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' From Pope's perspective as satirist', writes Michael Seidel, ' London is stuffed with the bodies of dunces and awash in printer's ink', hitting upon the early 18th century's proliferation of print culture and its wider implications that Pope was so interested in. This proliferation manifests itself in multifarious ways in his satires *The Rape of the Lock* [1712] and *The Dunciad* [published and revised in 1728, 1729, 1742 and 1743] in which material culture saturates and overwhelms both poems. Both texts also share their roots in Homer's *Iliad*, a choice which elides in some ways with the saturation of material culture, as the ' epic' by its very nature is concerned with grandeur, prizes, and trophies. Although some critics have perceived Pope's satires as mocking works, outrageous parodies of sincere matter, in this essay I will discuss his use of Homer's work as a framing and comparative device to ridicule his contemporary material culture as petty and illusory, during an age which was just beginning to develop self-awareness about its legacy and place in history as well as the world, in literary debates about newness vs returning to classical antiquity, and the emerging perception of England as a mercantile capital of the world. Tensions between the illusory and tangible, and worldly and domestic weave through Pope's satires, centred round the chaos of the material world, which constitutes a central target for Pope's attacks on his contemporary world, in turn mocking those who [sometimes quite literally] buy excessively into its false sincerity or promises.

Pope's *Rape of the Lock* is often referred to as a ' mock epic', or, ' satiric burlesque' by Seidel for example, who describes the mode as ' a substitute literary program, a way of rearticulating an important part of any culture's

reassessment of its literary inheritance'. For writers in Pope's era, this notion of 'inheritance' was centered largely on the classical writers of the Augustan period, Homer being whom Pope took inspiration from for his satire.

However, to state this, or to label Pope's work 'mock' epic or 'burlesque' implies that the epic itself is the locus of his satire, when in fact, much the opposite is true. In spite of claims that his works 'do violence to Homer's passages, adulterate them', it seems clear from Pope's corpus of work, including a translation of Homer's Iliad, strongly implies his reverence for the ancient poet:

'He was a Father of Learning, a Soul capable of ranging over the whole Creation with an intellectual View, shining alone [...] leaving behind him a Work adorn'd with the Knowledge of his own Time [...] A Work which shall always stand at the top of the sublime Character'[,]

Pope's admiration of the poet's work is clear in his depiction of it as standing 'at the top of the sublime character', and far from mockery, this passage illuminates Pope's desire to emulate Homer's role. He perceives him as 'capable of ranging over the whole creation', producing a 'work adorn'd with the knowledge of his own time', an position Pope attempts to achieve, as Seidel describes the Dunciad as 'a monumental instance of how the scope of satire expands in the early eighteenth century to absorb virtually everything modern society can display and produce'. By taking on this same role and absorbing the epic conventions he so admires, the satirical nature of Pope's works arises from the changed scope of what 'society can display and produce', rendering his own world disappointing in comparison to that of the epic. The notion of 'prizes' or 'trophies' are motivations in both The Dunciad <https://assignbuster.com/homer-and-the-influence-of-material-excess-in-alexander-popes-the-rape-of-the-lock-and-the-dunciad/>

and The Rape of the Lock for example, yet whilst the Trojan war is fought over Helen, the woman prized enough to 'launch a thousand ships', the 'prize' of concern in The Rape of the Lock seems barely a quarter of the worth, as merely a lock of hair:

'This Nymph, to the destruction of mankind,/Nourish'd two Locks, which graceful hung behind' [Canto II, 19-20]

These two lines work in a way much like the chronology of Pope's work following Homer's; the 'destruction of mankind' on line 19 sets up anticipation something terrible or disastrous, yet they are met on the following line with an image of two locks of hair, hanging benignly and 'gracefully' from the Lady's head. This is exemplary of the classical hyperbole and sense of inflation Pope proliferates throughout the poem as he exposes the concerns of those in the poem to be hysterical and excessive. Through this same method, Pope plays on anxieties of his age of its legacy in history, by substituting a mighty warrior and his weapon with Belinda and her bodkin:

