

ALEXANDER POPE: UNLOCKING THE KEY

BY FREYA JOHNSTON

This article discusses the image and function of the key in Alexander Pope's works, and its involvement in various attempts to understand and explain him. As a device for encrypting or decrypting a code, a 'key' permits either the further concealment or revelation of meaning, and sometimes both: a sense which enters the language with Francis Bacon in 1605, but which is not fully realized as a satirical opportunity until the early eighteenth century. The subgenre of the 'key' may be a small part of the unwholesome trade of deciphering, but it raises vital questions about originality, authority, cooperation, competition, and group identity. Keys to Pope's, Swift's, and Gay's works suggest some fruitful ways in which to track rival theories about their own writing and its reception; at its ornate Scriblerian best, the key is a riddling device, furthering the obscurity rather than breaching the mysterious specificity of the original.

I

Philip Larkin declared that, approaching any writer's work for the first time, we should attempt 'to determine what element is peculiarly his, which imaginative note he strikes most plangently'.¹ At the risk of confounding two musical terms, in Pope's case that imaginative note might well be the key. As a device for encrypting or decrypting a code, a 'key' permits either the further concealment or discovery of uncertain meaning, and sometimes both, within a single work. This sense enters the language with Francis Bacon in 1605, but it does not become a fully realized satirical opportunity until the early decades of the following century.²

Barbara Everett, reviewing Maynard Mack's *Alexander Pope: A Life* in 1985, observed that Mack's wish to give 'a comprehensive account of the man in his times' possessed 'something static [...] which is matched by the general movement, or lack of movement, the sense of relished vista in the book as a whole'.³ That 'sense of relished vista'—an appreciative summing up and standing back that feels purposefully limited—is wholly in tune not only with Mack's biography but also with Pope's formal poetic achievement. Hence the fitness of the *Life* to its

1 Philip Larkin, 'Wanted: Good Hardy Critic', in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces, 1955-1982* (London, 1983), 168-74 (172).

2 See *OED* 'key', 5b: 'A word or other device for encrypting or decrypting a code or cipher; something which enables the interpretation of an allegorical, cryptic, or otherwise obscure work; a means of translating a foreign text'.

3 Barbara Everett, 'Tibbles: A New Life of Pope', in *Poets in their Time: Essays on English Poetry from Donne to Larkin* (London, 1986), 120-39 (124). The original article appeared in the *London Review of Books* (17 October 1985), 11-14.

subject: it mimics the poet's wish to arrest motion and to capture and enclose it on the page.

Along with the *Pastorals* (1709), 'January and May; or, The Merchant's Tale: from Chaucer' was the first of Pope's poems to be published. It shows a vivid attention to boundaries and how to police them:

Hither the Noble Knight wou'd oft repair
 (His Scene of Pleasure, and peculiar Care)
 For this, he kept it lock'd, and always bore
 The Silver Key that op'd the Garden Door.

Pope then changed the second couplet so that it read:

For this, he held it dear, and always bore
 The Silver Key that lock'd the Garden Door.⁴

The revision eliminates a slight abruptness in the first version of the passage, in which we move directly from learning that the garden was 'kept [. . .] lock'd' to the key that 'op'd the Garden Door'. But in so doing the couplet also moves away from the source poem's 'unshette' to its opposite: the 'Key' is no longer treated as an instrument that opens, but as one that locks. In Pope's case there is always a strong possibility that keeping something locked (first version) might be tantamount to holding it dear (revised version); the 'peculiar Care' of secure domains belongs to the 'element [. . .] peculiarly his'. Take another of his revisions, this time to *The Rape of the Lock* (1714):

Sol thro' white Curtains did his Beams display,
 And op'd those Eyes which brighter shine than they;⁵

In the poet's *Works* (1717), these lines become:

Sol thro' white curtains shot a tim'rous ray
 And op'd those eyes that must eclipse the day;⁶

The change weakens the force of the sun, which rather than display its beams only to be outshone is made to appear timorous and 'must' then be eclipsed. The revised opening (of Belinda's eyes, and of the action of the poem), compared to that of 1714, offers a more definitive occlusion, one which at once obstructs and

4 *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, ii: *The Rape of the Lock and Other Poems*, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson, 3rd edn, reprinted (London and New Haven, CT, 1966), 'January and May', ll. 465-68. The source lines in Chaucer are: 'This noble knyght, this Januarie the olde, / Swich deyntee hath in it to walke and pleye, / That he wol no wight suffren bere the keye / Save he hymself; for of the smale wyket / He baar alwey of silver a clyket, / With which, whan that hym leste, he it unshette.' *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford, 2008), *The Merchant's Tale*, ll. 2042-7.

5 Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock 1714* (Menston, 1969), Canto I, ll. 13-14 (p. 2). Unless otherwise stated, all references to *The Rape of the Lock* are to the 1714 text.

6 Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, in *The Works of Mr. Alexander Pope* (London, 1717), 116 (Canto I, ll. 13-14).

enables the reader's view. For Pope, while he presents us with a vision that is blinding, also clearly looks forward to Belinda's loss of sight and life in the sober but celebratory final lines of the poem:

When those fair suns shall set, as set they must
And all those tresses shall be laid in dust
This *Lock*, the Muse shall consecrate to fame,
And 'midst the stars inscribe *Belinda's* name! (Canto V (1717), ll. 147-50)

In 1717, Canto I eschews solar display and introduces sudden darkness: the light of day will be dimmed by two rival suns. Morning is made to resemble evening; sunrise looks like sunset; eyelids open, and cast sunlight into shade. Pope's revision brings the opening of *The Rape of the Lock* closer to its ending. The introduction of the modal imperative 'must' to line 14 allows us to read that line as in the past or present tense, since 'must' retains the same form regardless, whereas in 1714 the implication of 'shine' is that the owner of those eyes remains alive. But the 1717 phrasing also mirrors that of Canto V: Belinda's eyes 'must eclipse', but 'set they must', too. In returning to *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope's sense of how to open his work was governed by how that work closes.

