

An Essay on Criticism

Alexander Pope published this poem in 1711, but, on the manuscript copy that he gave to the printer (see below), he says that it was “Written in the Year 1709,” and it is likely that some parts of it date to a couple of years earlier, when Pope was still in his teens. By 1711, Pope had become well known in the literary circles in London coffee houses, where he got to know more established writers like William Wycherley, the author of *The Country Wife*, who was by now an old man. Like other writers of the period, Pope circulated his works in manuscript form among friends and other poets, seeking feedback. But he was also eager to get those works, once they had been sufficiently polished through multiple revisions, out in print form. Pope’s first significant publication was a series of *Pastorals*, poems about the countryside, that were printed as part of a collection of works by several poets in 1709. These poems are fine, but they do not stand out from the crowd.



The manuscript of *An Essay on Criticism* that Pope prepared for the printers. Notice how carefully Pope has made the title look like it is printed; it is as if he has drawn printed letters.

An Essay on Criticism was designed, though, to make a splash. In it, Pope takes on both his fellow poets and the critical establishment, offering his own argument about what both parties ought to be doing. The idea of a kind of manifesto

written in verse seems odd to us now, but it would have made perfect sense to Pope. His model was the *Ars Poetica* (The Art of Poetry) by the Roman poet Horace, written in 19 B. C. E. Horace's poem was widely read and admired by neoclassical writers in the late seventeenth century in France and England, and several poets came out with their own poetical treatises in imitation of Horace's poem. Pope's is more or less the last of these. Like Horace, Pope is conversational; the poem starts with a contraction ("Tis") and seems designed to make it seem like we are coming into a fairly casual chat about contemporary poetry. But *An Essay on Criticism* goes on to offer some pretty stern advice; Pope is setting down strict rules for how poets and (especially) critics should conduct themselves, and it is not surprising that established writers found the young poet to be pretty presumptuous. And there is more than a little justice in the reservations that contemporary readers expressed about Pope's argument. It is hard to imagine how to *follow* Pope's advice here; the ideal poet described by the poem is an almost impossible goal, perhaps only realizable by a poet as talented as Pope himself. Which might be the point.

An Essay on Criticism made the splash that Pope intended. it was widely read, and, although it was published anonymously, it did not take long for people who cared about poetry to figure out that the twenty-three year old Pope was the author. Not everyone *liked* what he had to say, and it was easy to see his confidence as a kind of arrogance. But no one could ignore how beautifully Pope crafted his heroic couplets, which are themselves the best argument he could offer that he was a uniquely skilled artists, one who would have to be reckoned with.

The text here is reproduced from the Project Gutenberg edition.

'Tis hard to say, if greater Want of Skill
Appear in *Writing* or in *Judging* ill,

But, of the two, less dang'rous is th' Offence,
To tire our *Patience*, than mis-lead our *Sense*:
Some few in *that*, but Numbers err in *this*,
Ten Censure wrong for one who Writes amiss;
A *Fool* might once *himself* alone expose,
Now *One* in *Verse* makes many more in *Prose*.
'Tis with our *Judgments* as our *Watches*, none
Go just *alike*, yet each believes his own. [10]
In *Poets* as true *Genius* is but rare,
True *Taste* as seldom is the *Critick's* Share;
Both must alike from Heav'n derive their Light,
These *born* to Judge, as well as those to Write.
Let such teach others who themselves excell,
And *censure freely* who have *written well*.
Authors are partial to their *Wit*, 'tis true,
But are not *Criticks* to their *Judgment* too?

Yet if we look more closely, we shall find
Most have the *Seeds* of Judgment in their Mind; [20]
Nature affords at least a *glimm'ring Light*;
The *Lines*, tho' touch'd but faintly, are drawn right.
But as the slightest Sketch, if justly trac'd,
Is by ill *Colouring* but the more disgrac'd,
So by *false Learning* is *good Sense* defac'd.
Some are bewilder'd in the Maze of Schools,
And some made *Coxcombs* Nature meant but *Fools*.
In search of *Wit* these lose their *common Sense*,
And then turn *Criticks* in their own Defence.
Each burns alike, who can, or cannot write, [30]
Or with a *Rival's* or an *Eunuch's* spite.
All *Fools* have still an Itching to deride,
And fain *wou'd* be upon the *Laughing Side*;
If *Maevius* Scribble in *Apollo's* spight,
There are, who judge still worse than he can *write*.

Some have at first for *Wits*, then *Poets* past,
Turn'd *Criticks* next, and prov'd plain *Fools* at last;

Some neither can for *Wits* nor *Criticks* pass,
As heavy Mules are neither *Horse* or *Ass*.
Those half-learn'd *Witlings*, num'rous in our Isle, [40]
As half-form'd *Insects* on the Banks of *Nile*:
Unfinish'd Things, one knows now what to call,
Their Generation's so *equivocal*:
To tell 'em, wou'd a *hundred Tongues* require,
Or *one vain Wit's*, that might a hundred tire.

