

Augustan poetry

See also Augustan literature (ancient Rome).

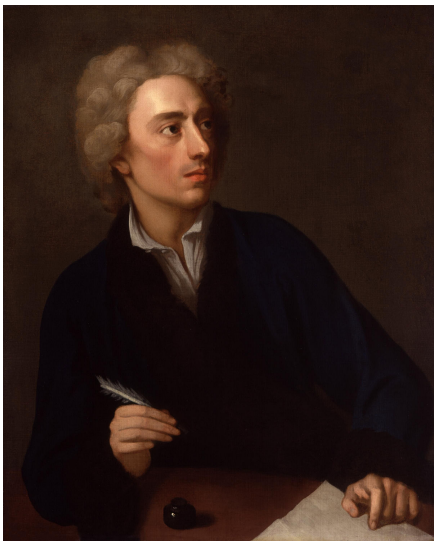
In Latin literature, **Augustan poetry** is the poetry that flourished during the reign of Caesar Augustus as Emperor of Rome, most notably including the works of Virgil, Horace, and Ovid. In English literature, **Augustan poetry** is a branch of **Augustan literature**, and refers to the poetry of the 18th-century, specifically the first half of the century. The term comes most originally from a term that George I had used for himself. He saw himself as an Augustus. Therefore, the British poets picked up that term as a way of referring to their own endeavors, for it fit in another respect: 18th century English poetry was political, satirical, and marked by the central philosophical problem of whether the individual or society took precedence as the subject of verse.

Overview

In the Augustan era, poets were even more conversant with each other than were novelists (see Augustan prose). Their works were written as direct counterpoint and direct expansion of one another, with each poet writing satire when in opposition. There was a great struggle over the nature and role of the pastoral in the early part of the century, primarily between Ambrose Philips and Alexander Pope and then between their followers, but such a controversy was only possible because of two simultaneous movements. The more general movement, carried forward only with struggle between poets, was the same as was present in the novel: the invention of the subjective self as a worthy topic, the emergence of a priority on *individual* psychology, against the insistence on all acts of art being *performance* and public gesture designed for the benefit of society at large. Underneath this large banner raged multiple individual battles. The other development, one seemingly agreed upon by both sides, was a gradual expropriation and reinvention of all the Classical forms of poetry. Every genre of poetry was recast, reconsidered, and used to serve new functions. Ode, ballad, elegy, satire, parody, song, and lyric poetry would all be adapted from their older uses. Odes would cease to be encomium, ballads cease to be narratives, elegies cease to be sincere memorials, satires no longer be specific entertainments, parodies no longer be *bravura* stylistic performances, songs no longer be personal lyrics, and the lyric would become a celebration of the individual rather than a lover's complaint.

These two developments (the emphasis on the individual and the willingness to reinvent genre) can be seen as extensions of Protestantism, as Max Weber argued, for they represent a gradual increase in the implications of Martin Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and the Calvinist emphasis on individual revelation of the divine (and therefore the competence and worth of the individual). It can be seen as a growth of the power and assertiveness of the bourgeoisie and an echo of the displacement of the worker from the home in growing industrialization, as Marxists such as E.P. Thompson have argued, for people were no longer allowed to remain in their families and communities when they had to travel to a factory or mill, and therefore they grew accustomed to thinking of themselves as isolates. It can be argued that the development of the subjective individual against the social individual was a natural reaction to trade over other methods of economic production, or as a reflection of a breakdown in social cohesion unconsciously set in motion by enclosure and the migration of the poor to the cities. There are many other plausible and coherent explanations of the causes of the rise of the *subjective self*, but whatever the prime cause, poets showed the strains of the development as a largely conservative set of voices argued for a social person and largely emergent voices argued for the individual person.

Alexander Pope, the Scribblers, and poetry as social act



Alexander Pope, the single poet who most influenced the Augustan Age.

