

TEACHING ALEXANDER GORDON'S *THE HUMOURIST*

Two Newly Recovered Essays from Colonial Charleston, 1754

A Free Classroom Packet

**FREE FOR CLASSROOM USE
COPYRIGHT RETAINED • CITATION REQUIRED**

Prepared by Brent L. Kendrick, Ph.D.

*Author/Editor of Unmasking The Humourist: Alexander Gordon's Lost Essays of
Colonial Charleston, South Carolina (Luminare Press, 2025)*

This packet reproduces selections from the definitive edition. The eighteenth-century source texts are public domain; the transcription, headnotes, annotations, editorial apparatus, introduction, analysis, and packet materials remain copyrighted.

For the Instructor

Alexander Gordon (c. 1692-1754) was a Scottish antiquarian, Egyptologist, playwright, artist, scholar, and colonial administrator who spent the final twelve years of his life in Charleston, South Carolina, serving as Clerk of His Majesty's Council. In 1753-1754, twenty-two essays and related pieces appeared pseudonymously in the *South-Carolina Gazette* under the title *The Humourist*. They were not republished as a complete series until 2025.

In *Unmasking The Humourist*, Brent L. Kendrick identifies Gordon as the previously unknown author and provides the complete authoritative text, scholarly headnotes, and explanatory notes. The edition preserves original eighteenth-century spelling, capitalization, and punctuation (modernizing the long s), avoids speculative reconstruction, and supplies contextual annotation for modern readers.

Why teach Gordon? Gordon brings a distinctive Charleston voice into the mid-eighteenth-century American literary conversation - and offers instructors unexpected new ways of teaching texts already familiar to their students. His wonderfully acerbic essay on literary critics pairs naturally with Anne Bradstreet's "The Prologue," opening a conversation across nearly a century about authorship, literary judgment, modesty, reputation, and the writer's relationship with critics and readers.

Gordon also belongs to the transatlantic periodical tradition of Addison and Steele. His next essay, on slander, reputation, and social virtue, pairs especially well with Benjamin Franklin's *Silence Dogood* essays. Both writers adopt pseudonymous periodical personae to scrutinize the morals and manners of colonial society; Franklin writes from Boston, Gordon from Charleston.

Just as importantly, Gordon's recovery allows students to encounter the early American canon not as something fixed and finished, but as literary history still being made through research and scholarship.

Using This Packet

This packet offers two ready-made points of entry into an existing syllabus: Gordon's essay on literary critics paired with Anne Bradstreet's "*The Prologue*"; and Gordon's essay on slander, reputation, and social virtue paired with Benjamin Franklin's *Silence Dogood*, especially No. 9.

Use it tomorrow. Both essays are complete, short enough to add to an existing syllabus without redesigning a unit. They may stand alone, but they are designed especially to bring Gordon into conversation with authors and texts already familiar to students.

Essay One: Gordon on Critics

Suggested pairing: Anne Bradstreet, “The Prologue”

Gordon’s February 12, 1754, essay attacks the vanity and destructiveness of modern critics while asking what legitimate criticism ought to be. Read beside Bradstreet, it opens a cross-century conversation about authorship, modesty, authority, reputation, judgment, and the writer’s anticipation of hostile readers.

Questions for discussion

1. What kinds of authority do Bradstreet and Gordon grant - or refuse to grant - to critics and readers?
2. How does each writer use apparent modesty as a rhetorical strategy?
3. Gordon distinguishes fault-finding from the “true Nature of Criticism.” What would an ethical critic look like by his standard?
4. How does pseudonymity complicate Gordon’s attack on literary judgment and reputation?
5. What changes when Bradstreet’s seventeenth-century negotiation of literary authority is placed beside Gordon’s 1754 satire?

Assignment possibility: Ask students to write a short comparative response defining “literary authority” from the evidence of the two texts. Who gets to judge a writer - and why?

The following pages are reproduced directly from the 2025 definitive edition, including Kendrick’s headnote and explanatory notes.

[Numb. 1026.]

February 12, 1754.



In this essay, Gordon turns his sharp wit toward literary criticism, exposing its pettiness and self-importance. Using the anecdote of Phidias—whose masterpiece was ruined by critics’ conflicting demands—he makes a pointed argument: critics are not guardians of literary excellence but its greatest destroyers. Unlike the ancient masters of criticism, such as Longinus and Quintilian, modern critics are painted as meddlesome figures who tear down rather than refine, motivated more by personal vanity than by a genuine concern for literature. The essay is both an attack and a defense—acknowledging that all writers must endure criticism while challenging the assumption that critics are fit to judge in the first place.

