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Why Tibbald?

Gene E. Kiernan

Pope's *Dunciad* was first published May, 1728 with Lewis Theobald or "Tibbald" as the King of the dunces:

I see a King! who leads my chosen sons
To lands, that flow with clenches and with puns;
'Till each fam'd Theatre my empire own,
'Til Albion, as Hibernia, bless my throne!
I see! I see! — 'Then rapt, she spoke no more.
'God save King Tibbald!' Grubstreet alleys roar.¹

Later, in 1743, the *Dunciad* was published in a revised edition with Colly Cibber replacing Theobald as the hero. Most critics find Cibber a more fitting hero. Theobald, as Pope's first choice, is usually explained as a retaliatory gesture emanating from Theobald's book *Shakespeare Restored: Or, a Specimen of Many Errors . . . Committed . . . by Mr. Pope*, published in 1726. There can be no denying Pope's pique with what purported to question his competence as an editor; however, it seems certain from the activities of the Scriblerus Club that an attack on the dunces was in the making as early as 1714. Undoubtedly, Theobald was chosen to reign as King because of his activities as a dramatist and not primarily because of his labors as an editor. Pope's choice of Theobald was plainly not petty but of artful design.

If pettiness had been Pope's primary motive, Theobald would probably never have been replaced by Cibber. For after being crowned King of the dunces, Theobald glorified his reign in 1728 by publishing a volume entitled *Posthumous Works of William Wycherley*. The friendship between Pope and the elder Wycherley is well documented, as well as Pope's efforts over some five years in helping the aged man revise his poems. During the years of revision, Pope and Wycherley had agreed that some of the poems should not be published. After the death of Wycherley, however, his widow, influenced by her second husband, selected Theobald to oversee the publication of Wycherley's poems. When the first volume was published, Pope recognized some poems were not Wycherley's; "he was convinced that Theobald had included material that was not Wycherley's and had foisted revisions of his own into the genuine pieces . . ."² Pope prepared a denunciation of Theobald's editorship entitled *Posthumous Works* and in it included his correspondence with Wycherley and some of the copies of the poems he had helped to revise. Significantly, Theobald's projected second volume of Wycherley's poems never was published. It is interesting to note that one of the poems Pope spent some time

re-working was entitled "Poem on Dulness."³ Therefore, if Pope was only a spiteful man and not an artist, Theobald might still reign as King. But, since meanness alone has never been known to create great literature, some consideration may be profitably given to the question: Why did Pope feel his age needed an emetic such as the *Dunciad* with "Tibbald" as the hero?

First, the attitude of Pope and other Augustans was that the "poet was a man speaking to the other members of a civilized society . . ."⁴ Therefore, it follows that the poet's role was synonymous with that of the reformer: he had a moral duty to society. This view was not held by Pope alone; Addison too attempted to raise the level of culture. Admittedly, their methods differed, Addison more often using persuasion while Pope's weapon was satire. Indeed, John Butt states that all of Pope's writings are both ethical and topical; "in the contemporary extravagance and follies Pope always sees the abuse of a general principle . . ."⁵ Pope's concern in the *Dunciad* is the general disintegration of Taste in his time. The *Dunciad* is an attack on those Pope held responsible for the deterioration of Taste: the Court, the men of arts, and in particular, the men who wrote for the public theatres. Too often the *Dunciad* is seen as an attack on the writers of Grub Street in general; however, according to Allardyce Nicoll:

only through a study of the stage of these years can we gain a true impression of the literary development and ideals of the early eighteenth century; even particular works, such as Pope's *Dunciad*, cannot properly be appreciated until we enter into the mysteries of the daily repertoire of Drury Lane and of Lincoln's Inn Fields and of the Haymarket.⁶

Viewed from this perspective, the *Dunciad* is not the vituperative brainchild of the "Wasp of Twickenham," but rather, the voice of a prophet. As early as April 10, 1731, a critic writing in *The Universal Spectator*, and *Weekly Journal* states:

. . . we are now sunk so intollerably low in respect of Taste, that things at present draw an audience of People of Fashion into our Theatres, which in the Days of Our Fathers and Grandfathers, would have excited the Hisses of Servant Maids and 'Prentices, at every Puppet-Show.⁷

