

The Poetics of Character Assassination: A Technical Analysis of Alexander Pope's Satire on Edmund Curll

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Introduction: The Intersection of Literary Satire and the 18th-Century Book Trade

In the history of English literature, few rivalries have achieved the level of calculated vitriol and strategic brilliance as that between the preeminent poet **Alexander Pope** and the notorious bookseller **Edmund Curll**. The document titled '*A further account of the most deplorable condition of Mr. Edmund Curll, bookseller*' represents more than a mere personal attack; it is a foundational artifact in the evolution of modern satire, public relations, and the technical development of the print industry. Published in the wake of an actual physical altercation involving the administration of an emetic, this pamphlet serves as a case study in the weaponization of narrative.

Understanding this text requires an immersion into the **Grub Street** ecosystem of the early 1700s. At this juncture, the traditional systems of aristocratic patronage were shifting toward a market-based economy. Edmund Curll was a pioneer of this transition, albeit through methods that were frequently litigious, ethically dubious, and technically illegal. Pope, representing the 'Augustan' ideal, viewed Curll not just as a nuisance but as a systemic threat to the integrity of letters. This technical analysis explores the rhetorical mechanisms, the printing environment, and the historical implications of the 1716 poisoning incident and its subsequent literary documentation.

The Anatomy of 'Curllism': Defining the Adversarial Framework

To analyze the '*Further Account*', one must first define the phenomenon known as **Curllism**. This term, coined by his contemporaries, refers to a specific business model in the 18th-century book trade characterized by several technical and ethical deviations:

- Unauthorized Publication (Piracy):** The systematic printing of private letters, poems, and manuscripts without the author's consent, often circumventing the nascent Statute of Anne (1710).
- Sensationalism:** The use of inflammatory titles and 'scandalous' content to drive sales, a precursor to modern tabloid journalism.
- Biographical Opportunism:** Curll's practice of publishing rushed, often inaccurate biographies of public figures immediately following their deaths (famously referred to as 'adding a new terror to death').
- Pseudonymous Attribution:** Falsely attributing low-quality works to high-profile authors (like Pope or Swift) to leverage their brand equity.

Table 1: Comparative Profile of Stakeholders

Feature	Alexander Pope (The Satirist)	Edmund Curll (The Subject)
Social Objective	Preservation of Classical Standards	Mass Market Penetration / Profit
Technical Medium	Polished Heroic Couplets / Satirical Prose	Pamphlets, Unauthorized Memoirs
Legal Standing	Advocate for Authorial Property	Frequent Defendant in Libel/Copyright Suits
Legacy	Canonical Literary Figure	Eponym of 'Curllism' (Low-brow tactics)

Technical Breakdown of the 'Poisoning' Incident

The *'Further Account'* is the second part of a narrative sequence. The first, *'A Full and True Account of a Horrid and Barbarous Revenge by Poison on the Body of Mr. Edmund Curll'*, details the actual event. On March 28, 1716, Alexander Pope met Curll at the Swan Tavern in Fleet Street. Under the guise of a professional reconciliation, Pope famously laced Curll's wine with **antimony**, a powerful emetic designed to induce violent vomiting.

The Chemical and Rhetorical Mechanism

The choice of an emetic was technically significant. Unlike a lethal poison, an emetic causes public physical humiliation—a 'purging' that Pope metaphorically extended to the literary landscape. The *'Further Account'* utilizes this physical purging as a central trope. Pope's prose adopts a pseudo-medical and journalistic tone, parodying the very types of sensationalist reporting Curll himself utilized.

The narrative structure follows a **chronological decay model**:

1. Incubation: The immediate aftermath of the poisoning where Curll is portrayed in a state of physical and mental disarray.
2. Confession: Pope utilizes the 'dying man' trope to force Curll into a satirical confession of his 'sins' against the literary world.
3. Decline: The detailed description of Curll's 'deplorable condition,' using clinical language to heighten the absurdity of his plight.

Literary Mechanics: The Satirical Infrastructure

Pope's technical execution in the *'Further Account'* relies on **Menippean Satire**—a form characterized by a mixture of prose and verse, a fragmented narrative, and a focus on intellectual or social critique rather than character development. Several key rhetorical devices are employed:

1. The Mock-Heroic Pathos

Pope describes Curll's distress with the gravity usually reserved for epic heroes. By applying high-register vocabulary to the low-brow reality of a sick bookseller, Pope creates a cognitive dissonance that reinforces the target's ridiculousness. This is a technical application of **bathos**—the sudden shift from the sublime to the ridiculous.

2. The Catalog of Sins

The text frequently includes lists of Curll's 'crimes.' These are not presented as mere insults but as a technical

bibliography of his unauthorized publications. By listing the titles Curll pirated, Pope effectively creates a permanent public record of Curll's professional malfeasance under the guise of a narrative account.

3. The Eye-Witness Reliability

As noted in the source data, the account is often attributed to an 'eye-witness,' which internal evidence suggests is Pope himself. The technical use of a third-party narrator allows for a level of 'objective' cruelty that would be less effective in the first person. This distancing mechanism is a staple of early 18th-century political and literary polemics.