The satirical *Letter to the Critics* that follows escalates this battle into outright mock-heroic defiance. Casting himself as a celestial being, born under the influence of Mars and imbued with divine fire, Gordon parodies the grandiose self-importance of both critics and writers alike. His exaggerated threats—promising to “hurl confusion” from his aerial mansion upon those who dare mock him—drip with irony, exposing the absurdity of critical arrogance. Yet beneath the satire lies a serious point: literary criticism, when wielded with malice, becomes a tool of suppression rather than refinement.

This essay offers another glimpse into Gordon’s own struggles as a colonial writer navigating ambition, audience, and inevitable resistance. His reference to the *Council of Trent* condemning books and authors alike hints at a

broader awareness of censorship and intellectual control. By blending humor with biting social commentary, Gordon once again asserts himself not just as a satirist, but as a writer keenly aware of the tensions between creativity, authority, and public reception.



The HUMOURIST. No. VII.

*Majores nusquam Rhonci, Juvenesq; Senesque,
Et Pueri Nasum Rhinocerontis habent.*

MARTIAL.¹

WHEN *Phidias*² had completed the *Athenian* Minerva, a Critic, of much the same Discernment with these of the present Age, intimated to him, that the Waist was too thick; the silly Crowd, who always put an Implicit Faith in these malevolent Leaders, join'd in the Opinion, and the Statuary, in order to rectify the Blunder, chipp'd it to the Delicacy of their Fancy: But when another Set of People came to see it, they insisted, that it was too slender; *Phidias* then threw aside his Tools, informing them, that it was impossible to chip any on again.

In this Manner these Triflers perplex the best Capacities, and sacrifice Excellence to the Attacks of insolent Curiosity: The most unexceptional Writers, have dearly experienced the Consequences of Envy and Ill-Nature; none are exempt from it who enter the Lists of Authorism, because every weak Mortal (and weak Mortals abound every where) considers himself as the Censor of the Age. It is a first Principle with these Gentlemen, to decry all Performances, not because they deserve Censure, but as soaring above their Comprehensions, not as void of Matter, but as a Taste for Censure seems to indicate a more refined Judgment and extensive Knowledge than Silence of Decorum can infer; to be pacific now a-Days, is to be tame and senseless; to take

Things in the Sense intended, argues a narrow and limited capacity, discovers a Want of Fire and Animation, of Zeal and noble [one word illegible]; it is a Pity, that the World has not more Humanity and less Spirit, at least, that it is not better tempered; for, tho' it is a glorious Thing to be possessed of the Strengths of Lions, yet 'tis tyrannous to use it.

The Critics may be ranged into Classes, or certain Orders of Distinction, as thus, one seizes upon your Title, another suggests, and by a wonderful Sagacity, hunts out an Author's Name, some comment, some dissect, and all misconstrue.

This Accusation is principally aim'd at the modern Critics, for the Ancients were, generally speaking, a People of different Inclinations and better Dispositions.

Dyonisius, *Longinus*, and *Quintilian*,³ were Men of acknowledged Parts, and what Remarks they may have passed against particular Authors, were intended to establish a true Taste, and reform Corruptions that might possibly creep into the Republic of Letters; they had Honesty eno' to confess the Truth, and Generosity to admire Merit where they found it.,

Our modern Critics arrogate to themselves what does not belong to them: They are Poets, Philosophers, and Divines; they are Orators, Statesmen and Prime Ministers; they are as knowing in Science as mechanic Operations: In short, a Critic is an Abstract of every Thing, and is very communicatively inclined, always giving his Opinion, as the true Standard whereby to direct the Judgment and inform the Understanding of Mankind.

I need not add, that they are by Nature cruel, to use an Author with Raillery, whose highest Ambition is to please, especially when he offers his Sentiments with a becoming Modesty: I always made it a Rule with me, to read all Authors as Anonymo's, regarding the Sense, not Names

of Books, indifferent, like the Consulters of Oracles, who speaketh, provided what is spoken be sensible and just; true Wisdom being nothing else but an Induction from examined Judgments, making proper Applications to Discourse, and drawing the most natural Conclusions from an Author.

It seems annexed to the Fate of all Writers, from the Oracles, to the puny Echoes, of Learning, that they shall live in a State of War: The Complaint against the Council of *Trent*,⁴ was, that they condemned not so much Books as Authors, and indeed it is a general Distemper, supported by the worst Principles, Pride and Envy. Our Fancies are so bigoted to some particular Notions, that no one can be surprised at the Causes of intellectual Slavery, who takes Time to reflect upon the Perverseness of human Nature, which creates an obstinate Moroseness against any Man's Light, not lighted at his Candle.