A contributing factor in what Pope saw as the disintegration of tradition and Taste was the attitude of the Court. Beginning with the reign of Queen Anne in 1702 and continuing with the accession of the Hanoverians in 1741, the theatre did not enjoy the favor of the Court. As the influence of the Court decreased and the educated aristocracy withdrew their patronage, the rising middle class moved into the theatres bringing with them their middle class attitudes and aspirations. Long before Pope published the *Dunciad*, John Dennis, one of Pope's critics, deplored the conditions that existed in the theatres. Dennis categorized the audiences into three groups: "younger brothers suffering under the laws of primogeniture, merchants, and foreigners. All, he says, contributed to the debility of the theatre."⁸ Or as Pope writes and explains in the notes by Scriblerus:

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Books and the Man I sing, the first who brings
The Smithfield Muses to the Ear of Kings.⁹
(I, ll. 1-2)

The questionable Taste of the Smithfield rabble was fast becoming the national Taste.

This new audience had little liking for tragedy; with their lack of a classical education and their preoccupation with the commercial world, they did not accept the Ancients as the last stronghold of Taste and Decorum. This new audience did not go to the theatre to judge the play as the imitation of Nature following basic rules; they went to be amused. Nor was this audience concerned with an author's invention, his creativity. It was then, a time of "struggle between the classically inclined traditionalists on the one hand, and, on the other, those who found reason to question older beliefs."¹⁰ True, critics favored the pseudo-classical, and Addison's *Cato*, presented in 1713, was successful. Actually the success of *Cato* is usually attributed not to its merit as a well-written drama, but rather as a successful political spectacle.¹¹ Overall, tragedy was not popular. Rather, play lists for the years 1700 through 1749 show that in the early years comedy and opera brought the people out. Later, opera and comedy gave way to the more popular pantomime and farce.¹² This gradual decay from the sublime to the ridiculous was for Pope the outward sign of moral decay, a decay inspired by the audience and fostered by those writers who pandered to the low Taste of the audience. In the *Dunciad* Pope paints a graphic picture of Taste gone mad:

'See now, what Dulness and her sons admire;
See! what charms, that smite the simple heart
Not touch'd by Nature, and not reach'd by Art.'
He look'd, and saw a sable Sorc'rer rise,
Swift to whose hands a winged volume flies:
All sudden, Gorgons hiss, and Dragons glare,
And ten-horn'd fiends and Giants rush to war.
Hell rises, Heav'n descends, and dance on Earth,
Gods, imps, and monsters, music, rage, and mirth,
Till one wide Conflagration swallows all.¹³

(Bk. III, ll. 226-236)

This is the world of the *Dunciad*. There was "no writer who did not stoop from the more serious realms to produce an opera or a farce."¹⁴ In this world of the theatre, Lewis Theobald played an active role in the demise of Taste.

The writers for the theatre in the eighteenth century are varied and many. Paradoxically, the men most associated with eighteenth century literature, Pope, Johnson, and Swift are the exception rather than the rule in their singular non-involvement in dramatic writing. Pope attempted only one play in collaboration with Gay and Arbuthnot; Samuel Johnson contributed only one mediocre drama, *Irene*, and Swift never did more than give advice to Gay and perhaps offer Gay a few verses. The

majority of the men in the *Dunciad*, however, are representative of the age, an age that had to wait for Oliver Goldsmith (1768) and Richard Sheridan (1775) to bring some semblance of creativity to the stage. For the better part of the eighteenth century “writing for the theatre engaged the attention of only second or third-rate writers.”¹⁵

Of the thirty-some names mentioned in Book I of *The Dunciad Variorum*, seventeen can be associated to some degree with dramatic writing: Draper, Cibber, Settle, Haywood, Ozell, Gildon, Tate, Philips, Dennis, Banks, Congreve, Ward, Shadwell, Howard and Tibbald. Everyone was a dramatist in his spare time. For example, most readers associate the name of Steele with the *Spectator* papers and not the four comedies he wrote for the stage. Similarly, Addison’s name is coupled with his superior prose and the tragedy of *Cato*, but the opera *Rosamund* and the comedy *The Drummer; or, The Haunted House* are long forgotten. Ambrose Philips, if he is remembered at all, is connected with the Pope-Pastoral controversy: his tragedies *The Distrest Mother*, *The Briton*, and *Humfrey, Duke of Gloucester* are only fillers for theatre history books. Theobald’s reputation is generally confined to his work as editor of *Shakespeare Restored*, but this is no more representative of Theobald’s major literary endeavors than is *Cato* representative of Addison’s literary efforts, and Pope knew it.