The entire Augustan age's poetry was dominated by Alexander Pope. Since Pope began publishing when very young and continued to the end of his life, his poetry is a reference point in any discussion of the 1710s, 1720s, 1730s, or even 1740s. Furthermore, Pope's abilities were recognized early in his career, so contemporaries acknowledged his superiority, for the most part. Indeed, seldom has a poet been as publicly acknowledged as a leader for as long as was Pope, and, unlike the case with figures such as John Dryden or William Wordsworth, a second generation did not emerge to eclipse his position. From a technical point of view, few poets have ever approached Alexander Pope's perfection at the iambic pentameter closed couplet ("heroic verse"), and his lines were repeated often enough to lend quite a few clichés and proverbs to modern English usage. However, if Pope had few rivals, he had many enemies. His technical perfection did not shelter him from political, philosophical, or religious opponents, and Pope himself was quarrelsome in print. His very technical superiority led Pope to injudicious improvements in his editing and translation of

other authors. However, Pope and his enemies (often called "the Dunces" because of Pope's successful satirizing of them in *The Dunciad* of 1727 and 1738) fought over central matters of the proper subject matter for poetry and the proper pose of the poetic voice, and the excesses and missteps, as much as the achievements, of both sides demonstrated the stakes of the battle.

The Pope/Philips debate occurred in 1709 when Alexander Pope published his *Pastorals*. Pope's *Pastorals* were of the four seasons. When they appeared, Thomas Tickell, a member of the "Little Senate" of Addison's (see above) at Button's Coffee-shop, wrote an evaluation in *Guardian* that praised Ambrose Philips's pastorals above Pope's. Pope replied by writing in *Guardian* with a mock praise of Philips's *Patorals* that heaped scorn on them. Pope quoted Philips's worst lines, mocked his execution, and delighted in pointing out his empty lines. Philips responded by putting a staff in the floor of Button's with which to beat Pope, should he appear. In 1717, Pope explained his theory of the pastoral in the *Discourse on Pastoral Poetry*. He argued that any depictions of shepherds and their mistresses in the pastoral must not be updated shepherds, that they must be icons of the Golden Age: "we are not to describe our shepherds as shepherds at this day really are, but as they may be conceived then to have been, when the best of men followed the employment" (Gordon). Philips's *Pastorals* were not particularly awful poems, but they did reflect his desire to "update" the pastoral.

In 1724, Philips would update poetry again by writing a series of odes dedicated to "all ages and characters, from Walpole, the steerer of the realm, to Miss Pulteney in the nursery." To do so, he shortened his line length to 3.5', or almost half a normal iambic pentameter line. Henry Carey was one of the best at satirizing these poems, and his *Namby Pamby* became a hugely successful obliteration of Philips and Philips's endeavor. What is notable about Philips against Pope, however, is not so much the particular poems and their answers as the fact that *both* poets were adapting the pastoral and the ode, both altering it. Pope's insistence upon a Golden Age pastoral no less than Philips's desire to update it meant making a political statement. While it is easy to see in Ambrose Philips an effort at modernist triumph, it is no less the case that Pope's artificially restricted pastoral was a statement of what the ideal (based on an older Feudal arrangement) should be.

The Scribblers Club wrote poetry as well as prose, and the club included among its number John Gay, who was not only a friend and collaborator of Pope's, but also one of the major voices of the era. John Gay, like Pope, adapted the pastoral. Gay, working at Pope's suggestion, wrote a parody of the updated pastoral in *The Shepherd's Week*. He also imitated the satires of Juvenal with his *Trivia*. In 1728, his *The Beggar's Opera* was an enormous success, running for an unheard-of eighty performances. All of these works have in common a gesture of compassion. In *Trivia*, Gay writes as if commiserating with those who live in London and are menaced by falling masonry and bedpan slops, and *The Shepherd's Week* features great detail of the follies of everyday life and eccentric character. Even *The Beggar's Opera*, which is a clear satire of Robert Walpole, portrays its characters with compassion. The villains have pathetic songs in their own right and are acting out of exigency rather than boundless evil. Gay's tone is almost the opposite of Jonathan Swift's. Swift famously said that he hated mankind but loved individual humans, and Gay's poetry shows a love of mankind and a gentle mocking of overly serious or pretentious individuals.