But you who seek to *give* and *merit* Fame,
And justly bear a *Critick's* noble Name,
Be sure *your self* and your own *Reach* to know.
How far your *Genius*, *Taste*, and *Learning* go;
Launch not beyond your *Depth*, but be discreet, [50]
And mark *that Point* where *Sense* and *Dulness* meet.

Nature to all things fix'd the *Limits* fit,
And wisely curb'd proud *Man's* pretending *Wit*:
As on the *Land* while *here* the *Ocean* gains,
In *other Parts* it leaves wide sandy *Plains*;
Thus in the *Soul* while *Memory* prevails,
The solid *Pow'r* of *Understanding* fails;
Where *Beams* of warm *Imagination* play,
The *Memory's* soft *Figures* melt away.
One *Science* only will one *Genius* fit; [60]
So *vast* is *Art*, so *narrow* *Human Wit*;
Not only bounded to *peculiar Arts*,
But oft in *those*, confin'd to *single Parts*.
Like *Kings* we lose the *Conquests* gain'd before,
By *vain Ambition* still to make them more:
Each might his *sev'ral Province* well command,
Wou'd all but stoop to what they *understand*.

First follow *Nature*, and your *Judgment* frame
By her just *Standard*, which is still the same:
Unerring Nature, still divinely bright, [70]
One *clear*, *unchang'd* and *Universal* *Light*,
Life, *Force*, and *Beauty*, must to all impart,

At once the *Source*, and *End*, and *Test* of *Art*.
Art from that *Fund* each *just Supply* provides,
Works *without Show*, and *without Pomp* presides:
In some fair *Body* thus th' informing *Soul*
With *Spirits* feeds, with *Vigour* fills the whole,
Each *Motion* guides, and ev'ry *Nerve* sustains;
It self unseen, but in th' *Effects*, remains.
Some, to whom *Heav'n* in *Wit* has been profuse. [80]
Want as much more, to turn it to its use,
For *Wit* and *Judgment* often are at strife,
Tho' meant each other's *Aid*, like *Man* and *Wife*.
'Tis more to *guide* than *spur* the *Muse's Steed*;
Restrain his *Fury*, than provoke his *Speed*;
The winged *Courser*, like a gen'rous *Horse*,
Shows most true *Mettle* when you *check* his *Course*.

Those *Rules* of old *discover'd*, not *devis'd*,
Are *Nature* still, but *Nature Methodiz'd*;
Nature, like *Liberty*, is but restrain'd [90]
By the same *Laws* which first *herself* ordain'd.

Hear how learn'd *Greece* her useful *Rules* indites,
When to repress, and when indulge our *Flights*:
High on *Parnassus'* Top her *Sons* she show'd,
And pointed out those arduous *Paths* they trod,
Held from afar, aloft, th' *Immortal Prize*,
And urg'd the rest by equal *Steps* to rise;
Just *Precepts* thus from great *Examples* giv'n,
She drew from them what they deriv'd from *Heav'n*
The gen'rous *Critick* fann'd the *Poet's Fire*, [100]
And taught the *World*, with *Reason* to *Admire*.
Then *Criticism* the *Muse's Handmaid* prov'd,
To dress her *Charms*, and make her more *belov'd*;
But following *Wits* from that *Intention* stray'd;
Who cou'd not win the *Mistress*, woo'd the *Maid*;
Against the *Poets* *their own Arms* they turn'd,
Sure to hate most the *Men* from whom they *learn'd*.

So modern *Pothecaries*, taught the Art
By *Doctor's Bills* to play the *Doctor's Part*,
Bold in the Practice of *mistaken Rules*, [110]
Prescribe, apply, and call their *Masters Fools*.
Some on the Leaves of ancient Authors prey,
Nor Time nor Moths e'er spoil'd so much as they:
Some dryly plain, without Invention's Aid,
Write dull *Receipts* how Poems may be made:
These leave the Sense, their Learning to display,
And theme explain the Meaning quite away

You then whose Judgment the right Course wou'd steer,
Know well each Ancient's proper *Character*,
His *Fable*, *Subject*, *Scope* in ev'ry Page, [120]
Religion, *Country*, *Genius* of his Age:
Without all these at once before your Eyes,
Cavil you may, but never *Criticize*.
Be *Homer's Works* your *Study*, and *Delight*,
Read them by Day, and meditate by Night,
Thence form your Judgment, thence your Maxims bring,
And trace the Muses *upward* to their *Spring*;
Still with *It self compar'd*, his *Text* peruse;
And let your *Comment* be the *Mantuan Muse*.

When first young *Maro* in his boundless Mind [130]
A Work t' outlast Immortal *Rome* design'd,
Perhaps he seem'd *above* the Critick's Law,
And but from *Nature's Fountains* scorn'd to draw:
But when t'examine ev'ry Part he came,
Nature and *Homer* were, he found, the *same*:
Convinc'd, amaz'd, he checks the bold Design,
And Rules as strict his labour'd Work confine,
As if the *Stagyrite* o'er looked each Line.
Learn hence for Ancient *Rules* a just Esteem;
To copy *Nature* is to copy *Them*. [140]

Some Beauties yet, no Precepts can declare,
For there's a *Happiness* as well as *Care*.