Pope and Theobald were contemporaries; both men were born in 1688 and both died in 1744. But each man went his separate literary way, Pope to become the arbiter and servant of Taste, while Theobald, for most of his life, was subservient to the Tasteless. For Pope, Theobald’s choice was the unpardonable sin, and for this, Theobald or “Tibbald” was made King of the dunces. It is interesting to note that Pope’s use of “Tibbald” rather than Theobald has engendered little critical comment. The writer would like to suggest Pope’s choice as one more example of Pope’s studied satirical style. Scriblerus tells us: “Lewis Tibbald (as pronounced) or Theobald (as written) . . .”¹⁶ The question still remains: Why did Pope use the pronounced version? True, it is ridiculous, but if critics agree that Pope’s intent in the *Dunciad* was to portray the disintegration of Taste, perhaps the choice of “Tibbald” has greater significance. Theo is recognized as the Greek root for the word *God*; obviously this is not applicable to the King of dunces who represents not the moral good, but the immoral, the decay of Taste. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Tib* was originally a typical name for a woman of the lower classes, but just as Taste degenerated (with Theobald’s help), so by Pope’s age did the word *Tib*, and undoubtedly the readers of the *Dunciad* recognized the prefix for the more common term, strumpet. It does not seem to be far of the mark to presume that Pope saw little difference between the woman who sold her flesh and Theobald who prostituted his art.

Lewis Theobald began his dramatic career with an heroic play *The Persian Princess: or The Royal Villain* written and acted when he was eighteen years old. Apparently this initial offering was not received enthusiastically; it was performed only twice.¹⁷ In 1714, Theobald translated two plays by Sophocles, but neither *Electra* or *Ajax* were performed. Pope alludes to these plays in *The Dunciad Variorum*:

. . . : A folio Common place

Founds the whole pyle, of all his works the base;
Quarto's, Octavo's, shape the less'ning pyre,
And last, a little Ajax tips the spire.¹⁸

(Bk. I, ll. 139-142)

Until 1716, Theobald confined his literary endeavors to nothing more concrete than assisting a fellow dramatist, Griffen, in writing "*A Complete Key to the Whay-d'ya-Call-It*," a satirical piece about Gay's successful play. In the "Key" Pope is called a *knave* and Gay dubbed a *blockhead*.¹⁹ In February 1716, Theobald's *The Perfidious Brother* was performed four times at the Lincoln's Inn Field theatre. In this play Rodrigo was the hero as was, according to Scriblerus, Memnon the hero of *The Persian Princess*.²⁰ Pope skillfully places them both on the altar of Dulness:

The opening clouds disclose each work by turns,
Now flames old Memnon, now Rodrigo burns,
In one quick flash see Proserpine expire,
And last, his own cold Aeschylus took fire.²¹

(Bk. I, ll. 207-210)

Proserpine refers to a Pantomime-Opera written by Theobald in 1727, the reference to Aeschylus is to a work never completed. Long before Pope consigned Theobald's plays to the fire, however, public sentiment had judged them failures.