Old style poetic parody involved imitation of the style of an author for the purposes of providing amusement, but not for the purpose of ridicule. The person imitated was not satirized. Ambrose Philips's idea was of adapting and updating the pastoral to represent a contemporary lyric (i.e. to make it a form for housing the *personal* love complaints of modern shepherds), where individual personalities would be expressed, and this desire to move from the universal, typical, and idealized shepherd to the real, actual, and individual shepherd was the heart of the debate. Prior to Ambrose Philips, John Philips, whose *The Splendid Shilling* of 1701 was an imitation of John Milton's blank verse for a discussion of the miseries of poverty, was championed by Addison's Kit-Kats. *The Splendid Shilling*, like Pope's poetry and the other poetry by the "Tory Wits," is a statement of the social man. The shilling, the poverty, and the complaint are all posited in terms of the man in London, the man in society and conviviality, and not the man as a particular individual or with idiosyncrasies. It was a poem wholly consonant with the poetry of the Scribblers. After Ambrose Philips, though, poets would begin to speak of peculiarities and actualities, rather than ideals. It is a debate and a poetic tension that would remain all the way to Samuel Johnson's discussion of the "streaks of the tulip" in the last part of the century (*Rasselas*).

Translation and adaptation as statement

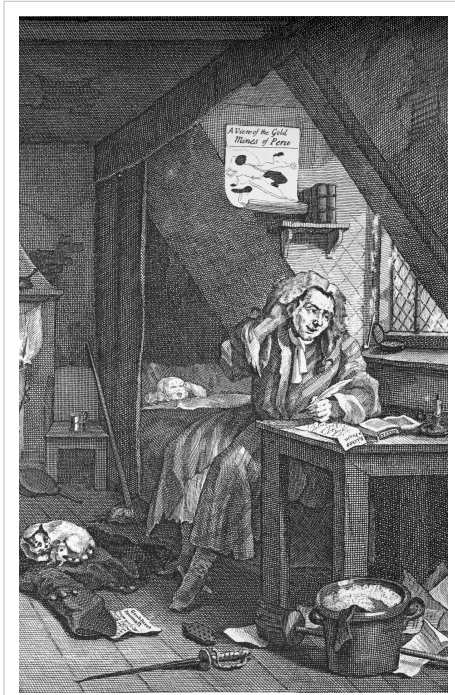
Gay adapted Juvenal, as Pope had already adapted Virgil's *Eclogues*, and throughout the Augustan era the "updating" of Classical poets was a commonplace. These were not translations, but rather they were imitations of Classical models, and the imitation allowed poets to veil their responsibility for the comments they made. Alexander Pope would manage to refer to the King himself in unflattering tones by "imitating" Horace in his *Epistle to Augustus*. Similarly, Samuel Johnson wrote a poem that falls into the Augustan period in his "imitation of Satire III" entitled *London*. The imitation was inherently conservative, since it argued that all that was good was to be found in the old classical education, but these imitations were used for progressive purposes, as the poets who used them were often doing so to complain of the political situation.