Everett takes mild issue with Mack's claim that Pope's elusiveness or reserve was 'peculiar to himself', arguing that most poets are 'inward'.⁷ But even if we put temporarily to one side the relationship between art and life, there remains within Pope's verse—in which 'half the skill is decently to hide'⁸—a drama of revealing and concealing. The two opposing verbs are often rhymed in his work, but he seems to favour the latter. It may be a joke that coffee allows the politician to be 'wise, / And see thro' all things with his half shut Eyes' (*Rape of the Lock*, Canto III, l. 118). Nevertheless, constitutionally, Pope is a half shut rather than half open kind of writer, one whose creative vision is enabled rather than hampered by the proximity of ending ('half shut' becomes 'half-shut' in 1717, another closing down, or in, of sorts within the poem). Long before 'Universal Darkness buries All' at the end of *The Dunciad*, there is something instinctively more appealing to him about closing and locking than about opening and revealing.⁹ Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that closing and half closing are Pope's favoured ways of opening. After all, this is a writer who began another poem with the words 'Shut, shut the door', thereby excluding the rest of the world from a domestic realm into which the reader is invited.¹⁰ He encourages us to wonder which side of the door we are

7 Everett, 'Tibbles: A New Life of Pope', 127.

8 Alexander Pope, *Epistle to Burlington* (1731), in *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, iii.ii: *Epistles to Several Persons (Moral Essays)*, ed. F. W. Bateson (1951), l. 54.

9 *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, v: *The Dunciad*, ed. James Sutherland (1943; repr. 1966), Book iv, l. 656.

10 *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, iv: *Imitations of Horace and An Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot and The Epilogue to the Satires*, ed. John Butt (1939), *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, l. 1.

on; to ask whether we are being issued into, or left out of, a private view; whether the speaker is being hospitable, or hostile, or both.

Pope's acts, in verse, of closing, shutting, and locking seem mostly to relate to the protected viewing of secret truths, and to the threats that may be posed to such viewing. When, in *The Rape of the Lock*, we are assured of the poem that 'This, ev'n *Belinda* may vouchsafe to view' (Canto I, l. 4), the sense of what *Belinda* may be doing is not entirely clear. It depends on whether 'view' is a verb, in which case we can read the line as saying that *Belinda* will herself deign to look upon the work; or a noun, in which case she seems to be granting her permission for the poem, and herself, to be open 'to' a more public 'view', as if she is conferring a gift on the poet and on us. The first reading keeps the poem in a semi-private or coterie setting; the second licenses 'ampler *Vista*'s'.¹¹ One 'view' is more open than the other.

In *The Rape of the Lock*, views have formal limits set to them and guards placed around them—as do women themselves, or rather those beings 'inclos'd in Woman's beauteous Mold' (Canto I, l. 48). All such 'inclosed' creatures harbour the promise and the pleasure of being 'unveil'd', 'display'd', and 'uncover'd' (Canto I, ll. 121, 124), but full disclosure, like absolute closure, is tantamount to severance. The poem rests on a delicate and elaborate network of partially revealed truths and passions that is brought to an end only when 'the fatal Engine' has 'clos'd' on the lock (Canto III, l. 149). Pope toys with the full range of meanings attached to and implicit in the verb 'close': it suggests finality, but also proximity and combat (closing in, on, and with someone or something); it can signal enclosure within a secure domain, but also the destruction of all security. This is perhaps only to say that mock-epic is as concerned as its epic parent with war and peace. Pope includes many lines that are locally parodic of the *Iliad*—for instance, 'Where Wigs with Wigs, with Sword-knots Sword-knots strive, / Beaus banish Beaus, and Coaches Coaches drive' (Canto I, ll. 101-2), echoing the *Iliad*'s 'Now Shield with Shield, with Helmet Helmet clos'd, / To Armour Armour, Lance to Lance oppos'd'¹²—as well as the longer and more sustained imitation that is *Clarissa*'s speech, added to Canto V in 1717. Claude Rawson has interpreted such moments as part of the civilizing process of mock-epic, a form that shows 'astonishing reticence about bloodshed and war' and which urges us not to glory but to recognize our shared mortality.¹³ This way of looking at the poem in relation to epic might encourage us to read *The Rape of the Lock* as a key to the *Iliad*, a poem which has its own interest in keys and locks:

With Skill divine had *Vulcan* form'd the Bow'r,
Safe from Access of each intruding Pow'r.

11 Alexander Pope, *The Temple of Fame* (1715), another poetic response to Chaucer, in *Twickenham*, ii. 259 (l. 263).

12 *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, vii: *The Iliad Books I-IX*, ed. Maynard Mack, Book iv, ll. 508-9.

13 Claude Rawson, 'Heroic Notes: Epic Idiom, Revision and the Mock-Footer from the *Rape of the Lock* to the *Dunciad*', in *Alexander Pope: World and Word*, ed. Howard Erskine-Hill (Oxford, 1998), 69-110, 78.

