Essays

Transcription Conventions

- "The Emperor of China His Letter to Queen Elizabeth" (1600)
- John Donne's "To His Mistress Going to Bed" As an Open Source
- Sequence and Design in Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*
- A Seventeenth-Century Prophecy of Merlin
- The Marginalized Voices of Chaucer's Early Readers
- Poetic Authority in Manuscript and Print: The Case of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dryden's *The State of Innocence and Fall of Man*
- Ben Jonson and Manuscript Culture
- The Circulation of Poetry in the Eighteenth Century: The Case of Charles Plumptre's Manuscript Volume
- Gendering Hands, Gendering Business: A Letter from Elizabeth Bagot
- Copying Fatherly Advice
- Episodes in the Pastoral
- "Let them Compleately Learn": Manuscript Clues About Early Modern Women's Educational Practices
- Teaching Reading and Writing
- The Royal Paper Office

The Circulation of Poetry in the Eighteenth Century: The Case of Charles Plumptre's Manuscript Volume

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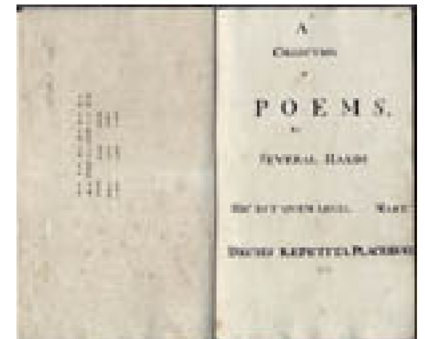
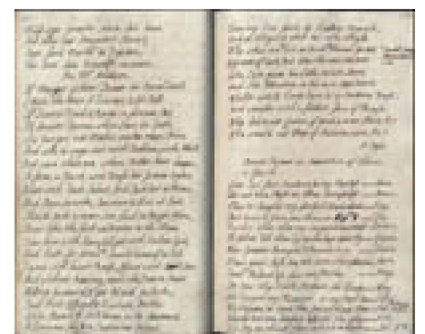
On September 7, 1728 Charles Plumptre (1712–1779) began a manuscript miscellany book of poetry, *A Collection of Poems by Several Hands* (Folger MS M.a.104). Plumptre was from a notable Nottingham family and, in the course of his life, would become an eminent cleric in the Church of England. The teen-aged Plumptre, following convention, signed and dated on the first front end leaf what could have been a blank book purchased for the purpose, and he carefully set out a title page that imitated printed title pages of the day. The front pastedown bears the bookplate of John Plumptre, identified by the Folger catalog as the author's older brother. The recto of the first leaf after the endleaves, hinged onto the title-page, contains sample addresses—"Dear Cousin," "Dear Sir"—`and other scribblings, while the verso contains what may be sample poetic meters, or calculations, written in ruled vertical lines. The volume includes pages numbered to 131, with 118 pages of these containing verse. The rest of the book remains blank. From the classical epigrams Plumptre appended to its conventional title, we can see that he envisaged his book as a personal repository of contemporary poetry. Much of what Plumptre carefully copies is light verse of the kind that might appeal to a schoolboy: bawdy rhymes addressing randy mistresses or defiant proclamations that there is more to school than studying.



But Plumptre also records poems by some of the great poets of the day, including Alexander Pope (1688–1744). For instance, on pages 32 and 33, he copied out Pope's satiric lines "On Mr. Addison," a set of verses with a vexed and complicated relationship with manuscript and print modes of production and distribution. Analysis of the history of these lines, their various forms, and ultimate print publication in final form seven years later can shed light on the interpenetration of print and manuscript in the early eighteenth century and on the ways in which a successful author like Pope could attempt to manipulate these media in his own cultural and economic interest. At the same time, manuscript publication, so less easily controlled than print, could subvert the author's original aims. Publishers used manuscript verse for their own profit, and readers continued to copy out verses by hand even when printed versions were available.



Joseph Addison (1672–1719) was best known as the author, with Richard Steele, of the periodical essay, *The Spectator*. Pope's lines attacking him eventually were incorporated in expanded form in his *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, which was first printed in January 1735. Pope apparently composed the first version of these lines in 1715 and showed them in manuscript to Joseph Addison in order to deter his former mentor from patronizing a rival translation of Homer being prepared by Thomas Tickell (1685–1740). Indeed, Addison may have been the prime mover behind his friend Tickell's edition. After being shown Pope's verses, Addison stopped supporting Tickell, and Pope's own translation of the *Iliad* (published 1715–1720) became a great critical and popular success.