One Satisfaction however attends the Writer, superior to what other Men can boast under a critical Survey, and that (confining myself only to the Instance of the Statuary) evidently appears; if a Writer errs in Judgment, he can easily correct himself, if he gives a false colouring, he has it in his Power to retouch; but the Statuary has no Resource left, he has the torturing Reflection, that his Work will stand as an eternal Subject for Animadversion and critical Reflection.

The true Nature of Criticism, widely differs from what we usually understand by the Expression; it is not the Art of finding Fault that merits the Appellation, it is the determined Resolution of a Reader neither to depreciate nor dignify by partial Representation, that constitutes the amiable Part of a Critic; the Ancients were regardless of particular Connexions, wholly solicitous to promulgate the Stamp of Truth, and rely on her Determinations, whatever she might dictate.

The HUMOURIST to the CRITICS.
← — Procul O! Procul este Profani!⁵

Gentlemen:

I HAVE no Ambition of your Acquaintance, nor will I concern myself with the Sect, abominable Tribe! Your Name bespeaks Contempt; more it may, less methinks! it cannot.

Preserve a proper and respectable Distance, a reverential Awe to my Authority, or I will assume the Wings of *Icaromenippus*,⁶ and fly to my aerial Mansion (now ready for the Reception of its Master) and hurl Confusion on you.

If a People are to fear, it is necessary to know, whom they are to fear; the Brave are ever just. Know then, that I was born under a Planet not to die in a Lazaretto. The hot Constellation of *Cancer* presided at my Nativity. *Mars* was then predominant. Of all the Elements, *Fire* sways most in me. I have many Aspirings, many elevated Conceptions, owing, for the most Part, to the peculiar Quality of the Ground wherein I was born, which was the Top of a Hill situated South-East, so that the House must be *illustrious*, being so obvious to the Sun-Beams.

I have made a Rule, that whoever shall insinuate a Laugh, a distant Joke, or otherwise, on my Writings, and shall not own my Performances to be the best wrote Pieces in the World, the Classics only excepted, shall be look'd upon as a Coxcomb, and — ; and I do hereby give any Man leave to lay him on his Center of Gravity.

NOTES

- 1 Martial (40–c. 102-104 AD), a Latin poet best known for his twelve books of *Epigrams*. The quote is from Book I, Verse III, which deals with the perils of publication: “Nobody sneers as loud / As a Roman: old or young, even newly-born / He turns his nose up like a rhino horn.”
- 2 Phidias (c.500-c.432 BC), one of the greatest sculptors of ancient Greece.
- 3 Longinus, also called Dionysius Longinus or Pseudo-Longinus (flourished 1st century AD), name sometimes assigned to the author of *On the Sublime* (Greek *Peri Hypsous*), one of the great seminal works of literary criticism. The earliest surviving manuscript, from the 10th century, first printed in 1554, ascribes it to Dionysius Longinus. Later it was noticed that the index to the manuscript read “Dionysius or Longinus.” Quintilian (AD 35-d. after 96), Latin teacher and writer known for his *Institutio Oratoria*, a major contribution to educational theory and literary criticism.
- 4 The first official censorship had come in 1559 with the publication of the *Index auctorum et librorum prohibitorum* under the direction of Pope Paul IV. The *Pauline index*, as it became known, was the first in a long succession of papal indexes, forty-two in all. The purpose of these indexes was to guide censors in their decisions of what publications to authorize and which to disallow, for printers were not free to publish books without official permission. In January of 1562 the Council of Trent took up the issue of the Index and was deeply divided. The Pauline index had been seen by many as too controversial and excessively restrictive. After the opening speeches, the council appointed a commission to draft a new index. Although the council closed before the task of the commission was completed, the new Tridentine index was taken up by Pope Pius IV and published in 1564 by Paulus Manutius in Rome. This index constituted the most authoritative guide the church had

Essay Two: Gordon on Slander, Reputation, and Social Virtue

Suggested pairing: Benjamin Franklin, Silence Dogood, especially No. 9

In this complete essay of February 19, 1754, Gordon turns from literary criticism to a darker question about human behavior. If human beings are naturally social, why do they so readily injure one another through gossip, slander, insinuation, and attacks upon reputation? Beneath the satire lies a serious argument about benevolence, friendship, honesty, and the obligations that make genuine social life possible.

Franklin's Silence Dogood offers a particularly useful companion. Like Gordon, Franklin writes through a pseudonymous newspaper persona and uses wit, irony, and moral scrutiny to expose failures in the society around him. Silence Dogood No. 9, with its attack on public hypocrisy and its insistence that character must be judged by conduct rather than profession, gives students an especially direct point of comparison.

