

Disciplining of 18th Century Civil Society through The Negation of Morality, Conduct and Etiquette: A Study of Alexander Pope's An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot

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Abstract

The research paper aims to examine how **Alexander Pope** (1688-1744) the chief spokesman of the 18th Century England unleashed a literary crusade against his enemies in **An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot** published in 1735. Considered as one of the greatest satirical pieces in English poetry, the work shows Pope's brilliant handling of both comic and corrosive satire at his best. The study has its key areas of focus on Pope's personal attacks which brought on his part a complete denial of the 18th Century moral laws, ethics and conducts. The highly objectionable bitter satire presented in the Epistle defies morality, conduct, and code of family honor. Yet Mr. Pope's negation of proper etiquettes actually helps to retain the moral codes prevalent in the 18th Century England. The research paper thus aims to highlight on Pope's handling of satire in the Epistle offering moral prescription through the denial of 18th Century etiquettes.

Keywords: Epistle; Satire; Morality and Etiquette; Alexander Pope.

1. Introduction

In the 18th century, civil society was often influenced and disciplined through various cultural and literary means. Alexander Pope's "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" serves as a significant work that provides insights into the negation of morality, conduct, and etiquette during that era. Pope, a prominent satirist of the Augustan Age, used his poetic works to comment on the moral and social issues of his time. "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" is a satirical poem in which Pope addresses and criticizes various aspects of society. The poem is written in the form of a letter to his friend Dr. Arbuthnot, a physician and friend of Pope. One key aspect of Pope's satire is the critique of moral values. Pope often employed irony and wit to expose the hypocrisy and moral shortcomings of individuals in society. Through his satirical lens, he questioned the ethical conduct of people, including those in positions of authority and influence.

Additionally, Pope targeted the prevailing norms of conduct and etiquette. The 18th century was a period marked by a strong emphasis on manners and social behavior. However, Pope's satire often subverted these norms, highlighting the artificiality and pretense that existed in society. He exposed the flaws in the conduct of individuals and institutions, challenging the accepted standards of behavior. "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" can be seen as a reflection of the broader cultural and social changes taking place in the 18th century. The Enlightenment era brought about a questioning of traditional values and a shift towards reason and individualism. Pope's satire can be interpreted as a commentary on the tensions between the old moral order and the emerging values of the Enlightenment.

2. Overview of the work

"An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" is a satirical poem written by Alexander Pope, a prominent 18th-century English poet. It was first published in 1735 and is also known as "Prologue to the Satires." The poem is written in the form of an epistle, a letter or message, and it is addressed to Pope's friend, Dr. John Arbuthnot, a physician and satirist. The poem is a literary work that serves as a self-defense and a statement of Pope's views on literature, society, and his own position as a poet. It reflects Pope's wit, sharp criticism, and mastery of the heroic couplet, a poetic form that consists of rhymed pairs of iambic pentameter lines. In "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot," Pope defends himself against various literary critics and satirizes his contemporary literary and social circles. He uses the epistle form to express his thoughts on the purpose of satire and the role of the poet in society. The poem also provides insights into Pope's personal experiences and his relationships with other writers and critics of the time. The epistle is notable for its engaging and often humorous style, as well as its skillful use of language and meter. Pope employs a range of literary devices, including irony, allusion, and allegory, to convey his ideas and opinions.

3. Pope's satirical sketches in the Epistle

In the poem, Pope engages in literary quarrels and criticizes several contemporary writers and critics. One of the notable targets is poet laureate Colley Cibber, whom Pope portrays as a dunce and a bad poet. Pope uses satire to mock and ridicule his adversaries, employing wit and humor to make his points. The poem also serves as a defense of Pope's own literary reputation, justifying his use of satire and attacking those who had criticized his earlier works. Pope addresses issues such as the nature of satire, the role of the poet, and the responsibilities of literary critics. "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" is a complex and multifaceted work that combines personal grievances with broader reflections on the state of literature and society in Pope's time. The poem reflects the satirical and combative nature of Pope's writing, as well as his skill in using language to convey sharp and critical commentary.