Touch'd with her secret Key, the Doors unfold;
Self-clos'd behind her shut the Valves of Gold.¹⁴

The open-and-shut case of 'unfold; / Self-clos'd' is perhaps indebted to the first lines of *Hamlet*, which Pope would go on to edit a few years later, and hence to another imperial location in which safety from intrusion is a key concern: 'stand and unfold your self', says Francisco to Bernardo at I.i.2, meaning: explain yourself.¹⁵ However, the echo of *Hamlet*'s unfolding in that of Pope's *Iliad*, if it is an echo, may also be a false lead. At this point in the *Iliad*, we are inside a place not unlike Belinda's bedroom—Hera's 'bright' female 'Apartment'—rather than (as in *Hamlet*) outside and among men in the dark. The doors of the regal boudoir unfold only as a prelude to their magical, automated closing. This is not a process of one human self revealing its friendly intentions to another, but the securing of an individual private realm in which nature will be beautified in order to deceive: Hera is preparing to seduce Zeus and therefore to divert his attention from Troy.

Walter Benjamin, writing on Kafka, worried at the German equivalent of 'unfolding' (*Entfaltung*):

The word 'unfolding' has a double meaning. A bud unfolds into a blossom, but the boat which one teaches children to make by folding paper unfolds into a flat sheet of paper. This second kind of 'unfolding' is really appropriate to the parable; it is the reader's pleasure to smooth it out so that he has the meaning on the palm of his hand. Kafka's parables, however, unfold in the first sense, the way a bud turns into a blossom. That is why their effect resembles poetry.¹⁶

In Benjamin's account, if unfolding is tantamount to explanation and containment, however pleasurable, it is inimical to poetry. But the kind of unfolding that is a development into the beautiful rather than the merely comprehensible deserves, he says, to be classed quite differently. There are all sorts of reasons to question this account of flat versus three-dimensional 'unfolding' (not least because parables, whether by Kafka or anyone else, are very rarely clear in their meanings). But rather than oppose the two, if we combine the blossoming view with something that can be held in the palm of a hand, we end up with a form of unfolding that seems true of Pope's relished vista. His verse delights in securing and displaying an image within due limits, like flies in amber, but it does not explain or wish us to understand what motivates its acts of containment; this is part of the reason why it does not itself feel limited.

The *Iliad*'s highly decorated, self-closed bower, its treasure concealed and safeguarded from 'intruding Pow'r', might stand for the Popeian closed couplet, with

14 *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, viii: *The Iliad Books X-XXIV*, ed. Maynard Mack (1967), Book xiv, ll. 193-6.

15 Alexander Pope, ed., *The Works of Shakespear*, 6 vols (London, 1725), vi. 345.

16 Walter Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death', in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn, ed. Hannah Arendt (London, 1999), 108-36, 118.

of a line that looks as if it threatens to spill over or seep into the next, as a train might well do. The crowded brain and the sweeping train are describing parallel spheres of activity, but there is another thought process in play and at work in the rhyme that shows us the imaginative association between them: it moves from brain to train, from crowding to over-crowding to sweeping to containment. The line-end at ‘Train’, with one word perched atop another and squared off parenthetically, looks as if it were one of the sylphs who defend the fabled petticoat and ‘Form a strong Line about the silver Bound, / And guard the wide Circumference around’ (Canto II, ll. 123–4). It is the privilege and the task of Pope’s verse to release or discover its own secrets to the world; no-one else is quite permitted to do so.

II

In Book XXI of the *Odyssey* (1726) translation, we read of Penelope that:

A brazen key she held, the handle turn’d,
With steel and polish’d elephant adorn’d:
Swift to the inmost room she bent her way,
Where safe repos’d the royal treasures lay;²⁰

The adjective ‘brazen’ is associated with duncehood and the *ignes fatui* of Colley Cibber and his brethren in the *Dunciad* (1744).²¹ But even in the very different atmosphere of the *Odyssey*, a ‘brazen key’ turns out to possess the whiff of indecorum, as Pope notes in his ‘Observations on the Twenty-First Book’ of the *Odyssey*:

The Poet very circumstantially describes the key, and the make of it [. . .] This conduct has been liable to objection, as made up of particulars of small importance, to no propos’d end. But notwithstanding, every circumstance is not without its effect and beauty, and nothing better shows the power of the Poet’s diction. [. . .] However, I will not promise that these digressions and ancient histories will please every Reader; the passage is so far from being faulty, that it is really an instance of *Homer*’s judgment; yet every thing that is not a fault, is not a beauty.

The contradictory judgements of success and failure mixed up in this passage have partly to do with an epic that borders on mock-epic—this section of the poem is identified as a ‘little History’, containing ‘particulars of small importance’—but which is nevertheless asserted as a model of decorum. Homer, Pope says, ‘adapts his verse to the nature of his subject’; the passage reveals his ‘judgment’; as a key to a lock, this style, we are told, is fitting.²² The translation of epic and its lapses or

20 *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, vii: *The Odyssey Books XIII–XXIV*, ed. Maynard Mack (1967), Book xxi, ll. 9–12.

21 ‘Great Cibber’s brazen, brainless brothers’; ‘Cibberian Forehead, and Cibberian Brain, / This brazen Brightness’. Pope, *Twickenham*, v: *The Dunciad*, Book I, ll. 32, 218–19.

22 Pope, *Twickenham*, vii. 258–9 n.

near-lapses in propriety offers and indeed begins to codify a way of composing mock-epic, but the reference of circumstantiality back to the Homeric poet's character and discretion causes some difficulties. Attempting to justify it leads his translator into the same long-winded awkwardness as that which characterizes the poem at this stage. The explanation of Homer, in other words, raises as many questions as it answers; and in this, Pope's translation—another 'key', of sorts, to the original text—is typically, fruitfully, vexed.