There is no doubt that Theobald found his failure difficult to accept, and not unlike Pope, was determined to have the last word against the hisses from the pit. In a preface to the published plays, Theobald "abused the *little critics*, scorned their *ill-nature* and appealed to better judges."²² Time has proven the critics' good judgement; the plot of *The Perfidious Brother* is judged hackneyed and a reworking of an earlier play, *The Unnatural Brother* (1699) by Filmer. In 1716, Henry Meystayer published his tragedy *The Perfidious Brother* to prove Theobald's guilt of plagiarism.²³ If after this inauspicious beginning Theobald had quit the theatre and used his talents "to follow Nature," Pope would probably have been the first to laud his decision. Unfortunately, Theobald:

a capable scholar turned to pen the foolish ditties which pleased the spectators in the pantomime displays.²⁴

Except for an alteration of Shakespeare's *Richard II* and the adaptation of the much suspected *Double Falsehood*²⁵ presented as "A Play" of Shakespeare's, "Theobald wrote nothing for the stage between 1716 and 1731 that achieved production, except opera and pantomime."²⁶ In other words, Theobald was continuing the tradition of Settle, the Poet Laureate, and was in this sense, Settle's heir to the throne of Dulness. To appreciate Pope's condemnation, the use of the term pantomime is not to be confused with the art form *Commedia dell'arte* as performed by French and Italian companies. In England in the eighteenth century, pantomime meant: "... a motley combination of song, dance,

clownage, and spectacle . . .”²⁷ For Pope this was a debasement of art, a prostitution if you will, and reason enough for crowning Theobald “King Tibbald.”

Too often Theobald is viewed as the unsuspecting scholar suddenly crowned and crucified in the *Dunciad*. But the *Dunciad* was not the first time Pope used Theobald as an example of a bad dramatist and a worse poet. In “Peri-Bathos: Of the Art of Sinking Poetry” published in the third volume of the Pope-Swift *Miscellanies* (March, 1728), Theobald is singled out as one of the swallows:

authors that are eternally skimming and fluttering up and down, but all their ability is employed to catch flies.²⁸

Also in the essay are three examples of Theobald’s writing taken from the *Double Falsehood*. The most memorable is an example of the “buskin” style in Chapter XII in which Theobald is alleged to interpret “open the letter” to read: “Wax! render up thy trust.” If, as many critics believe, the “Peri-Bathos” is a serious appraisal of contemporary morality and contemporary letters then, it follows that the *Dunciad*, too, is a critical document not of men as personalities, but men as symbols of dullness. Though critics today find Cibber the more suitable hero, apparently Pope’s contemporaries accepted Theobald in his assigned role.

In *The Author’s Farce* (1730) and in *Tom Thumb* (1730), Henry Fielding, writing under the familiar pseudonym Scriblerus Secundus, effectively satirizes Theobald. In *The Author’s Farce*, the character Don Tragedio tells the audience:

That Welcome, yes, that Welcome is my Due,
Two Tragedies I wrote, and wrote for you;
And had not Hisses, Hisses me dismay’d,
By this, I’d writ Two-score, Two-score, by Jay’d.

Theobald’s fondness for and insistence on repetition was one of the criticisms he had made of Pope’s edition of Shakespeare. Fielding’s parody of Theobald’s mannerism of useless repetition is not unlike Pope’s in *The Dunciad Variorum*:

And are these wonders, Son to thee unknown?
Unknown to thee? These wonders are they own.²⁹
(Bk. III, ll. 269-270)

As Charles B. Woods points out, Fielding’s audience was well aware that Theobald was the King of the dunces in the *Dunciad*, and though they may not have read his tragedies, they had many times seen the thunder and lightning in the pantomimes he composed for John Rich, the theatre manager of Lincoln’s Inn Fields theatre.³⁰ From 1730 until 1748 these two plays by Fielding enjoyed continuous popularity which would seem to imply that even after Theobald was deposed by Pope the contemporary audience accepted Theobald if not as the King a plausible runner-up.

The judgement of modern critics should in no way deprecate Pope’s choice of Theobald in the original *Dunciad*. Pope chose Theobald or “Tibbald” not because of spite

or personal animosity, but because Theobald was, at the time, the best example of Nature mis-ruled. Theobald was deposed not because Cibber was any more contemptible, but primarily because as Poet Laureate, Cibber represented the national moral decay of Taste. Whether the hero is Theobald or Cibber, Pope's final commitment is to demonstrate that

When, in the *Dunciad*, the king and his nobility, the intellectual and moral preceptors of the nation, give ear to the 'voices' of a Blackmore, a Theobald, or a Cibber, and acquiesce in an invasion of the polite world by writers who pander to flaccid emotions and effeminate mind, their acts (not wholly fictional) become metaphores which suggest a general social and moral breakdown within the nation.³⁰