The Economics of the 18th-Century Print Shop

To understand the 'deplorable condition' of a bookseller, we must analyze the technical environment of his operation. A 1716 print shop was a complex ecosystem of labor and logistics. The *'Further Account'* references the physical artifacts of this trade—manuscripts, ink, typeset, and the 'devils' (apprentice printers).

Printing Workflow and Satirical Interference

Stage of Production	Standard Process	Pope's Satirical Perversion
Acquisition	Purchasing a manuscript from an author.	Curll stealing 'papers' from a dead man's pocket.
Composition	Setting type manually in a composing stick.	Printers in a state of chaos as their master fails.
Distribution	Selling through established stalls and hawkers.	The 'weekly' publication of a man's agony.

The JSON data mentions that this account was *'to be publish'd weekly.'* This is a technical parody of the **serial publication** trend that was beginning to dominate the London market. By suggesting that Curll's suffering would be chronicled in installments, Pope mocks the commercialization of tragedy—a practice Curll himself perfected.

Procedural Analysis: Identifying Early 18th-Century Print Varieties

The source data lists various records of the text, including those from the **OTA (Oxford Text Archive)** and the **British Library**. These records highlight the bibliographical complexity of the era. Analyzing the physical characteristics of the *'Further Account'* involves examining:

- Chain Lines and Watermarks: The JSON mentions 'Horizontal chain lines,' which is a technical marker used by bibliographers to determine the format of the book (e.g., Quarto vs. Octavo). In a Quarto (4to), the chain lines run horizontally across the page.
- Imprint and Colophon: The information at the bottom of the title page provides data on the printer, the date (March 28th being the pivotal date), and the location (often Fleet Street or Paternoster Row).
- Typography: The use of italics and capitalized nouns was standard in the 1710s, but Pope uses these technically to emphasize specific insults and legalistic terms.

Field Guide: Analyzing Primary Satirical Sources

For scholars and technical writers examining 18th-century pamphlets, the following procedural steps are recommended for a comprehensive analysis:

Step 1: Contextual Mapping

Identify the specific event triggering the publication. In the case of the *'Further Account'*, it is the 'poisoning' incident. Research contemporary diaries (such as those of John Gay or Jonathan Swift) to verify the timeline.

Step 2: Bibliographical Verification

Cross-reference the pamphlet with the **English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC)**. Identify the printer—often, satires were published 'anonymously' or with 'sham' imprints to avoid libel laws.

Step 3: Rhetorical Decoding

Isolate the specific 'vices' being attacked. Are they personal, professional, or political? In Pope's work, these often overlap. Look for 'key' or 'coded' names (often printed as C---I for Curll) which allowed authors a thin layer of legal protection.

Step 4: Mechanical Analysis

Examine the physical condition of the extant copies. The 'most deplorable condition' describes both the character

and, often, the cheap paper and rushed printing (Grub Street quality) of the physical pamphlet itself—a meta-commentary by the author.

Case Study: The Impact of the 'Further Account' on Curll's Business

Did Pope's technical execution of this character assassination work? The historical data suggests a complex outcome. While Curll was physically humiliated and his reputation in 'polite society' was irrevocably damaged, the notoriety actually served his commercial interests. The public's appetite for the 'deplorable condition' of the bookseller created a feedback loop where Curll began to lean into his role as the 'villain' of the book trade.

Operational Challenges in Satirical Defense

Curll attempted to retaliate using his own technical platform. He published his own 'accounts' and 'keys' to Pope's works. However, Curll lacked the **stylistic precision** and **rhetorical complexity** that Pope employed. This case study demonstrates that in the 18th-century 'war of the dunces,' technical mastery of the medium (poetry and prose) was often more powerful than the raw ability to print and distribute.

Broader Implications and Literary Evolution

The technical strategies used in '*A further account of the most deplorable condition of Mr. Edmund Curll*' laid the groundwork for future satirical works, most notably Pope's own masterpiece, **The Dunciad**. In *The Dunciad*, Curll is featured as a primary 'hero' of dullness, competing in a 'pissing contest' (a literalization of the emetic's effects) that highlights the visceral, bodily nature of Pope's critique.

The integration of medical terminology, the parody of journalistic forms, and the use of physical artifacts as symbols of moral decay are all technical innovations that moved satire away from abstract moralizing toward concrete, impactful social commentary. For the modern technical writer, this period represents the birth of the 'media war,' where the control of the narrative is contingent upon the mastery of the technical tools of communication.

Today, the 'deplorable condition' of Edmund Curll is preserved in digital archives like the OTA, serving as a reminder of a time when the boundaries between literature, law, and physical assault were remarkably porous. The 1716 pamphlet remains a masterclass in how to dismantle an opponent's brand through the sophisticated application of narrative logic, chemical intervention, and print-house precision. It is a testament to the fact that while technology changes—from hand-presses to JSON data—the mechanics of reputation and the power of a well-crafted, albeit 'deplorable,' account remain constant.

Baca Juga (Artikel Terkait)

- [Charles Dickens: A Tale of Ambition and Genius - A Comprehensive Technical and Biographical Analysis](http://www.amotionselfie.com/charles-dickens-biography-ambition-and-genius-analysis.pdf)

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Tags: #Alexander Pope #Edmund Curll #18th Century Literature #Satire #Print History #Grub Street