The habit of reading *à clef* might seem a particularly Scriblerian one. But keys to well-known poems pre-date the group's emergence—to Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681–2), for instance²³—and earlier still Ben Jonson complained in the 1607 dedicatory epistle to *Volpone* (1606) that

Application is now grown a trade with many; and there are that profess to have a key for the deciphering of everything; but let wise and noble persons take heed how they be too credulous, or give leave to these invading interpreters to be over-familiar with their fames, who cunningly and often utter their own virulent malice under other men's simplest meanings.²⁴

The purity of an author's motives cannot vouchsafe the innocence of what he writes, which hangs in the last resort on those who read it. The 'invading interpreter', a figure who wedges himself between the author and the public, resembles Joseph Addison's impertinent 'Anagrammatist', who, when he

takes a Name to work upon, he considers it at first as a Mine not broken up, which will not shew the Treasure it contains till he shall have spent many Hours in the Search of it: For it is his Business to find out one Word that conceals itself in another, and to examine the Letters in all the Variety of Stations in which they can possibly be ranged.

Addison's contempt for such a practice becomes clear when he compares it to the art of the acrostic, and declares 'it is impossible to decide whether the inventor of the one or the other' is 'the greater Blockhead'.²⁵ There is a further resemblance between such unwelcome ransackers and the author of an imitation, who in Dryden's formulation also performs a kind of grab and smash: he 'assumes the liberty not only to vary from the words and sence, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion: and taking only some general hints from the Original, to run division on the ground-work, as he pleases'.²⁶ The most unwholesome variety of all those

23 [Christopher Ness], *A Key (With the Whip) To Open the Mystery & Iniquity of the Poem called, Absalom & Achitophel: Shewing its Scurrilous Reflections Upon both King and Kingdom* (London, 1682); Anon., *Absolon's IX Worthies: or, A Key to a late Book or Poem, Entitled A. B. & A. C.* (London, 1682).

24 Ben Jonson, 'The Epistle', *Volpone, or The Fox*, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, iii: 1606–1611 (2012), 29.

25 *The Spectator*, 5 vols, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford, 1965), no. 60 (9 May 1711), 253–8, 255.

26 John Dryden, 'Preface to the Translation of Ovid's Epistles', *The Works of John Dryden*, i: *Poems 1649–1680*, ed. by Edward Niles Hooker and H. T. Swedenberg, Jr. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1956), 114–15.

would-be writers who read, as Pope put it, ‘but with a Lust to mis-apply’,²⁷ is the hack, whose perversions of meaning and intention are summed up by Richard Savage, posing as Iscariot Hackney. He recalls Edmund Curll forcing him to churn out

Obscenity and Profaneness, under the Names of *Pope* and *Swift*. Sometimes I was Mr. *Joseph Gay*, and at others *Theory Burnet*, or *Addison* [...] Had Mr. *Oldmixon* and Mr. *Curll* agreed, my assistance had probably been invited into Father *Boheur’s* [Bouhours] *Logick*, and the critical *History of England*.²⁸

The preposition ‘in’ or ‘into’ feels aptly inappropriate in these circumstances: it is inserted where it doesn’t belong—‘witty *in* another man’s works’, ‘my assistance [...] invited *into*’—what is gestured towards is the rape of a lock. Both Jonson and Savage are describing extreme, invasive acts of impersonation and misattribution, an utter disregard for authorial integrity expressed in the wanton acts of copying, chopping, extending, glossing and re-selling old works for new. The pursuit of concealed meaning, the anagrammatist’s ‘Treasure’, entails the destruction of an original work; it becomes a casket whose gems have been ransacked.

As far as the trade of deciphering is concerned, however, other men’s meanings tend not to be as ‘simple’ as Jonson protests. There is no need entirely to dismiss the assertion, commonly made in eighteenth-century keys to other people’s works, that they have been published because readers needed help. After all, as Swift warned Pope (with reference to *The Dunciad*), ‘twenty miles from London no body understands hints, initial letters, or town facts and passages; and in a few years not even those who live in London’.²⁹ ‘*An Emblem without a Key to’t*’, as Roger L’Estrange cautioned, ‘*is no more then a Tale of a Tub*’—thereby launching one of Swift’s weirdest, most brilliant spoofs, which in turn provoked a wave of attempts both to gloss and destroy it.³⁰ The hack of the *Tale* was rightly confident that ‘Commentators’ would be appointed to explain ‘this elaborate Treatise’ and ‘certain dark points’ that are raised and buffeted about within it; however, a complicated and typically Scriblerian aspect of its ‘elaborate’ nature is that the *Tale* is already gasping under the weight of its own interpretations.³¹ Explanatory keys to satirical works by the Scriblerians are, generally speaking, opportunistic and belligerent forms of writing, neither sophisticated nor elegant—but they entertain the same questions about origins and authority as appear in the most

27 Pope, *Epistle to Arbuthnot* (l. 301) in *Twickenham*, iv, 117.

28 Iscariot Hackney [Richard Savage], *An Author to be Lett* (London, 1729), 3–4.

29 *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, 5 vols, ed. George Sherburn (Oxford, 1956), ii, 504.

30 Sir Roger L’Estrange, ‘The Preface’, *Fables of Æsop and other Eminent Mythologists* (London, 1692), I, sig. A6 v.

31 *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift*, i: *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works*, ed. Marcus Walsh (Cambridge, 2010), 73.

celebrated contributions to (say) the ancients and moderns quarrel. Keys dispute, often in their crudest form, ideas about collaboration, imagination, justice, and authorial accountability.³²

To some extent, these publications as they relate to the Scriblerians are shaped by differences in individual temperament: John Arbuthnot was seemingly uninterested in laying claim to his own part in any collaborative act of creation, and this aspect of his character (coupled with his day job as physician to the stars) meant he largely escaped the personally intrusive attentions of a key. The 1712 *Compleat Key* to his John Bull pamphlet *Law Is a Bottomless Pit* says nothing at all about the author, merely vaunting the fact that it has ‘above a hundred more explanations than in any former edition’.³³ Had the interpreter chosen to be more antagonistic, it is unlikely he would have got a rise out of Arbuthnot.