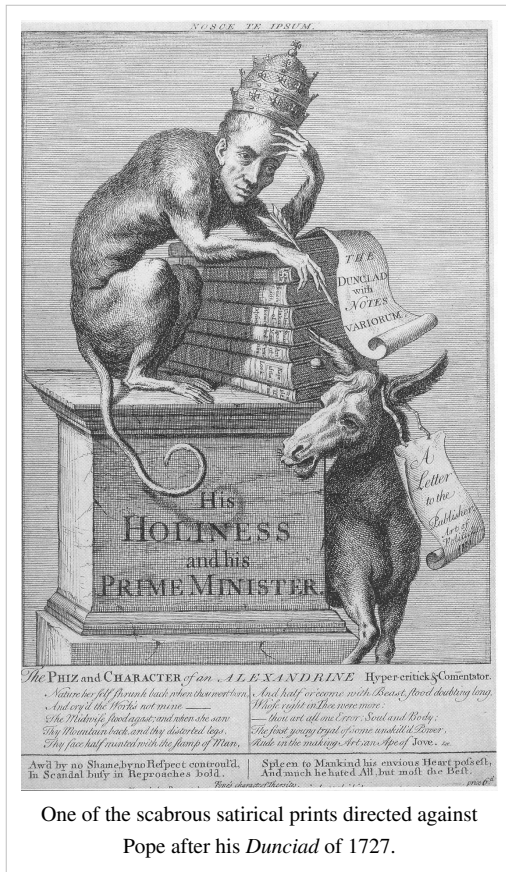
Portrait of John Gay from Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets*, the 1779 edition. Gay's gentle satire was a contrast with the harsher Pope and Swift.

Readers of adaptations were assumed to know the originals. Indeed, original translation was one of the standard tests in grammar school. Pope's translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* was not an attempt to make the works available to an Augustan audience, but rather to make a new work occupying a middle ground between Homer and Pope. The translation had to be textually accurate, but it was intended to be a Pope translation, with felicity of phrase and neatness of rhyme from Pope. Additionally, Pope would "versify" John Donne, although his work was widely available. The changes Pope makes are the content, the commentary. Pope's edition of Shakespeare claimed to be textually perfect (although it was corrupt), but his desire to adapt led him to injudicious attempts at "smoothing" and "cleaning" Shakespeare's lines.

In satire, Pope achieved two of the greatest poetic satires of all time in the Augustan period, and both arose from the imitative and adaptive demands of parody. *The Rape of the Lock* (1712 and 1714) was a gentle mock-heroic, but it was built upon Virgil's *Aeneid*. Pope applied Virgil's heroic and epic structure to the story of a young woman (Arabella Fermor) having a lock of hair snipped by an amorous baron (Lord Petre). The *structure* of the comparison forced Pope to invent mythological forces to overlook the struggle, and so he borrowed sylphs from ludicrous (to him) alchemist Paracelsus and makes them the ghosts of vain women. He created an epic battle over a game of Ombre, leading to a fiendish appropriation of the lock of hair. Finally, a *deus ex machina* appears and the lock of hair experiences an apotheosis. To some degree, Pope was adapting Jonathan Swift's habit, in *A Tale of a Tub*, of pretending that metaphors were literal truths, and he was inventing a mythos to go with the everyday. The parody was in no way a comment on Virgil. Instead, it was an imitation made to serve a new purpose. The epic was transformed from a paean to national foundations to a satire on the outlandish self-importance of the country nobility. The poem was an enormous success, at least with the general public.



A "hack" poet desperate for money, from William Hogarth's 1741 print, *The Distrest Poet*.



After that success, Pope wrote some works that were more philosophical and more political and therefore more controversial, such as the *Essay on Criticism* and *Essay on Man*, as well as a failed play. As a result, a decade after the gentle, laughing satire of *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope wrote his masterpiece of invective and specific opprobrium in *The Dunciad*. Pope had translated Homer and produced an errant edition of William Shakespeare, and the 1727 *Dunciad* was an updating and redirection of John Dryden's poison-pen battle of *MacFlecknoe*. The story is that of the goddess Dulness choosing a new Avatar. She settles upon one of Pope's personal enemies, Lewis Theobald, and the poem describes the coronation and heroic games undertaken by all of the dunces of Great Britain in celebration of Theobald's ascension. When Pope's enemies responded to *The Dunciad* with attacks, Pope produced the *Dunciad Variorum*, which culled from each dunce's attack any comments unflattering to another dunce, assembled the whole into a commentary upon the original *Dunciad* and added a critical comment by Pope professing his innocence and dignity. In 1743, Pope issued a new version of *The Dunciad* ("The Dunciad B") with a fourth book added. He also changed the hero from Lewis Theobald to Colley Cibber. In the fourth book of the new *Dunciad*, Pope expressed the view that, in the battle between light and dark (enlightenment and the Dark Ages), Night and Dulness were fated

to win, that all things of value were soon going to be subsumed under the curtain of unknowing.

