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'Strange and Wonderful': Editing Pope's Dunciads for today's readers

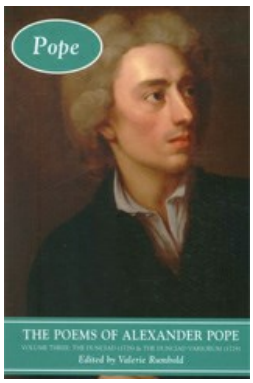
Dr Valerie Rumbold

Since the 1990s I have been working on the *Dunciad*s by Alexander Pope – Pope's various versions of what is arguably the greatest eighteenth-century satire by the greatest eighteenth-century poet. My aim has been not just to understand this amazing poem better, but also to open it up to the widest possible range of today's readers.

The *Dunciad*s are satires for their time and for ours, ripe for rediscovery by wider audiences. These marvellously accomplished poems constructed, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, a powerful vision of concerns that still resonate powerfully in the twenty-first (fears of cultural decline, of political corruption and entropy, of the dumbing down of art and literature, of technological and ideological transformation); but the complexity of their allusions to contemporary issues and personalities, and the complicated relationships among the various versions (which is why I speak of *Dunciad*s in the plural rather than simply of the *Dunciad* as a singular entity), mean that today's readers need editions that provide detailed help laid out in a clear and user-friendly way. A **reviewer on the Amazon website (http://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/1408204169)** aptly calls this poem 'strange and wonderful', commenting that it contains 'lots of lines that ring in your head forever'. With the targeted information and explanation that my editions offer, I hope that new generations of readers will engage in a direct way with the astonishing literary artistry that Pope brought to his darkly hilarious vision of a culture on the road to ruin.

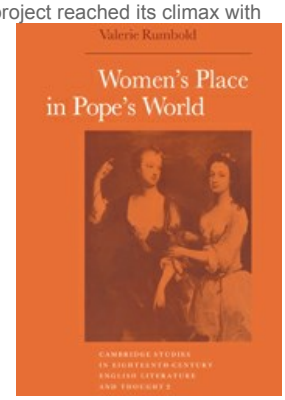
So who was Pope? Born in 1688, he lived, despite the ill-health that he suffered from his early years, until 1744. He quickly established his claims to attention as a literary prodigy; and despite belonging, as an English Catholic, to a minority denied full civil rights, he went on not only to produce a much-admired translation of Homer, but also to win a hearing as a major satirical commentator on the state of England under George I and George II, launching a particular critique of the regime run by the King's minister Sir Robert Walpole.

Between 1728 and 1743 Pope published what may at first sight seem a bewildering array of different versions of his *Dunciad* – but the ongoing changes suggest something more than just a need to keep up with what was happening around him. They also point to the sheer ambition of the poem, as it progressively developed the scale and implications of its challenge to English culture. The title *Dunciad* would have reminded its first readers of the ancient tradition of epic poems that celebrated the deeds of national heroes and the divinities who guided and protected them (the '*---iad*' ending echoes the titles of poems like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*); but in this poem the hero is a dunce, and the divinity is Dulness. It is the goddess Dulness's cosmic mission to subject the whole creation to her perverse stupidity; and Pope finds among his contemporaries no shortage of candidates eager to assist her.

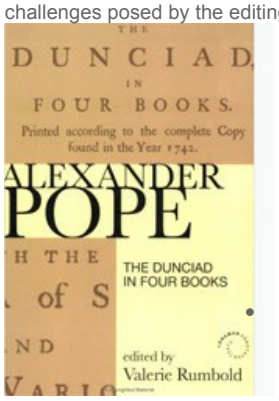


Pope's *Dunciad* first appeared, in 1728, as a three-book poem, *The Dunciad. A Heroic Poem* ('heroic' in this connection is another signal to readers to look back to the heroes of old, and recall the civilisations that they struggled to found and protect). In 1729, however, this poem was utterly transformed into *The Dunciad Variorum* ('variorum', i.e. 'notis variorum' or 'with notes by various people', was a traditional promise to readers that the edition provided a full commentary informed by the work of the best previous scholars). This new version lived up to its title by presenting a massive accumulation of annotation, along with numerous elaborate prefaces and appendices.

Pope continued to issue further variants of *The Dunciad Variorum* through the 1730s, updating in line with his developing views on who was who and what was what; but in 1742 he heralded a major new departure by publishing, as a freestanding item, *The New Dunciad*, a one-book sequel to the former poem, surrounded, like its predecessor, with extensive annotation. Finally, in 1743, the project reached its climax with the publication of *The Dunciad in Four Books*, a radically revised version of *The Dunciad Variorum* to which a revised version of *The New Dunciad* had been added to form a fourth book. A striking feature of this culminating version was the replacement of the hero, who had originally been a caricature of the Shakespeare scholar and miscellaneous writer Lewis Theobald (alias 'Tibbald'), with a caricature of the comic actor, Poet Laureate and celebrity autobiographer Colley Cibber (alias 'Bays'). It is this, the longest and fullest version, that is perhaps the most widely read today.