Swift, a much more proprietorial writer, went on the offensive against Curll’s *Key* to the *Tale*, describing him in a ‘Postscript’ as ‘a Prostitute Bookseller’ and the *Key* as ‘a foolish Paper’. The idea of the author (a person distinct from the dedicator, bookseller, and the whole tribe of hack writers) that is propounded throughout the *Tale* is that of a single figure. Rubbishing the claim of joint composition made in Curll’s *Key*, which asserts that Thomas and Jonathan Swift split the work between them, Swift, writing as ‘The Author’, insisted ‘that the whole Work is entirely of one Hand, which every Reader of Judgment will easily discover’.³⁴ That did not quite wash with many eighteenth-century readers, perhaps in part because of the influence of the *Key*: Johnson doubted that the *Tale* was Swift’s, and on at least one occasion attributed its wayward brilliance to Arbuthnot.³⁵ The structural incoherence of the work also encouraged the belief that more than one person was involved. Curll’s *Key* opportunistically glossed such incoherence as incompleteness and the result of multiple authorship—the *Tale*, having passed between two people and countries, simply had not been

32 See e.g. *A Complete Key to the Tale of a Tub; with some account of the authors, the occasion and design of writing it, and Mr. Wotton’s remarks examin’d* (London, 1710); *A Complete Key to the New Farce, call’d Three Hours after Marriage* (London, 1717); *A Key, being Observations and Explanatory Notes, upon the Travels of Lemuel Gulliver* (London, 1726); *The Brobdingnagians. Being a Key to Gulliver’s Voyage to Brobdingnag* (London, 1726); *The Flying Island, &c., Being a Key to Gulliver’s Voyage to Laputa, Balnibarbi, Glubbdubdribb, Luggnagg, and Japan* (London, 1726); *The Kingdom of Horses. Being a Key to Gulliver’s Voyage to the Houyhnhnms* (London, 1726); *A Compleat Key to the Dunciad* (London, 1728); *A Miscellany on Taste. By Mr. Pope, &c. [...] With notes variorum, and a compleat key* (London, 1732); *Achilles Dissected: Being a compleat key of the political characters in that new ballad opera* (London, 1733).

33 *A Compleat Key to Law is a Bottomless Pit, in all its parts: with above a hundred more explanations than in any former edition* (London, 1712).

34 Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works*, 14, 15. This volume of *The Cambridge Edition* reprints Curll’s *Compleat Key*; for his claim that the *Tale* was the work of more than one hand, see 236–7, 247.

35 See *Lives of the Poets*, iii. 208 and n. For his suggestion that Arbuthnot wrote it, see *Johnsonian Miscellanies*, 2 vols, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (Oxford, 1897), i. 374 n.

finished—which offered a chance to suggest that more material would be forthcoming.³⁶ In a sense, this is the most important aspect of any key, whether by the author or his antagonist: it keeps the argument, and the profits, going. The hint is therefore repeatedly dropped of a sequel to the work, or of gaps in the original, or both.

Those who attacked the Scriblerians in keys were more interested in gunning for Pope than they were in anyone else, and this resulted in some other, strategic reattributions of authorship. When Pope and Arbuthnot contributed to John Gay's freakish satirical farce *Three Hours After Marriage* (1717), their reward was a critical onslaught whose target was Pope (George Sherburn called *Three Hours* 'an important pre-Dunciad storm center').³⁷ The play retains trace elements of the conversational jostling that must have produced it: one voice is often at risk of being drowned out by a different strain, or is interrupted by it, and the climax results from a wildly competitive exchange of wit and opinion. Hostile responses to *Three Hours* sought primarily to demolish Gay's mild, grateful, but unwise acknowledgement that it was the work of three people, a point of origin that may be echoed in the title—itsself an echo of his three-book poem, *Trivia, or the Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716). Gay, it seems, was keen on triplets.³⁸ *A Complete Key to the New Farce, call'd Three Hours After Marriage*, in which Curll had some part, set itself the task not so much of explaining as of meting out its own form of justice to the authors, attempting to distribute blame and responsibility for a play that was not nearly as disastrously received as the *Complete Key* would have us think. We are told that the text sold badly and was plagiarized, that Pope taught Gay how to write, and that Gay's contribution to the farce was in any case vanishingly small; in the epigraph on the title-page, he confesses that it was Pope and Arbuthnot who 'made' *Three Hours*.³⁹

Those claims are elaborated in John Breval's *Confederates: A Farce* (1717), a work supposedly by Gay. Breval identifies Pope as the real, sole author of *Three Hours*, a point made plain in the illustration on the title-page, where he stands centre stage, shrugging as if to say, 'Who, me?'

36 See Swift, *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works*, 236–37, 247.

37 George Sherburn, 'The Fortunes and Misfortunes of "Three Hours after Marriage"', *Modern Philology*, 24 (1926), 91–109 (91 n.1).

38 Gay wrote in the 'Advertisement' to the play: 'I must farther own the Assistance I have receiv'd in this Piece from two of my Friends; who, tho' they will not allow me the Honour of having their Names join'd with mine, cannot deprive me of the Pleasure of making this Acknowledgment'. *Three Hours After Marriage. A Comedy* (London, 1717).

39 E. Parker, *A Complete Key to the New Farce, call'd Three Hours After Marriage. With an Account of the Authors* (London, 1717).

THE 2
CONFEDERATES:
 A
F A R C E.

