

Alexander Pope as a Satirist

Alexander Pope, poet and satirist of the English Augustan period, best known for his poems *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), *The Rape of the Lock* (1712–14), *The Dunciad* (1728), and *An Essay on Man* (1733–34). He is one of the most epigrammatic of all English authors. Regarded as one of the greatest English poets, and the foremost poet of the early eighteenth century. He is best known for his satirical and discursive poetry, and *An Essay on Criticism*, as well as for his translation of Homer. After Shakespeare, Pope is the second-most quoted writer in the English language, as per *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, some of his verses having even become popular idioms in common parlance (e.g., *Damning with faint praise*). He is considered a master of the heroic couplet.

Pope's poetic career testifies to his indomitable spirit in the face of disadvantages, of health and of circumstance. The poet and his family were Catholics and thus fell subject to the Test Acts, prohibitive measures which severely hampered the prosperity of their co-religionists after the abdication of James II; one of these banned them from living within ten miles of London, and another from attending public school or university. For this reason, except for a few spurious Catholic schools, Pope was largely self-educated. He was taught to read by his aunt and became a lover of books. He learned French, Italian, Latin, and Greek by himself, and discovered Homer at the age of six. As a child Pope survived being once trampled by a cow, but when he was 12 began struggling with tuberculosis of the spine (Pott disease), along with fits of crippling headaches which troubled him throughout his life.

In the year 1709, Pope showcased his precocious metrical skill with the publication of *Pastorals*, his first major poems. They earned him instant fame. By the time he was 23 he had written *An Essay on Criticism*, released in 1711. A kind of poetic manifesto in the vein of Horace's *Ars Poetica*, the essay was met with enthusiastic attention and won Pope a wider circle of prominent friends, most notably Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, who had recently started collaborating on the influential *The Spectator*. The critic John Dennis, having located an ironic and veiled portrait of himself, was outraged by what he considered the impudence of the younger author. Dennis hated Pope for the rest of his life, and, save for a temporary reconciliation, dedicated his efforts to insulting him in print, to which Pope retaliated in kind, making Dennis the butt of much satire.

The Rape of the Lock, perhaps the poet's most famous poem, appeared first in 1712, followed by a revised and enlarged version in 1714. When Lord Petre forcibly snipped off a lock from Miss Arabella Fermor's head (the "Belinda" of the poem), the incident gave rise to a high-society quarrel between the families. With the idea of allaying this, Pope treated the subject in a playful and witty mock-heroic epic. The narrative poem brings into focus the onset of acquisitive individualism and conspicuous consumption, where purchased goods assume dominance over moral agency.