'Now meet thy fate, incens'd Belinda cry'd,/And drew a deadly bodkin from her side./ (The same, his ancient personage to deck,/Her great great grandsire wore about his neck,/ [...] Form'd a vast buckle for his widow's gown [...] Then in a bodkin grac'd her mother's hairs/Which long she wore, and now Belinda wears'. [Canto V, 88-90, 92, 95-6]

Pope fashions a history to the bodkin akin to that of those included in classical epics in reference to the warrior's weapons. Again, Pope here

employs hyperbole, scaling down a mighty weapon to a 'bodkin', a kind of <https://assignbuster.com/homer-and-the-influence-of-material-excess-in-alexander-popes-the-rape-of-the-lock-and-the-dunciad/>

needle which is inept to inflict any 'deadly' blows. Much like Helen reduced to a lock of hair, the bodkin provokes a feeling of loss in reflection upon the classical epic, and more importantly, an inflated perception of petty material goods as important or powerful. Whilst the weaponry objects attributed to Homer's warriors leave them a legacy of heroism, Pope expresses ridicule for the frivolous object[s] Belinda and her recent ancestors are remembered by, in every case here being merely decorative, worn 'about [a] neck' or gracing 'her mother's hairs'. Satirising a real incident, Pope fashions a perspective around the closed, civilized world his characters inhabit, and his Homeric frame both expresses the pettiness of their argument, but also mocks the habit of sensationalising and placing excessive faith in objects of little real importance.

Whilst I have analysed specific objects of ridicule in Pope's satire, what has not yet been addressed is the mass proliferation of material things in his work. The Rape of the Lock is ornate, decorated with objects, exemplified by Belinda's toilet which strikes parallels to a virtuosi's curiosity collection:

'Here files of pins extend their shining rows,/Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bible, Billet-doux./Now awful Beauty puts on all its arms'[Canto I , 137-142]

In an almost sacrilegious fashion, the 'bible' is jumbled carelessly amongst Belinda's 'puffs' and 'powders' as though equal in value. It is here then that an opposition arises, where we see that not only are petty objects inflated to false values, but that things of importance are neglected. In The Dunciad, this complaint is the centre of Pope's attack upon the proliferation of print culture, which as he saw it, brought a 'new wind of commercial and material

order in England' as writing became heavily involved with economic capital. In this mock epic, he again appropriates part of Homer's work in his heroic couplet form, but also structurally, as we see the goddess of Dullness at 'war' with reason, and dark at war with light. Much as with Rape of The Lock, the framing device poses The Dunciad's 'war' as fought for ignoble ends. Pope mourns for a lost purity in writing as figures and tropes from Homer's epic multiply, and become warped or excessive. Homer's Hera, for example, who is described as cow-eyed, becomes an ugly 'Juno of majestic size,/With cow-like udders, and with ox-like eyes'[Book II, 155-6] in Pope's work. We see two different kinds of 'excess' arise between The Rape of the Lock and The Dunciad, where in the former, Homer's heroic style applied to the argument makes it appear excessive and overblown, using this to mock the treatment of petty commodities as prized, worldly goods, and in the latter, elements of Homer's work are directly magnified and multiplied to ugly proportions in order to condemn those writers he deems to be muddying the waters of the literary sphere. With the rise of print culture and the lapsing of the licencing act in 1695, Pope sees the literary sphere as overwhelmed with bad writers and bad work, looking only for money, rather than the purity he finds in Homer's work:

' Now thousand tongues are heard in one loud din:/The Monkey-mimics rush discordant in;/Twas chatt'ring, grinning, mouthing, jabb'ring all, And Noise and Norton, Brangling and Brevall, Dennis and Dissonance, and captious Art'[.][Book II, 227-231]