By Mr. GAY.

Rumpantur ut ilia CODRO.



These are the Wags, who holly'did adventure
 To club a Farce by *Trivante Indotata!*
 But, let 'em share their Dividend of Praife,
 And wear their own Fool's Cap, instead of *Bay.*
 Proh. to the Substantif.

LONDON: Printed for R. BURLEIGH,
 in Amen-Corner. 1717. [Price 1s.]

The epigraph from Virgil's *Eclogues*, '*Rumpantur ut ilia CODRO*'—'May Codrus's sides burst with envy'—alludes to a singing contest between the rival swains Thyrsis and Corydon, referring to another (third) poet. *The Confederates* thus reveals, at an even earlier stage than other keys to Scriblerian works, that it is unwilling to accept collaborative authorship as a reality—except in the coercive form of an agreement between the original work and its negative, unwelcome interpretation.⁴⁰ In fact, 'agreement' and its cognates tend to be threatening and sarcastic words in keys. In the epigraph to the first edition of Curll's *A Compleat Key to the Dunciad*, we read: 'How easily Two Wits agree, / One finds the Poem; One the Key.'⁴¹ This evidently tries to place the authors of poem and key in positions of equality; but 'finds' suggests, in addition, that both kinds of writing are acts of locating rather than of inventing. Like the 'Business' of Addison's anagrammatist—to find out one Word that conceals itself in another—authorship is presented not as a matter of imagination but of laying something bare (hence the primary eighteenth-century sense of 'discovery' as 'uncovering'), whether in a poem or its key. This is a canny suggestion, merging the status of a parasitic key with that of the original work, while also hinting at Pope's solicitude to conceal what others seek to reveal. It raises further questions about literary ownership, as

40 [John Breval], *The Confederates: A Farce. By Mr. Gay* (London, 1717).

41 Edmund Curll, *A Compleat Key to the Dunciad* (London, 1728).

well as about the priority of the creative impulse over other forms of thinking and behaving. The author of *A Tale of a Tub* asserts, near its close, that ‘I have thought fit to make *Invention* the *Master*, and to give *Method* and *Reason*, the Office of its *Lacquays*.’⁴² The satirical impetus here might be to demonstrate how vital method and reason actually are; they should not, in any sane scheme of things, be subordinated to the inventions of authors who may well be deluded. On the other hand, this remark wraps up a tale which its own author subsequently characterized as the product of one man’s magnificent ‘flow of imagination’.⁴³

In the second edition of *A Compleat Key to the Dunciad*, the epigraph has changed, and it accompanies an intensified attack on Pope in the form of Richard Blackmore’s ‘Character’ of his ‘Profane Writings’. It now says: ‘How easily Two Wits agree, / One finds the Satire; One the Key.’⁴⁴ What is the difference between finding *satire* and finding *poetry*? Is ‘Satire’ synonymous with the malicious tendencies that many writers wish to diagnose in Pope, and with the profanity of which he is accused in the appended ‘Character’? Is the revised epigraph perhaps attempting to deny him the title of poet, diminishing his efforts to those of a mere libeller? If so, it is a tradition that persists in the decades after Pope’s death; Vicesimus Knox, writing about Joseph Warton, notes that ‘The author of the essay on Pope [...] seems to deny the justice of Mr. Pope’s claim to the title of a true poet, and to appropriate to him the subordinate character of a satirical versifier’.⁴⁵ Scriblerus’s ‘Notes Variorum on the Dunciad’ pay close attention to the first three editions of Curll’s *Key*, quoting and discussing their assertions, sometimes in order to dispute them, but also suggesting them as possible solutions to unresolved matters in the *Dunciad*—and in the process occasionally turning Curll’s authority back on himself.⁴⁶ Both Pope and Curll played the game of mock-complimenting one another’s work, presenting the other’s latest contribution to the *Dunciad* and its commentaries as a supportive, even collaborative endeavour.

If keys possess a unified critical method, it is that of attending minutely to single phrases and words, reproduced a line or two at a time, and attempting to map each of them on to equivalent events, persons, or things in the world. One effect of such commentaries is therefore to render the original work an anthology, as it were, of itself; the Scriblerians mimicked Curll’s scattergun example when they began to publish miscellanies of their own in the late 1720s. A key enforces agreement between the text and its interpreter, but in the process it also disaggregates the coherence of the original, transforming the *Dunciad* into what Curll describes as a

42 Swift, *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works*, 136.

43 Cited in Swift, *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works*, ‘Introduction’, xl.

44 Curll, *A Compleat Key to the Dunciad. With A Character of Mr. Pope’s Profane Writings*, 2nd edn (London, 1728). The title-page advises the reader that copies of *The Dunciad* may be purchased from Curll.

45 Vicesimus Knox, ‘On the Prevailing Taste in Poetry’, *Essays Moral and Literary. A New Edition*, 2 vols. (London, 1782), ii. 185–9 (186).

46 See e.g. ‘Testimonies of Authors’ in *Twickenham* v. 25 n, 39 n; 106 n, 145 n; 152 n.

'Patch-Work Medley', a poem whose individual elements must be translatable into single real-life explanations or mere nonsense—but whose overall purpose can only be stupid, vain, or evil.⁴⁷ Most keys repudiate the pleasures of ambiguity and multiplicities of intention. They spring order from confusion only by refusing to comprehend more than one meaning at a time. The multi-lingual, restless punning of which the Scriblerians are so fond is anathema to the morally pofaced character of the typical key. Combined with that punctilious, blinkered attention to detail, and the unconvincing posture of moral outrage, is what might seem to be a contradictory reluctance among the authors of keys to confine their attacks to a single poem. For the key claims to unmask what are murkily called religious or political 'tendencies'.⁴⁸ And those tendencies have to be shown to govern every work, because the author can only ever mean the same (bad) thing.