3.1 Satire on Joseph Addison

In "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot," Alexander Pope satirizes Joseph Addison, a prominent literary figure of the early 18th century and one of the founders of *The Spectator* magazine. Pope had a complex relationship with Addison, who was initially a friend but later became a source of tension and rivalry. In the poem, Pope addresses Addison under the pseudonym "Atticus." Pope criticizes Addison for his supposed betrayal and shift in allegiance, accusing him of being disloyal to their friendship. Pope suggests that Addison has abandoned him in favor of other literary circles, particularly the Whig

political and literary establishment. One notable section of the poem, known as the "Atticus" episode, describes Addison's supposed advice to Pope, urging him to focus on more gentle and morally uplifting themes in his poetry. Pope portrays Addison as a moralizing mentor, advising him to abandon the biting satire for a more virtuous style. The satire in this context serves as Pope's response to what he perceived as condescension and interference in his artistic choices.

However, it's essential to note that Pope's portrayal of Addison in "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" is a satirical exaggeration, and it reflects Pope's bitterness and frustration with Addison rather than providing an objective account of their relationship. The poem as a whole serves as a defense of Pope's own poetic style and an attack on those whom he saw as adversaries or critics, and Addison is just one target among several in this satirical work.

3.2 Satire on Bubb Dodington or Earl of Halifax as 'Bufo'

In "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot," Alexander Pope satirizes a character named "Bufo," who represents a composite figure embodying various critics and adversaries of Pope. "Bufo" is a pseudonym used by Pope to criticize and mock his enemies, and the character doesn't correspond to a specific individual but rather to a type of critic.

Pope employs satire to lampoon Bufo, portraying him as a dull and envious critic who lacks literary taste and discernment. The use of satire allows Pope to express his contempt for those who have criticized his work, and Bufo becomes a symbol of the ignorant and malicious critics Pope faced in his literary career. The satirical portrayal of Bufo is part of Pope's broader strategy in the poem, where he defends his own literary achievements, responds to his critics, and justifies his use of satire as a legitimate literary form. Through the character of Bufo, Pope engages in a humorous and critical examination of the literary and critical landscape of his time.

It's important to understand that the names and characters used by Pope in the poem are often allegorical or symbolic, representing different aspects of the literary and political scene rather than specific individuals. "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" is a complex work that combines personal grievances with broader reflections on the role of the poet, the nature of satire, and the challenges of literary life in the 18th century.

3.3 Satire on Lord Hervey as 'Sporus'

In "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot," Alexander Pope satirizes Lord Hervey under the pseudonym "Sporus." Lord Hervey, a courtier and political figure in the early 18th century, was known for his close association with Sir Robert Walpole, the Prime Minister of Britain. Pope's portrayal of Sporus is a scathing attack on Lord Hervey, and the character represents a satirical composite of various negative traits associated with Hervey. The name "Sporus" is derived from a historical figure associated with the Roman Emperor Nero. Sporus was a young boy whom Nero castrated and married, symbolizing decadence and moral corruption. By using this name, Pope is drawing a parallel between the historical Sporus and his contemporary target, Lord Hervey.

In the poem, Pope criticizes Hervey's supposed effeminacy, implying moral and personal shortcomings. The satirical attack extends beyond Hervey's character to include his political associations and his role at the court. Pope uses the character of Sporus to express his disdain for Hervey's perceived moral and political failings.

It's essential to note that Pope's satirical works often involved exaggerated caricatures and were fueled by personal animosities and literary rivalries of the time. The use of pseudonyms and allegorical figures allowed Pope to criticize and mock his enemies while maintaining a degree of deniability. As with other targets in "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot," Pope's satire on Lord Hervey reflects not only personal grievances but also broader themes related to the nature of satire, the role of the poet, and the challenges of the literary and political landscape of the 18th century.

