his father's neighbour, Sir William Trumbull.

Sir William was a retired Secretary of State with a great interest in literature, and was over sixty years old when Pope first knew him. Pope was only sixteen or seventeen at the time, but the two men, despite these disparities in age, felt immediate respect for one another. They rode through the Forest together, while the older man listened with great patience to the early efforts of the young poet. As Pope says in the opening lines of his *Pastorals*, written in 1704:

> First in these Fields I try the Sylvan Strains
> Nor blush to sport on *Wintsor's* blissful Plains. (1–2)

The *Pastorals* were Pope's first published poems, but he had been experimenting in poetry long before their publication in 1709. There is perhaps some slight exaggeration in the claim which he later made in *An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot* that,

As yet a Child, nor yet a Fool to Fame,
I lisp'd in Numbers, for the Numbers came. (127–8)

but only the most literal minded would object. It is quite clear that he began being interested in poetry at a very early age: he told Spence in March 1743 that 'I began writing verses of my own invention farther back than I can remember' (32). His mother gave Spence similar testimony:

> Mr. Pope's father . . . was no poet, but he used to set him to make English verses when very young. He was pretty difficult in being pleased and used often to send him back to new turn them. 'These are not good rhymes' he would say, for that was my husband's word for verses. (11)

Pope's precocity in poetry is perhaps best illustrated by his attempt to write an epic poem when he was only twelve. The subject was Alcander, Prince of Rhodes, and he later told Spence that he wrote four books towards it, of about one thousand verses each.

During these years of growing up at Binfield, the young poet was not only extending his reading and trying out his poetry, he was also developing his literary acquaintance. At a remarkably early age he got to know the literary wits at Will's Coffee House, who had formed Dryden's circle. There is even a record of Pope being taken, when he was only twelve years old, to see Dryden. The particular members of the Will's group that Pope got to know apart from Trumbull, who has already been mentioned, were the critic William Walsh; the poet Samuel Garth; the dramatists William Wycherley and William Congreve; and the actor Thomas Betterton. These were all older and distinguished literary men by the time Pope knew them and it was obviously not mere coincidence that they should all share an enthusiasm for the young man's ability and company. There is certainly something a little self-conscious in the correspondence Pope wrote to these worldly men of letters, but that is hardly surprising in a young man anxious to make a good impression.

With Wycherley and Walsh Pope struck up particularly close friendships. He helped the old playwright prepare his verse for publication and maintained a long correspondence with him. He visited Walsh at his seat at Abberley in Worcestershire in 1707 and it was from him that he received the famous advice to make correctness his study and aim:

> When about fifteen, I got acquainted with Mr Walsh. He encouraged me much, and used to tell me that there was one way left of excelling, for though we had had several great poets, we never had any one great poet that was correct – and he desired me to make that my study and aim. (73)

The eighteenth-century notion of correctness as a literary virtue is improperly understood today. It is by no means the same thing as correction. The first involves the principle of proper literary decorum (see chapter 4), while the second involves the more mechanical matter of revision. Both Pope and Walsh were only too well aware of the dangers of too much of the latter, and I shall end this account of the first phase of Pope's life by quoting from a letter he wrote to Walsh on 2 July 1706 saying just this:

> I am convinc'd as well as you, that one may correct too much; for in Poetry as in Painting, a Man may lay colours one upon another, till they Stiffen and deaden the Piece. Besides to bestow heightening on every part is monstrous; Some parts ought to be lower than the rest; and nothing looks more ridiculous, than a Work, where the Thoughts, however different in their own nature, seem all on a level: 'Tis like a Meadow newly mown, where Weeds, Grass, and Flowers are all laid even, and appear undistinguish'd. I believe too that sometimes our first Thoughts are the best as the first squeezing of the Grapes makes the finest and richest Wine. (I, 18–19)

The experimenting poet, 1709–1717

The eight years from the time of Pope's first published work, the *Pastorals* (May 1709), to the time of the first edition of his collected *Works* (June 1717), form a fairly cohesive unit in his life. This was a period of extraordinary poetic activity which he later described as wandering in 'Fancy's Maze' (*Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*, 340). In these eight years he tried his hand at half a dozen different 'kinds' of poetry (see chapter 4), ranging from pastoral and georgic (*Windsor-Forest*), to didactic (*Essay on Criticism*), to elegiac (*The Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady*), to heroic (*Eloisa to Abelard*), to mock-epic (*The Rape of the Lock*), to actual epic (the translation of the *Iliad*). To say he tried his hand is perhaps to suggest an unfinished, or trial, state totally inappropriate to these highly finished and successful poems. The phrase is used here to indicate the sense in which Pope was feeling for his strength during these years and trying out different possibilities. The wide range of his success is a mark of his versatility.

These years were also a time of great expansion in his personal and social life. They mark a period during which Pope spent more time in London than at any other stage in his life, at the same time as he continued to visit his Catholic acquaintances around Binfield. They include the making of the lasting and major friendships with Gay, Swift, Arbuthnot, Bolingbroke and Oxford among his literary and political friends, and with the Carylls, Englefields, Dancastles and Blounts among his Catholic friends.

The family's move from Binfield to Chiswick in 1716 and the sudden death of his father on 23 October 1717 brought this period, which was so much freer of sober responsibility than most of his life, to a close. There is a strong element of carefree gaiety about the poetry written during these years that is in marked contrast to the more overtly moral mood of his later work:

> Soft were my Numbers, Who could take offence
> While pure Description held the place of Sense?
> Like gentle *Fanny's* was my flow'ry Theme,
> A painted Mistress, or a purling Stream.
>
> (*Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot,* 147–50)

Such an element is undoubtedly linked to the relative freedom he enjoyed at the time, though with the death of his father he became solely responsible for his seventy-five-year-old mother.

The period begins with the publication of the *Pastorals.* While these were greatly admired by Pope's Tory friends at Will's, they immediately brought him into conflict with London's rival literary group, Addison's 'little Senate' of Whig writers who met at Buttons' coffee-house. Pope's poems were published in a volume of Tonson's *Miscellanies* that also included the *Pastorals* of Addison's friend Ambrose ('Namby Pamby') Philips. Philips was a third-rate poet and his *Pastorals* were clearly inferior to the young Pope's, but Addison's friends Welsted, Tickell and Gildon all highly praised Philips's *Pastorals* in the current periodicals at various times during the next few years, whilst totally ignoring Pope's. Pope was not so much angry as annoyed and when, in 1713, the *Guardian* ran a series of articles on pastoral poetry in general and set Philips along-side Theocritus, Virgil and Spenser, he took the opportunity to expose such critical claptrap for what it was. He anonymously wrote an ironic essay (*Guardian,* no. 40) to conclude the series in which he continued the pattern of praising Philips but, this time, for patently absurd reasons. Philips was furious and threatened to beat Pope with a rod if he ever came near Buttons'. Pope had not only demonstrated an early knack with irony, but had shown that he was quite capable of looking after himself in the eighteenth-century literary jungle. Since Pope's friend Gay further ridiculed Philips's *Pastorals* in his mock-pastoral poem, *The Shepherd's Week,* published a year later in April 1714, scores had been more than evened.

The conflict with Philips and the Buttons' group is told in some detail here in order to give an idea of the sort of jostling for literary standing that was part and parcel of the literary scene in the early part of the eighteenth century. Nearly every publication of Pope's was attended with this sort of critical and personal dispute and the