Given the figurative and allusive senses of the word 'key' as the spiritual authority transmitted from Christ to St Peter, and therefore to the Pope as his successor, there is special piquancy in a written key which claims to unmask the Catholic tendencies of *The Rape of the Lock*.⁴⁹ The first edition of *A Key to the Lock* appeared in 1715. The title page names the author as 'Esdras Barnivelt, apothecary',⁵⁰ the choice of profession implying one who purveys dubious solutions. The work was soon attributed to Pope himself; it had in fact been circulating among his friends the year before it was printed.⁵¹

Bearing in mind the date of its initial appearance, this is the key to a not-quite-finished poem. It should therefore perhaps be viewed as part of the work of completing *The Rape of the Lock*, just as the *Iliad* translation complements the mock-epic poem that was being written and revised alongside it. It is hard to imagine Pope writing a *Lock* without having a *Key* at the same time in mind; and this is, after all, a poem full of singletons looking for their lost halves—the glove, the slipper, the lock itself, and two warring families apparently waiting to be laughed back together again.⁵² By 1715, Pope had added the game of ombre and the supernatural machinery to the *Rape*, but he had yet to write Clarissa's speech (the so-called 'MORAL' of the poem, and therefore in itself another 'key' to the

47 *A Compleat Key to the Dunciad*, 'To the PUBLIC', iv.

48 See e.g. the 'Tendency to Popery' revealed in *A Key to the Lock*, in *The Prose Works of Alexander Pope*, vol. i: *The Earlier Works, 1711-1720*, ed. Norman Ault (Oxford, 1936), 197.

49 See *OED* 'key', 3a: 'With allusion to Matthew 16:19 [...] R.C. Church. The spiritual authority believed to have been transmitted from Christ to St Peter, and so to the Pope considered as his successor, as symbolized by the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Also in a wider sense: the power or authority of the Christian Church or its priests.'

50 His name is not Pope's invention, but originated in William King's *Voyage to the Island of Cajamai* (1709), itself a satirical attack on another book. In *A Further Account of the Most Deplorable Condition of Edmund Curll* (London, 1716), Barnivelt is invited to join a society committed to defaming and libelling Pope; his task is 'to make further Discoveries' (16-17).

51 See Pope, *Prose Works*, 'Introduction', i. lxxiii-lxxv.

52 See Spence, *Observations*, I.43-4 on the origins of *The Rape of the Lock* and the wish for Pope to make two families 'laugh together again' (i. 44).

'lock').⁵³ Like the *Rape*, its *Key* went through several printings, with new editions appearing in 1715, 1718, and 1723.

The general premise of the *Key* is that the *Rape* is a political allegory on the Barrier Treaty (signed in November 1715), in which Belinda is, initially, Great Britain (or its Queen) and the Lock is the Treaty. This is glaringly impossible, given that the first version of the *Rape* appeared in 1712. But publishing a mock-interpretative and patently wrong-headed key of this kind serves a number of useful authorial purposes. Like the *Rape*, its *Key* begins with a letter of dedication, this time from the ostensible author to 'Mr. Pope' and puffing his qualifications for writing a publicly beneficial exposé: Barnivelt dispenses '*salutary Medicines*' and furnishes antidotes against '*Poyson*', such as that '*baneful Serpent, Popery*', which has been '*so artfully distilled*' in the *Rape*. Barnivelt, it turns out, is a '*naturalized*' citizen of Great Britain. The reason he is so attuned to the dangers of the poem is that he is himself an outsider looking in, possibly a lapsed Catholic.⁵⁴

Barnivelt absurdly suggests that the Catholic elements of the *Rape* are somehow covert or suppressed, while allowing Pope to tease readers with his name and identity via 'Popery' of various kinds. Obviously the butt of a joke, Barnivelt strives desperately to lend a serious political motivation to the *Rape*, but in yoking the poem to the Barrier Treaty he makes any future attempt at such a reading highly unlikely. The *Rape* does have a political remit, but it cannot be tied—as Barnivelt attempts to tie it—to one historical occurrence. Rather, the *Rape* toys with the public and private, male and female, economic and social relations between things and people in ways too light, mobile, and dextrous for the clunky terms of Barnivelt's approach; and, thanks to his cack-handedness, it never quite explains them. This *Key to the Lock* may be false in its specifics, but it is illuminatingly cogent and pertinent in other ways—for instance, in its accusation that the author has designs on 'the Royal Dignity' (by yoking, say, regal 'Counsel' to the drinking of '*Tea*' in Canto III, l. 8). As for the aim of exposing 'secret Designs' in the *Rape*, it seems that the reader might eventually progress towards some of that covert or suppressed or half-glimpsed material. In the dedicatory epistle to the *Rape*, Pope encourages us to think as much when he writes that the poem 'was communicated with the Air of a Secret' ('To Mrs. *Arabella Fermor*', [p. ii]). There is an acute irony to the following passage in the *Key*, springing as it does from a writer whose blunders are a means of obscuring the truth and of covering the true author's designs just at the point at which Barnivelt promises to reveal them:

Since this unhappy Division of our Nation into Parties, it is not to be imagined how many Artifices have been made use of by Writers to obscure the Truth, and cover Designs, which

53 Pope, *Twickenham*, ii. 199 n.

54 *A Key to the Lock*, 'The Epistle Dedicatory to Mr. Pope', in Pope, *Prose Works*, i. 175-6.

may be detrimental to the Publick; in particular, it has been their Custom of late to vent their Political Spleen in Allegory and Fable.⁵⁵

Faction breeds artifice, Barnivelt suggests, which in turn conceals the author's ill humour, foisted on the world in such a way as to be insidiously damaging. Comments of this kind, on the nature of writing and malicious doublespeak, appear throughout the *Key*. Barnivelt tells the reader: 'when the Meaning of any thing is dubious, one can no way better judge of the true Intent of it, than by considering who is the Author, what is his Character in general, and his Disposition in particular.'⁵⁶ How do we read this passage, once we know that Pope is the author both of *Lock* and *Key*? Given his remarks elsewhere, it appears he would have agreed that the author's character and disposition should contribute to how we understand what we are reading; that there is a natural reference from the work to the life and back again.⁵⁷ But by attributing such an observation to Barnivelt, Pope immediately calls into question any appeal to authorial character.