Questions for discussion

1. Gordon begins with the familiar idea that man is a "sociable Animal." How does the essay complicate that assumption?
2. What forms of slander or detraction does Gordon identify? Why might a shrug, sneer, insinuation, or whisper be more damaging than an open accusation?
3. Both Gordon and Franklin write through invented personae. What freedom does pseudonymity give a writer who intends to criticize society?
4. Compare Gordon's treatment of reputation with Franklin's treatment of public character and hypocrisy. What does each writer suggest constitutes genuine virtue?
5. Both writers criticize other people's behavior while implicitly claiming authority to judge it. What makes the satirist's position persuasive - or potentially hypocritical?

Assignment possibility: Ask students to compare Gordon's No. VIII with a Silence Dogood essay, identifying a vice or social failing each writer exposes and considering how persona, satire, irony, and humor make moral criticism more effective - or more dangerous.

The following pages reproduce Gordon's complete No. VIII directly from Kendrick's 2025 definitive edition, including the headnote and explanatory notes.

[Numb. 1027.]

February 19, 1754.

[page 2]



In this essay, Gordon shifts from satirizing literary critics to exposing a more insidious human failing: the impulse to undermine others through slander and detraction. With a tone that balances moral gravity and sharp wit, he dissects how easily society indulges in gossip, reputation-smearing, and the calculated manipulation of public perception. Though man is often celebrated as a “sociable animal,” Gordon argues that much of human interaction is built on the opposite—envy, malice, and the pleasure of tearing others down. True social bonds should be grounded in benevolence and friendship, yet people are far more invested in eroding each other’s reputations for personal advantage.

Gordon demonstrates a keen psychological insight into the mechanics of defamation. Whether through overt slander, passive-aggressive gestures like shrugs and sneers, or the strategic whisperings of flatterers who serve powerful patrons, he catalogues the many ways reputations are dismantled. His reference to Plutarch’s anecdote about Aristides—exiled simply because people were tired of hearing him called “just”—illustrates the irrationality of human envy. By the essay’s end, Gordon transforms his critique into a lament, mourning how speech, meant as a gift for human connection, has instead become a tool for destruction.

Yet this essay is not just a satire; it is a defense of integrity. As Gordon urges his readers to resist the temptation of easy

cruelty, he continues his deeper philosophical inquiry—suggesting that deception and malice are not just personal failings but fundamental, almost inevitable, conditions of social life. In a world where character assassination is sport, the real rarity is a man who values honesty over self-interest.



The HUMOURIST. No. VIII.

*Iustitia partes sunt non violare homines; vercundiae
Non Offendere. —TULL.¹*

MAN (they say) is a sociable Animal; which is a Character equally applicable to a Beast, if we understand nothing more by the Expression, than an Association together for our common Security: It requires no great Penetration to observe Numbers of this brutish Inclination, who seem to have an Intercourse with their own Species, unadorned with the least Spark of social Virtue.

If there are (and no one will dispute it) any Degree of Subordination in Characters, superior to those created by human Foresight, for Order and Distinction, it is Benevolence, mutual Aid, Friendship, and Charity, and these alone form the noblest Picture of true Greatness.

I have heard (with Tears I speak it) *Humanity* called *Weakness*, and *Generosity* pass by the reproachful Terms of *Extravagance* and *Folly*. Very few consider the Causes of Distress; we are apt to affix a Reason, that, instead of pleading in our Favour, calls upon us for Contempt; we seldom distinguish between Calamities produced by Misconduct, the Oppressions of others, or the inevitable Strokes of Fate.

These are the unsocial Brutes, who whisper away their Neighbour's Reputation, and declare open War against all the Proprietors of Merit: There is a malignant Spirit that reigns thro' the World, and imbibes

the basest Principles, that teaches us to wish well to none, by which means we say Ill of all: The conscious Mind, reflecting on its Iniquity, concludes all Minds alike!

The least Glimmering of a Fault, collects innumerable Spectators, to multiply the dormant Evil, and enlarge upon the Nature of it, at the Expence of blushing Innocence.

This is an Observation familiar to us as the most common Occurrence of Life, we are prone to decry Reputations, we have Discernment to pursue the most effectual Methods, and few possess so small a Share of Self-Love, as to be ignorant, that, by unfavorable Comparisons upon a Friend, they raise their own Characters to a temporary Pitch of Glory.

What Man will, at least what Man does, deny that there is Melody in Defamation; there is Music in the Word, and it is certainly a Note as practiced as admired.

