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Scriblerus Club

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Keywords

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Abstract

The Scriblerus Club lasted only for less than a year, starting in the spring of 1714, and ending in November of that same year, but the ‘Scriblerian spirit’ that was developed in these few meetings never left their participants. The club consisted of Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, John Arbuthnot, John Gay, and Thomas Parnell, as well as Robert Harley, then the secretary of the treasurer. Working collaboratively, the group created the persona of Martinus Scriblerus, through whose writings they wanted to accomplish their satirical aims. Besides this persona, the idea of ‘hints’ is central to the Scriblerian idea of (collective) creation. The Scriblerians would generously provide each other with creative ideas to be used together or at each member’s discretion, developing a kind of intellectual and creative sociability that is one of the key aspects of its legacy.

The Scriblerus Club was much less a formalized social practice, let alone a social institution like the Kit-Cat Club and much more a concept of artistic creativity that derived from a shared sense of humour as well as a shared sense of aspects of society and culture that were worthy of criticism and satire. Its real existence as an actual practice – authors meeting with the self-conception that they were doing so as part of a club – lasted only for less than a year, starting in the spring of 1714, and ending with Jonathan Swift's move to Ireland in November of that same year, but the 'Scriblerian spirit' that was developed in these few meetings never left their participants, so that it is equally fair to say that the club only ended with the death of its last member, Jonathan Swift, in 1745. And while the club did not immediately generate a lot of creative material, the same spirit can be found expressed in some of the enduring literary masterpieces of the early eighteenth century, and powerfully shapes our own understanding of some of the main literary developments of that period in Britain.

The club was never formalized in the way that other clubs of the era were, and given the small number of members, it might even be difficult to say exactly which meetings among the friends would count as club meetings. As a sociable project, the club had two conceptual sources that came from its most prominent members. One of these was serious, the other mock-serious. Jonathan Swift was honestly advocating for the establishment of an academy of letters similar to the *Académie Française*, a view he expressed in his pamphlet 'A Proposal for Correcting, Improving and Ascertaining the English Tongue' in 1712, that was answered in the same year by John Oldmixon and Arthur Maynwaring in 'Reflections on Dr. Swift's Letter to Harley' and 'The British Academy'. Thus, Swift felt that an association of eminent men of letters could be beneficial to the state of language, literature, and culture in general. Alexander Pope, on the other hand, had previous to the establishment of the club developed the idea of a satirical periodical, *The Works of the Unlearned*, almost like an academy *ex negativo*. It was this idea, to think about the state of learning by providing ludicrous examples of *un*learning, that would form the conceptual core of the club. Still, the club was also the closest that Swift got to his desire for a society of like-minded intellectuals and wits.

In terms of social relations, the club developed out of a number of associations that all come together in 1714. In 1710, Jonathan Swift had moved to London and had become involved in writing propaganda in support of the Tories, particularly Robert Harley, 1st Earl of Oxford, then the secretary of the treasurer, chiefly through the *Examiner*. At the same time, he became friends with John Arbuthnot, who had recently risen to the position of fourth physician-in-ordinary, one of the permanent royal household. Swift and Arbuthnot formed the 'Brother's Club' (1711-1713), and Arbuthnot started to provide 'hints' for Swift's writing. The notion of hints is maybe best understood as creative input in a brainstorming session, or as miniature pitches for creative projects that others could take up and develop. At the same time, this period also saw the emergence of Arbuthnot's most significant contribution to literature, the series of five pamphlets that introduced the character of John Bull into British culture. A year later, he published a text that was even closer to the eventual 'Scriblerian spirit', 'Proposals for printing a very Curious Discourse [...] a Treatise of the Art of Political Lying, with an Abstract of the First Volume of the said Treatise'. In addition, his elevation to the position of physician of Chelsea Hospital provided him with a house. It was this house that hosted the

principal meetings of the Scriblerus Club.