3.4 Pope's attack on the contemporary poetasters

In "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot," Alexander Pope launches a scathing attack on what he terms "poetasters" — mediocre and inferior poets who lack genuine talent and understanding of the craft. Pope uses the term "poetaster" to refer to those he considered to be pretentious or unskilled poets, often suggesting that they imitate the style of more accomplished poets without possessing the necessary skill or originality. In the poem, Pope expresses his frustration with those who attempt to enter the world of poetry without the requisite talent and dedication. He criticizes the superficiality and lack of depth in their works, condemning their attempts to gain literary fame without the genuine ability to contribute meaningfully to the art. Pope mocks the poetasters' ignorance and self-delusion, suggesting that they lack the discernment to recognize their own shortcomings. The attack on stupidity among poetasters is part of Pope's broader defense of his own poetic achievements and his insistence on the importance of true wit and artistry in poetry.

By satirizing poetasters, Pope not only criticizes specific individuals but also addresses broader issues within the literary culture of his time. The poem reflects Pope's concern with the degradation of literary standards and his desire to uphold a certain level of excellence in the realm of poetry.

3.5 Pope's self-defense in the satire which defended moral codes, law, conduct and etiquette

In "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot," Alexander Pope engages in self-defense regarding his conduct and etiquette, particularly in the context of the literary and social circles in which he moved. The poem serves as a form of autobiographical satire, where Pope addresses various aspects of his life, relationships, and literary career. In the poem, Pope defends himself against the attacks and criticisms he faced, presenting his own perspective on his behavior, choices, and interactions with others. Regarding conduct and etiquette, Pope emphasizes his commitment to moral values and proper behavior. He addresses accusations and insinuations made by his contemporaries, asserting that he adheres to a code of conduct that aligns with virtue and integrity.

Pope uses the epistolary form of the poem to communicate directly with his friend Dr. Arbuthnot, who serves as a confidant and ally. Through this communication, Pope justifies his actions, choices, and satirical writings as responses to perceived slights and attacks on his character and literary reputation. The defense of conduct and etiquette in "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" is interwoven with Pope's broader

themes of personal and literary vindication. He presents himself as a moral and virtuous figure, defending his actions against what he views as unjust criticism. The poem, as a whole, provides insight into Pope's perspective on his own character and the challenges he faced in navigating the social and literary landscape of his time.

4. Pope's love for goodness and virtue

In "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot," Alexander Pope does express a love for goodness and virtues, particularly as part of his self-portrayal and defense of his character. Pope emphasizes his commitment to moral values and virtue, positioning himself as a champion of decency and integrity in the face of criticism and attacks. Throughout the poem, Pope defends his own conduct, asserting that his motivations are rooted in a desire for goodness and virtue. He argues that his satirical writings are not driven by malice but by a commitment to exposing vice and defending virtue. Pope portrays himself as someone who values moral principles and seeks to uphold them in his life and work.

It's important to note that Pope's representation of himself in the poem is a strategic and self-serving one. While he emphasizes his love for goodness and virtues, he also employs satire to attack those whom he perceives as enemies or critics. The poem is a complex blend of self-defense, self-justification, and satirical critique of the literary and social milieu of his time.

In essence, Pope's love of goodness and virtues in "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" is part of his larger rhetorical strategy to present himself in a positive light and counter the negative portrayals and criticisms he faced during his career. The poem serves as a means for Pope to shape his own narrative, asserting his commitment to moral values even as he engages in the satirical and often biting commentary for which he is known.

Conclusion

In summary, the research paper thus tried to throw light on Alexander Pope's "An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot" which contributes to the understanding of the 18th-century disciplining of civil society by critiquing and negating prevalent notions of morality, conduct, and etiquette. Through his satirical exploration, Pope sheds light on the complexities and contradictions of the societal norms of his time.

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