There is an Art in sullyng a Man's Reputation, without incurring Displeasure one's self; and I have frequently remarked, that a Shrug or a Sneer carries more Expression along with it, than the most forcible Language: I had occasion some Years ago, to employ a Gentleman in an Affair of some Importance, and, as he seem'd diffident of his own Judgment and Experience, I cheerfully proposed an Assistant to him; *Mr. Busy-body* made me no Answer, but shrug'd up his Shoulders, contracted the Muscles of his Face, sneering, and then with a Crowd of Words approved my Proposal, had no Objections to it, enlarged pretty minutely upon the Necessity of a Man of Parts in a Transaction environed with a Sea of Trouble like that, and ended his Speech with a Look of Reference to his Shrug and Sneer, which made so strong an Impression upon me, that I absolutely pitched another Person, contrary to my own Inclination and particular Bias for that Gentleman.

Another Set of Detractors there are, who, by a seeming Softness of Words, can probe a Reputation. *Plutarch* gives an apt Instance of this

upon *Aristides's* Banishment, whom when a mean Person had proposed to another, being ask'd what Displeasure *Aristides* had done him, he replied, *none, neither do I know him; but it grieves me to hear every Body call him a just Man.*

There are a Kind of Detractors, tho' last mentioned, not least in the Cause of Evil, who being mean and sordid, will condescend to collect a Catalogue of Stories, to humour a Patron and tickle a Friend. Such Men as these, do almost come up to a literal Sense of what the *Psalmist* spoke in a figurative, (*and eat up People for Bread;*)² dissect characters, and devour good Names, for the monstrous Entertainment of a servile Master.

How shocking is it, to think, that such unwarrantable Favour should be shewn these People, who make no Allowances for Actions which frequently arise from sudden Passions, or are the unhappy Attendants of some Constitutions, or are the Errors of a hasty Judgment, and now are form'd into Crimes, and charged as the highest, when Good-Nature and good Sense must certainly have overlook'd them.

How melancholy a Reflection it is, that *Speech*, which was given us to soften the Cares of Life, and for our mutual Assistance, should be converted to so bad a Purpose, as the sullyng of the Fame of our Fellow-Creatures; and by the Success of Artifice, raising the Admiration of Mankind on the one Hand, and a dreadful Persecution on the other.

NOTES

- 1 Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC), *De Officiis*, Book I:20, "It is the office of justice to injure no man; of propriety, to offend none."
- 2 Psalms 53:4: "Have the workers of iniquity no knowledge? who eat up my people as they eat bread: they have not called upon God."

Copyright, Classroom Permission, and Required Citation

© 2026 Brent L. Kendrick. All rights reserved.

This teaching packet is provided free of charge for classroom use. Instructors may reproduce and distribute the **complete packet** to students enrolled in their courses, either in print or through password-protected course-management systems, provided that the material is reproduced without alteration and that all copyright notices and required source citations remain intact.

All other rights are expressly reserved by Brent L. Kendrick. This permission does not authorize republication, adaptation, alteration, commercial use, posting of the packet or its constituent materials on other publicly accessible websites, incorporation into anthologies or other educational resources, or redistribution outside the classroom. Any such use requires prior written permission from the copyright holder.

Copyright status of the source: The original *Humourist* texts (1753-1754) are in the public domain. Kendrick's transcription, editorial content, scholarly annotations, introduction, analysis, and this teaching packet are copyrighted.

Required citations (MLA style)

No. VII: Gordon, Alexander. "The Humourist. No. VII." *South-Carolina Gazette*, no. 1026, 12 Feb. 1754. *Unmasking The Humourist: Alexander Gordon's Lost Essays of Colonial Charleston, South Carolina*, recovered, introduced, and edited by Brent L. Kendrick, Luminare Press, 2025, pp. 115-120.

No. VIII: Gordon, Alexander. "The Humourist. No. VIII." *South-Carolina Gazette*, no. 1027, 19 Feb. 1754. *Unmasking The Humourist: Alexander Gordon's Lost Essays of Colonial Charleston, South Carolina*, recovered, introduced, and edited by Brent L. Kendrick, Luminare Press, 2025, pp. 123-127.

Packet: Kendrick, Brent L., compiler. *Teaching Alexander Gordon's The Humourist: Two Newly Recovered Essays from Colonial Charleston, 1754*. 2026. Selections from *Unmasking The Humourist*, Luminare Press, 2025.

For permissions, anthology inquiries, or scholarly use:

Brent L. Kendrick, Ph.D.

brentlkendrick@gmail.com

Official classroom-packet page:

thewiredresearcher.com/teaching-alexander-gordon/