The *Key* adds to the *Rape* more than it explains the poem—adds to it in the sense of enclosing and covering the design of the original work, and in the seemingly opposed sense of publicizing its 'further Progress' in the world. Barnivelt notes, in an advertisement prefacing his *Key*, 'The uncommon Sale of this Book'.⁵⁸ He accuses Pope of having, in effect, supplied a 'Key' to the *Rape* in the form of his dedicatory epistle to the poem; albeit a 'Key' that tells us only 'that [Pope] meant something further'.⁵⁹ 'Meant something further' might well be translated as 'intended to publish something else'—rather than 'meant something other than what he said'—perhaps, among other spin-offs, *A Key to the Lock*. The true author is free, in this purposefully addled context, to rehearse his ideas about creativity and authorial participation in the meaning of a text, both as that text is being written and once it is published and received in the world. *A Key to the Lock* is open without being revealing; it displays the attractions of 'this mysterious way of Writing' via a character incapable of grasping or explaining where it comes from or how it works, although Barnivelt is right to gesture towards circulation of the poem (and of its key) among the author's 'Friends in private' before it is released into the world.⁶⁰ Just as there is a whole range of covert and explicit references in play in the *Key*, depending on whether Barnivelt is thinking about the circulation of Pope's works among a coterie of privileged intimates or in the more anonymous world of print, so we might see the short, grubby, foolish *Key* as one end of a range of thoughts about the meaning and status of epic and mock-epic, with the full-dress of the *Iliad* at the other. The *Key* creates further publicity

55 *A Key to the Lock*, Pope, *Prose Works*, i. 182.

56 *A Key to the Lock*, Pope, *Prose Works*, i. 183.

57 See e.g. *Epistle to Arbuthnot*, ll. 261–304, in *Twickenham*, iv. 114–17.

58 Pope, *Prose Works*, i. lxxxviii (the advertisement was removed from the 1727 edition of the *Key*).

59 Pope, *Prose Works*, i. 184.

60 Pope, *Prose Works*, i. 189, 193.

for the original *Lock*, since readers will need to consult that poem in order to test the validity of Barnivelt's claims (the title-page of the *Key* draws attention to its supplementary function, as does that of *A Compleat Key to the Dunciad*). The *Key* suggests that *The Rape of the Lock*, like *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), is not so much a single poem as a continuing, vibrant, and inventive parodic impulse spanning many different texts and contexts. This becomes even more obvious in the second edition of the *Key* (also 1715), which is supplemented by 'some Congratulatory Poems' of Pope's own devising. The first verse, purportedly by the obscure anti-Catholic writer Nathaniel Castleton, is in the form of an acrostic anagram in which the name 'Barnivelt' is turned into 'Un Barel It'. The false promise of a disgorging of secrets—a casket spewing forth its gems—is accompanied by a joke about Addison's low, coded, mechanical forms of writing. The fact that Pope's *Key* was itself expanding, just as Curll's keys to the *Dunciad* would grow and mutate from one edition to the next, makes it increasingly tricky to differentiate one type of work and its motivation from the other.⁶¹

Thomas Burnet quickly recognized not only that *A Key to the Lock* was Pope's, but also that its ostensible attack on the *Rape* was, in truth, designed to ensure its success: 'Another obliges the World with a *Key* to his own *Lock*, in which the *Wards* are all false: Under the borrowed Shape of an Apothecary, he modestly takes an opportunity to commend the Smoothness of his own Verses, and to publish a Sale of Six Thousand of his Books.'⁶² A work that seemed to expose the author and his poem to the world was, in truth, no more than a glowing review of and an advertisement for it. It is hardly surprising that readers at the time, and critics ever since, have found it hard to tell which attacks on the Scriblerians came from the original authors by way of pre-emptive and parodic strike, and which came from genuine opponents. Burnet threatened to produce, for Pope and his cronies, 'a *Master-Key* now under the File, with which I shall be able to unlock all their Secrets from the Beginning'. (By 'their Secrets' he meant those of Pope and his so-called 'Journey-man', presumably Gay, who is usually given a dubious supporting role, or viewed as a cover for Pope's malicious individual intentions.)⁶³ This was the fantasy of many hacks and dunces: to produce a key to all Scriblerian mythologies, in which the secrets of the entire group would be unmasked, the chief among them being that there was no such group at all. Instead, a sole figure would stand, revealed, to the world: Romish, Jacobite, twisted, and malevolent—but undeniably, maddeningly, successful.

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61 *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, vi: *Minor Poems*, ed. Norman Ault (1954), 133.

62 [Thomas Burnet], *The Grumbler* (6 May 1715); see also Pope, *Prose Works*, i. lxxxvii; J. V. Guerinot, *Pamphlet Attacks on Alexander Pope: A Descriptive Bibliography* (London, 1969), 33.

63 *The Grumbler* (6 May 1715).