Finally, as an afterword, we may say that though Theobald lost his throne to Cibber, he was in fact given a Temple, anonymously. In 1745 there appeared at the Drury-Lane theatre a satire upon Italian opera entitled: *The Temple of Dullness. With the Humours of Signor Caoccio, and Signora Dorinna*. For many years Colly Cibber, who survived Theobald by thirteen years, was given credit for this comic opera, but now it appears that *The Temple of Dullness* is "only the burlesque part of *The Happy Captive* by L. Theobald,"³² written in 1741. It seems certain that if in 1730 someone more worthy than Cibber had been named Poet Laureate, Lewis Theobald would still reign as King Tibbald in his Temple of Dullness.

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¹ Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad Variorum*, in *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. by John Butt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 369-370.

² Vinton A. Dearing, "Pope, Theobald, and Wycherley's *Posthumous Works*," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, LXVIII (March, 1953), 224.

³ George Sherburn, ed., *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, Vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), p. 31.

⁴ Geoffrey Tillotson, *On the Poetry of Pope* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), p. 19.

⁵ John Butt, "The Inspiration of Pope's poetry," in *Essays on the Eighteenth Century*, Presented to David Nichol Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), p. 70.

⁶ Allardyce Nicoll, *Early Eighteenth Century Drama*, Vol. II of *A History of English Drama 1660-1900* (Cambridge: University Press, 1961), p. 3.

⁷ John Loftis, ed., *The Augustan Reprint Society Essays on the Theatre From Eighteenth-Century Periodicals* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1960), p. 18.

⁸ Vera Mowry Roberts, *On Stage, A History of Theatre* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 254.

- ⁹ Pope, p. 349.
- ¹⁰ Nicoll, p. 415.
- ¹¹ David Harrison Stevens, *Party Politics and English Journalism 1702-1742* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1916), p. 25.
- ¹² Nicoll, p. 59.
- ¹³ Pope, pp. 415-416.
- ¹⁴ Nicoll, p. 59.
- ¹⁵ Roberts, p. 284.
- ¹⁶ Pope, p. 106.
- ¹⁷ Nicoll, p. 78.
- ¹⁸ Pope, p. 362. In the note for line 142, the editor notes: "It is doubtful if this translation (1714) was by Theobald." However, Nicoll includes it in his "Hand-List of Plays" on p. 359 and p. 444.
- ¹⁹ Sherburn, Note, p. 288.
- ²⁰ Scriblerus appears to be using the term hero *loosely* since Nicoll, p. 78. names Artaban as the hero of this play.
- ²¹ Pope, p. 366.
- ²² John Doran, *Annals of the English Stage, or Their Majesties' Servants*, Vol. II (New York: Bigelow, Brown & Co., 1919), p. 385.
- ²³ Nicoll, p. 118.
- ²⁴ Allardyce Nicoll, *British Drama* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1963), p. 175.
- ²⁵ Critics are still not sure of the authenticity of this play. If it is a play by Shakespeare, Theobald's philosophy of editing can be questioned. Why did he make no mention of it in *Shakespeare Restored*, and why didn't he publish the original without alterations?
- ²⁶ Charles B. Woods, "Theobald and Fielding's Don Tragedio," *English Language Notes* (June, 1965), 268.
- ²⁷ Mitchell P. Wells, "Some Notes on the Early Eighteenth Century Pantomime," *Studies in Philology* XXXII (1935), 598.
- ²⁸ Alexander Pope, "Peri-Bathos: Of the Art of Sinking Poetry," in *Literary Criticism of Alexander Pope*, ed. by Bertrand Goldgar (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 54.
- ²⁹ Pope, *The Dunciad Variorum*, p. 417.
- ³⁰ Woods, 268-271.
- ³¹ Aubrey Williams, *Pope's Dunciad, A Study of Its Meaning* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1955), pp. 40-41.
- ³² George Whiting, "The Temple of Dullness and Other Interludes," *Review of English Studies* Vol. 10 (April, 1934), 206.