Having written a PhD on Pope's relation to medieval literature and culture ('Pope and the Gothic Past', University of Cambridge, 1984), followed by the monograph *Women's Place in Pope's World* (Cambridge University Press, 1989; awarded a **Rose Mary Crawshay Prize (http://www.britac.ac.uk/about/medals/Rose_Mary_Crawshay_Prize.cfm)** by the British Academy), I turned my attention in the 1990s to the challenges posed by the editing of Pope's *Dunciad*s, and over the next few years I aim to bring this project to completion. I set out below the three main stages of my project:



1999 ***Alexander Pope: The Dunciad in Four Books (1743)***

Longman Annotated Texts (Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman. A very slightly revised first edition, this time in paperback, was published in 2009) This is an edition of the Dunciad in its fullest form, published by Pope the year before in his death, and has a commentary and introduction conceived with undergraduate and general readers particularly in mind.

2007 ***The Poems of Alexander Pope***

Longman Annotated English Poets, Vol. III, *The Dunciad* (1728) & *The Dunciad Variorum* (1729) This is volume three in a new multi-volume edition of Pope in the Longman Annotated English Poets series, and it contains the two earliest versions of the poem. As well as giving a commentary and introduction to each of the versions, it also sets out the myriad smaller ways in which the texts of each of these versions varied from one published edition to the next.

Forthcoming: In a further volume of *The Poems of Alexander Pope* I shall present *The New Dunciad* of 1742 (a version that has hitherto not been given much prominence in the editorial tradition) and *The Dunciad in Four Books*. This will advance beyond my 1999 treatment not only in incorporating much new scholarship from the intervening years, but also, and more radically, by addressing the consequences of the proliferation of electronic media over that time that now enable us to ask and answer questions about eighteenth-century literature in a context significantly wider and deeper than was the case when I began work in the 1990s.

Talks

2012 Sunday 23 September, ' **"Her boasted Newton"? Grantham celebrities in eighteenth-century poetry (http://www.gravityfieldsfestival.co.uk/)** '

Wednesday 10 October, 'Pope and the City', **Barber Institute (http://www.barber.org.uk)**

Podcasts

2011 Podcast on Pope at **http://barber.org.uk/artandwriting_beardsley.html (http://barber.org.uk/artandwriting_beardsley.html)**

2010 Warton Lecture, public lecture by invitation of the British Academy: **'"The Reason of Preference": Sleeping, Flowing and Freezing in Pope's *Dunciad*' (http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2010/warton/index.cfm)**

2007 **'In Our Time' panel broadcast on Alexander Pope (http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0038x97)**, Radio 4

The following are available in print, or online (a subscription may be required), or both:

2010 Warton Lecture, **public lecture by invitation of the British Academy (http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2010/warton/index.cfm)**: '"The Reason of this Preference": Sleeping, Flowing and Freezing in Pope's *Dunciad*' (published as **'"The Reason of this Preference": Sleeping, Flowing and Freezing in Pope's *Dunciad*' (http://www.britishacademypublications.com/view/10.5871/bacad/9780197264775.001.0001/bacad-9780197264775-chapter-13)**, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 167 (2010), pp.423-451)

2009 **'Scriblerus Club' (http://www.oxforddnb.com/public/themes/71/71160.html)**, group biography in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

2008 'Dulness's Obscure Vowel: Language, Monarchy, and Motherhood in Pope's *The Dunciad in Four Books*', in *Literary Milieux: Essays in Text and Context Presented to Howard Erskine-Hill*, edited by David Womersley and Richard McCabe (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press), pp.284-306

2005 'Fitzgerald's *Folly* and Pope's *Dunciad*s', jointly written with Thomas McGeary, ***RES* (http://res.oxfordjournals.org/)**, New Series 56, No.226, pp.577-610

2004 'Plotting Parallel Lives: Alexander Pope's "A Parallel of the Characters of Mr. Dryden and Mr. Pope"', in *John Dryden (1631-1700): His Politics, His Plays, and His Poets*, edited by Claude Rawson and Aaron Santesso (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2004), pp.235-62

'Milton's Epic and Pope's Satyr-Play' (http://www.wiley.com/bw/journal.asp?ref=0026-4326), *Milton Quarterly*, 38, pp.138-62

2001 'The *Dunciad*s', in *A Companion to Literature from Milton to Blake*, Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture, edited by David Womersley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp.291-300

'Women Writers (not) in Pope's *Dunciad*s', ***Review of English Studies* (http://res.oxfordjournals.org/)**, New Series 52, No.208, pp.524-3

2000 'Ideology and Opportunism: The Role of Handel in Pope's *The Dunciad in Four Books*', in *'More Solid Learning': New Perspectives on Alexander Pope's* Dunciad, edited by Catherine Ingrassia and Claudia N. Thomas (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2000), pp.62-80

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In 2001 the AHRB (now AHRC) awarded Research Leave to support my work on Vol. III of the Longman Annotated *The Poems of Alexander Pope*

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