The poet Thomas Parnell was brought into the club as Swift ’s *protégé* from St Patrick’s. The two had started a friendship in 1704 when their paths crossed at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in Dublin, Ireland. After he became Dean, Swift recommended Parnell to his own just-vacated prebend of Dunlavin. Parnell’s contributions to the club and its projects remain rather vague, though Pope acknowledged him as a contributor to the ‘Essay concerning the origin of the sciences’, and Parnell also helped Pope with his Homeric translations. At the other end of the social spectrum, but equally doubtful in his creative contributions, is Robert Harley, 1st Earl of Oxford and Earl Mortimer. He was of course Swift’s most powerful political contact, with Swift acting the role of head propagandist for Harley. Harley was certainly a well-educated man and a bibliophile, but while he could provide the club with political legitimacy and relevance (with Swift maybe envisioning that their association could emerge as a competitor for the Kit-Kat Club) he could not match the other members in providing ‘hints’, let alone witty publications. Still, one of the most direct written results of the club are the invitation-poems that the members sent to Harley in 1714, asking him to pause his political work to partake of their intellectual sociability. Two of the poems were first published in 1766, but the others first appeared in Harold Williams’s 1958 edition of Swift’s poems under the title ‘Jeux D’Esprit of the Scriblerus Club.’

The poet Alexander Pope completes the list of confirmed members. While far from his zenith as the leading man of letters in London, by 1714 he had already become a prominent voice in the republic of letters, gaining recognition with *Windsor Forest* (1711), controversy with *An Essay on Criticism* (1713), and widespread popularity with *The Rape of the Lock* (1714). His friendship with Swift that led to the establishment of the Scriblerus Club, and that continued until Pope’s death in 1744, is one of the most significant in eighteenth-century literature.

For various reasons, the club’s fortunes were tied to that of the monarchy. When Queen Anne died in August 1714, most of the members were deeply affected on a personal level. Because Anne died without leaving a will, her servants were not provided for in any way. Arbuthnot therefore lost his royal positions and with that the venue for the club’s meetings. Harley and Bolingbroke lost their positions of political power and went into exile or prison, and Swift eventually went to Ireland, thereby ending the period of regular club meetings. The abruptness of the end and the relative short life-span of the club might have been instrumental in its being mythologized by its own members as well as by posterity as a pinnacle of witty and creative sociability. What is uncontested is the extent to which the principle of the club merged sociability and literary creativity.

Working collaboratively, the group created the persona of Martinus Scriblerus, through whose writings they wanted to accomplish their satirical aims. As a satirical and fictional creation, more collaborative for example than the persona of Isaac Bickerstaff, Scriblerus could be made to contain every aspect of contemporary pedantry that the club wanted to target, and was flexible enough to be applicable to different persons with whom the members quarrelled. Probably the original target was the naturalist John Woodward. Another potential candidate was Richard Bentley.

Besides this persona, the idea of ‘hints’ is central to the Scriblerian idea of (collective) creation. The Scriblerians would generously provide each other with creative ideas to be used together or at each member’s discretion. John Arbuthnot was famously as prolific with providing such hints as he was unconcerned with getting authorial credit for them. This makes his role in the Scriblerian project one of the most fascinating particularly because it is the one that is most difficult to pin down.

In general, one can say that very little of the material that was developed during the active time of the club was published until many years after its dissolution. The most direct outcome of the club’s activities is also one of the latest to appear in print, and has therefore been eclipsed in the minds of both eighteenth-century critics and contemporary scholars by the later, and artistically more successful works. This was the fragmentary text, *The Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus*, published in 1741 as a part of Alexander Pope's *Works*, though it was most likely written between 1713 and 1714, with Arbuthnot as its main contributor. It is an account of the upbringing and life of the fictional Scriblerus, satirizing trends and fashions of its time.