John Gay and Alexander Pope belong on one side of a line separating the celebrants of the individual and the celebrants of the social. Pope wrote *The Rape of the Lock*, he said, to settle a disagreement between two great families, to laugh them into peace. He wrote the *Essay on Criticism* and the *Essay on Man* to emphasize, time and again, the public nature of human life and the social role of letters. Even *The Dunciad*, which seems to be a serial killing of everyone on Pope's enemies list, sets up these figures as expressions of dangerous and *antisocial* forces in letters. Theobald and Cibber are marked by vanity and pride, by having no care for morality, so long as they are famous. The hireling pens Pope attacks mercilessly in the heroic games section of the *Dunciad* are all embodiments of avarice and lies. Similarly, Gay, although he always has strong touches of personal humor and the details of personal life, writes of political society, of social dangers, and of follies that must be addressed to protect the greater whole. On the other side of this line, however, were people who agreed with the *politics* of Gay and Pope (and Swift), but not in approach.

Sentiment and the poetry of the individual



James Thomson, from the 1779 edition of Samuel Johnson's *Lives of the English Poets*.

The other side of this division include, early in the Augustan Age, James Thomson and Edward Yonge. Thomson's *The Seasons* (1726-30) are nature poetry, but they are unlike Pope's notion of the Golden Age pastoral. Thomson's poet speaks in the first person from direct observation, and his own mood and sentiment color the descriptions of landscape. *Winter*, in particular, is melancholy and meditative. Edward Yonge's *Night Thoughts* (1742–1744) was immediately popular. It was, even more than *Winter*, a poem of deep solitude, melancholy, and despair. In these two poets, there is the stirrings of the lyric as the Romantics would see it: the celebration of the private individual's idiosyncratic (but paradigmatic) responses to the visions of the world. Both of these works appeared in Pope's lifetime, and both were popular, but the older, more conservative poetry maintained its hold for a while to come. On the other hand, Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* set off a new craze for poetry of melancholy reflection.

Gray's *Elegy* appeared in 1750, and it immediately set new ground. First, it was written in the "country," and not in or as opposed to London. In fact, the poem makes no reference at all to the life of the city and society, and it follows no classical model. Further, it is not an elegiac in the strictest sense. Also, the poem sets up the solitary observer in a privileged position. It is only by being solitary that the poet can speak of a truth that is wholly individually realized, and the poem is a series of revelations that have been granted only to the contemplative (and superior) mind. After Gray, a group often referred to as the Churchyard Poets began imitating his pose, if not his style. These imitations followed no convenient or conventional political or religious division. Oliver Goldsmith (*The Deserted Village*), Thomas Warton, and even Thomas Percy (*The Hermit of Warkworth*), each conservative by and large and Classicist (Gray himself was a professor of Greek), took up the new poetry of solitude and loss. Additionally, Thomas Chatterton, among the younger poets, also followed. The only things these poets had in common was that they were not centered in London (except Chatterton, for a time), and each of them reflected, in one way or another, on the devastation of the countryside.

Therefore, when the Romantics emerged at the end of the 18th century, they were not assuming a radically new invention of the subjective self themselves, but merely formalizing what had gone before. Similarly, the later 18th century saw a ballad revival, with Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*. The relics were not always very ancient, as many of the ballads dated from only the 17th century (e.g. the Bagford Ballads or The Dragon of Wantley in the Percy Folio), and so what began as an antiquarian movement soon became a folk movement. When this folk-inspired impulse combined with the solitary and individualistic impulse of the Churchyard Poets, Romanticism was nearly inevitable.



A William Blake illustration for Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*.

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