The alliterative turns are to be waded through here, as the lines move rapidly from 't' sounds through to 'n's and 'b's, making it a mouthful to <https://assignbuster.com/homer-and-the-influence-of-material-excess-in-alexander-popes-the-rape-of-the-lock-and-the-dunciad/>

read, especially out loud. On this point of readerly difficulty in the poem, Aubrey L. Williams supposes that 'so weighty, and occasionally, so unassimilated are the materials of history and personality that the poem's organizing principles and central themes at times struggle through the mass of detail painfully, if at all'. Whilst this comes across as a criticism of Pope's style, this confusion or struggle can be usefully considered as deliberate stylistic excess, utilized as part of the poem's emphasis on the literary world's overcrowding, mirroring the way in which he perceives his own literary world to be a chattering 'mass' of bad work. Pope sees a 'thousand tongues' as negative, strongly advocating Dryden's succinct decree: 'Learn to write well, or not to write at all', and suggesting that for an age to be remembered, it is better to have one skilled 'tongue' like Homer's producing great work rather than a 'thousand' producing work of poor quality, as he saw in his contemporary world ' " little hope of maintaining the principles and standards of literature, largely derived from the classic past" '[.]

In looking at the two satires' depictions of excess, Barbara Benedict's notion of 'the material replac[ing] the moral' seems especially fitting, for it was not simply that the 'trophies' or valued objects of Homer's Iliad had degenerated into meager locks of hair, but also that the material elements of things were pored over excessively, negating moral good or satisfaction. For example, Pope levels his attack at one point in *The Dunciad* at Sir Thomas Handmer, who edited Shakespeare into exceptionally ornate editions:

'The decent Knight retir'd with sober rage,/ " What! no respect, he cry'd, for Shakespear's page/But (happy for him as the times went then)/Appear'd

Apollo's May'r and Aldermen,/On whom three hundred gold-capt youths
await,/To lug the pond'rous volume off in state'. [Book IV, 113-118]

With 'sober' rage, Sir Thomas laments a lack of respect for Shakespeare's 'page', or writing, yet at the appearance of a hundred 'gold-capt youths' he is pacified in an instant, as all moral outrage dissipates in the face of material wealth. This is of course the crux of Pope's satire in *Dunciad*, as he depicts both writers and the booksellers who [quite literally] chase them as mercenary and greedy, neglecting the moral duty to produce good literature in favour of material gain. In fact, the feeling of being overcome by bad writers and literature goes as far to suggest that words or essays have a physical weight, with 'show'rs of Sermons, Characters, Essays,/ In circling fleeces whiten all the ways:/So clouds replenish'd from some bog below,/Mount in dark volumes, and descend in snow'. [Book II, 361-364]

Belinda's lock of beautiful hair is the primary material desire of *The Rape of the Lock*, and petty collections are amplified to heroic status, whilst poets and booksellers of *The Dunciad* dedicate themselves to churning out hack literature and amassing material wealth. Yet all of these things are exposed by Pope as excessive in nature, and ultimately, illusory gains. In *The Rape*, Belinda's lock literally disappears: 'The Lock, obtain'd with guilt, and kept with pain/In ev'ry place is sought, but sought in vain' [Canto V, 109-110] and the quarrel comes to nothing, whilst in *The Dunciad*, writers and booksellers compete for prizes like 'a pig of lead' [Book II, 281], and in their 'dull' literary pursuits, all become the same, or as Pope puts it: ' " Reader! These also are not real persons ... Thou may'st depend on it no such authors ever

lived: all phantoms'. Their work amasses to so little that the authors and their work may literally be conceived of as meaningless, or transparent.

Excess, especially in the case of material objects, is pervasive in Pope's satire, and it is Homer's Epic that provides the springboard from which Pope mocks both the superfluous concerns given to petty matters, as well as the excessive propagation of hack literature by those writers deemed not qualified to write. In writing his satires, Pope drew directly from the contemporary world he perceived in order to control, and tame or change it, as is often the intention of satire generally. By means of his own 'excess', whether that is in heroic form laid over petty subjects, words and characters accumulating physical weight and presence, or the distorting of classical tropes and figures, Pope attempts to contain that 'excess' he so despises in his own world. It seems nothing characterizes this better than his constant re-revisions of *The Dunciad* in particular, as over the years the real people he satirizes change and transform, and as Rosenblum notes, if somebody made 'a suitable act of submission to Pope' he/she could be 'taken out of the poem'. Pope contains his real-world subjects within his satires to display their foolishness, and thus hypothetically, until they make a 'suitable act of submission' to prove their innocence, they remain the subjects of ridicule for their investment in petty, meaningless masses of things.