A more or less direct translation of the collaborative Scriblerian spirit into publication can be found in the four volumes of *Miscellanies* that the bookseller Motte published between 1727 and 1732, and that gathered works by Swift, Pope, Gay and Arbuthnot. Printing for the most part material that had already been published before, it does not add anything substantially new in terms of content, but stands as an example of how closely aligned the Scriblerians regarded sociability, conversation, creation, and publication. As Pope wrote to Swift in 1727:

> I am prodigiously pleas'd with this joint-volume, in which methinks we look like friends, side by side, serious and merry by turns, conversing interchangeably, and walking down hand in hand to posterity; not in the stiff forms of learned Authors, flattering each other, and setting the rest of mankind at nought: but in a free, unimportant, natural, easy manner; diverting others just as we diverted our selves.1

Even more important to the cultural legacy of the club were a number of works that were published by individual members long after the club’s dissolution, but that clearly carry its spirit. John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* provides a fascinating insight into the nature and working of the ‘hints’ that were a staple of Scriblerian collaboration, since it is now widely assumed that one of the origins for that work lies in the rather throw-away line that Swift included in a 1716 letter to Pope ‘for our friend Gay’: ‘Or what think you of a Newgate pastoral, among the whores and thieves there?’2 The resulting work – a dozen years after the suggestion – is fully Gay’s, of course, but the specific genre-mixing that is suggested by Swift might have been one of the motivations to create the work in this way, and is very important to its literary relevance beyond the topical political circumstances it satirizes.

While nobody but the Scriblerians was aware of Swift’s potential influence on *The Beggar’s Opera*, the case was very different for *Three Hours After Marriage*, Gay’s play that opened

on Drury Lane in 1717. Gay had admitted in an advertisement for the play that ‘two of my friends’ had helped in its creation, and the resulting rumour that this was in essence a satirical attack and first play by Pope brought up a concerted smear campaign by Pope’s enemies with at least eight pamphlets appearing in the first months.

After his departure and the consequent end of the club’s meetings, Swift spent many years in Ireland yearning for the kind of sociability he had enjoyed in London. When he finally returned once more, in 1726, two of his main reasons were to see his friends once again in person, and to deliver the manuscript of *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World, in Four Parts, by Lemuel Gulliver, first a surgeon, and then a captain of several ships*, better known as *Gulliver’s Travels*, to his bookseller. While much of the book’s satire is as Swiftian as it gets, the third book carries the most obviously Scriblerian overtones, with its mocking of science and learning, a subject for which the original Scriblerians had relied mostly on Arbuthnot once more, since he was the only trained natural scientist among them.

Alexander Pope’s mock-epic poem *The Dunciad* is arguably the most substantial monument to Scriblerian satire. It takes up the criticism of pedantry and false learning and takes it to its extreme, both in its sharpness and in the breadth of subject. The *Dunciad* is one of the works to make direct reference to Scriblerus, from the second edition of the poem the supplementary material contains work that is attributed to him. But it is also structurally Scriblerian, imitating by inverting the collaborative nature of the club in its multivoiced structure, where a plethora of pseudo-learned paratexts competes with the text proper of the poem and the copious annotations for discursive dominance. The book is Pope’s ultimate contribution to the club’s project, reframed by the poet as a war against dullness itself, as well as against all the ‘dunces’ that serve her. It immortalized the type of ridicule that was hatched in the club’s original meetings and made Scriblerus into a catchword that could be used by later writers, minor and major. Richard Owen Cambridge published a mock epic poem in 1751, *The Scribleriad*, in which the hero is Martinus Scriblerus, and Henry Fielding, who presented his play *The Welsh Opera* as a tribute to the Scriblerians, also used the pen name ‘Scriblerus Secundus’.

1. George Sherburn (ed), The Correspondence of Alexander Pope, 5 vols. (Clarendon Press, 1956), II, p. 426

2. Qtd. in Joseph McMinn, Jonathan Swift. A Literary Life (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 82.

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Further Reading

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Scriblerus Club (1770)