Addison died in 1719. Some critics, in the eighteenth century and later, have accused Pope of mean-spiritedness for continuing to circulate these lines. Norman Ault exonerates Pope through constructing a plausible timeline for circulation of the lines before Addison's death. An unattributed version reached print as early as 1722, in the *St. James's Journal* (a short-lived weekly periodical). An anonymous contributor calling himself "Dorimant" wrote to the editor from Button's Coffeehouse contributing a manuscript of the poem that had apparently been circulating hand to hand. Button's was, in fact, the site of Addison's "little senate" and the butt of some of Pope's satire, but Dorimant reports that *"The following Lines have been in good Reputation here, and are now submitted to Publick Censure."*

There were subsequent unauthorized publications of Pope's verses on Addison in printed miscellanies produced by "the Unspeakable" Edmund Curll (*d.* 1747), a London bookseller with whom Pope had quarreled for years. One of Curll's collections of verse included Pope's lines with the title "Verses Occasioned by Mr. Tickell's Translation of the First *Iliad* of Homer." The first authorized edition of the poem was published as "Fragment of a Satire" in Volume 3 of the Pope-Swift Miscellanies of 1727, but by this time, the lines on Addison had been altered and expanded.

Plumptre's version of the lines closely approximates the early version of manuscript circulation, as far as can be determined from comparison with the *St. James's Journal* and Curll's *Court Poems* (1726). However, Plumptre did not apparently take his copy from one of Curll's editions: this can be inferred from Plumptre's gloss on these lines, which were omitted from the versions later published with Pope's authorization:

> Who when two *wits on Rival* Themes Contest,
> Approves of Each, But likes the worst the Best.

Apparently without access to Curll's title, which refers to the topical occasion for the verses, Plumptre annotated these lines with "*Sewel's Garth's Metamorphoses" (George Sewell, *bap.* 1687–1726; Samuel Garth, 1660/1661–1719). With this note, Plumptre suggested that Pope was making cultural commentary on rival translations of Ovid rather than writing personal invective to shut down cultural debate. Of course Plumptre was wrong. Whether justified or not, Pope could be mean-spirited.

Plumptre probably copied his version of the lines from a source dependent upon the version in the *St. James's Journal* or from manuscript sources. Plumptre's version differs from the earliest surviving manuscript of the poem, a copy owned by the xx^th^ earl of Oxford and in the Welbeck collection. It is very similar to the version published in the *St. James's Journal*, but the title, the attribution to Pope, and the erroneous note on the source of the satire suggest that Plumptre was working either from an annotated copy of the printed version or a manuscript version incorporating title, attribution, and erroneous gloss.

Pope's lines are a literary descendent of the manuscript libels popular in the seventeenth century. The verses had an immediate social function (shutting down Addison's patronage of a rival) and geographic reference. Coffeehouses like Button's, which functioned as sites for reading, writing, and conversation, became crucial sites in the formation of what Habermas calls the "public sphere." A letter from Pope to Addison's friend James Craggs in July, 1715, complained that Button's was no longer the non-partisan space it had been, and blamed Addison for its metamorphosis into a playground for factional partisanship. Dorimant's note in the *St. James's Journal*, however, suggested a version of Habermasian disinterestedness in which common readers could participate in public events.

In Curll's volume, Pope's lines on Addison are followed by an "Answer to the Foregoing Verses. Presented to the Countess of Warwick." Curll hoped to profit from his theft of Pope's verse and also to humiliate the poet. Pope's own publication of an expanded set of verses in 1727 fits into a general pattern: writing in manuscript—such as his letters and his famous *Rape of the Lock*—would be circulated in manuscript, published without his approval (but, in some cases, with his crafty complicity), and then published again in corrected, explicitly authorized fashion. Alexander Pope, often thought to be one of the first authorial heroes of "print culture," built his career upon manipulation of the conventions of manuscript circulation of verse. Plumptre's admiring copy of the poem signals the preeminence of Alexander Pope not only in the literary marketplace, but in the overlapping, but not identical, world of manuscripts. It also demonstrates that comparison of manuscripts (and manuscripts with various printed sources) does more than create stemma in service of producing a copy text. Indeed, the complicated history of these lines—and Plumptre's innocent recording of one version of them— illuminates a complex literary world involving multiple writers, the publishing world, and readers dispersed throughout the isle of Great Britain.

Suggested Reading:

Ault, Norman. "Pope and Addison." *Review of English Studies* 17, no. 68 (1941): 428–51.

Curll, Edmund, ed. *Court Poems in Two Parts. By Mr. Pope, &c.* London: E. Curll, 1726.

Mack, Maynard. *Alexander Pope: A Life.* New York: Norton, 1985.

Plumptre, Charles. "A Collection of Poems by Several Hands." 1728.

Pope, Alexander. "[Lines]." In *A Compleat Set of St. James's Journals*, 201. London: J. Hughs, 1722.

Pope, Alexander. "Epistle to Arbuthnot." In *Poems of Alexander Pope.* John Butt, ed. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963.

Pope, Alexander. "Fragment of a Satire." In *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse by Pope, Swift, and Gay.* Alexander Pettit, ed. London: Pickering & Chatto, 2002.