Musick resembles *Poetry*, in each
Are *nameless Graces* which no *Methods* teach,
And which a *Master-Hand* alone can reach.
If, where the *Rules* not far enough extend,
(Since *Rules* were made but to promote their End)
Some *Lucky Licence* answers to the full
Th' *Intent* propos'd, *that Licence* is a *Rule*.
Thus *Pegasus*, a nearer way to take, [150]
May boldly deviate from the common *Track*.
Great *Wits* sometimes may *gloriously offend*,
And *rise* to *Faults* true *Criticks* dare not mend;
From *vulgar Bounds* with *brave Disorder* part,
And *snatch* a *Grace* beyond the *Reach* of *Art*,
Which, without passing thro' the *Judgment*, gains
The *Heart*, and all its *End* at *once* attains.
In *Prospects*, thus, some *Objects* please our *Eyes*,
Which out of *Nature's common Order* rise,
The *shapeless Rock*, or hanging *Precipice*. [160]
But tho' the *Ancients* thus their *Rules* invade,
(As *Kings* dispense with *Laws* *Themselves* have made)
Moderns, beware! Or if you must offend
Against the *Precept*, ne'er transgress its *End*,
Let it be *seldom*, and *compell'd* by *Need*,
And have, at least, *Their Precedent* to plead.
The *Critick* else proceeds without *Remorse*,
Seizes your *Fame*, and puts his *Laws* in force.

I know there are, to whose presumptuous *Thoughts*
Those *Freer Beauties*, ev'n in *Them*, seem *Faults*: [170]
Some *Figures monstrous* and *mis-shap'd* appear,
Consider'd *singly*, or beheld too *near*,
Which, but *proportion'd* to their *Light*, or *Place*,
Due *Distance reconciles* to *Form* and *Grace*.
A prudent *Chief* not always must display
His *Pow'rs* in *equal Ranks*, and *fair Array*,
But with th' *Occasion* and the *Place* comply,
Conceal his *Force*, nay seem sometimes to *Fly*.

Those oft are *Stratagems* which *Errors* seem,
Nor is it *Homer Nods*, but *We* that *Dream*. [180]

Still green with Bays each *ancient* Altar stands,
Above the reach of *Sacrilegious* Hands,
Secure from *Flames*, from *Envy's* fiercer Rage,
Destructive *War*, and all-involving *Age*.
See, from each *Clime* the Learn'd their Incense bring;
Hear, in *all Tongues* consenting *Paeans* ring!
In Praise so just, let ev'ry Voice be join'd,
And fill the *Gen'ral Chorus* of *Mankind*!
Hail *Bards Triumphant!* born in *happier Days*;
Immortal Heirs of *Universal* Praise! [190]
Whose Honours with Increase of *Ages* grow,
As streams roll down, *enlarging* as they flow!
Nations *unborn* your mighty Names shall sound,
And Worlds applaud that must not yet be *found*!
Oh may some Spark of *your* Coelestial Fire
The last, the meanest of your Sons inspire,
(That on weak Wings, from far, pursues your Flights;
*Glow*s while he *reads*, but *trembles* as he *writes*)
To teach vain Wits a Science *little known*,
T' *admire* Superior Sense, and *doubt* their own! [200]

Of all the Causes which conspire to blind
Man's erring Judgment, and misguide the Mind,
What the weak Head with strongest Byass rules,
Is *Pride*, the *never-failing Vice* of *Fools*.
Whatever Nature has in *Worth* deny'd,
She gives in large Recruits of *needful Pride*;
For as in *Bodies*, thus in *Souls*, we find
What wants in *Blood* and *Spirits*, swell'd with *Wind*;
Pride, where Wit fails, steps in to our Defence,
And fills up all the *mighty Void* of *Sense*! [210]
If once right Reason drives *that Cloud* away,
Truth breaks upon us with *resistless Day*;
Trust not your self; but your Defects to know,

Make use of ev'ry *Friend* – and ev'ry *Foe*.

A *little Learning* is a dang'rous Thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the *Pierian Spring*:
There *shallow Draughts* intoxicate the Brain,
And drinking *largely* sobers us again.
Fir'd at first Sight with what the *Muse* imparts,
In *fearless Youth* we tempt the Heights of Arts, [220]
While from the bounded *Level* of our Mind,
Short Views we take, nor see the lengths behind,
But *more advanc'd*, behold with strange Surprise
New, distant Scenes of *endless Science* rise!
So pleas'd at first, the tousing *Alps* we try,
Mount o'er the Vales, and seem to tread the Sky;
Th' Eternal Snows appear already past,
And the first *Clouds* and *Mountains* seem the last:
But *those attain'd*, we tremble to survey
The growing Labours of the lengthen'd Way, [230]
Th' *increasing Prospect tires* our wandering Eyes,
Hills peep o'er Hills, and *Alps on Alps* arise!

A perfect Judge will *read* each Work of Wit
With the same Spirit that its Author *writ*,
Survey the *Whole*, nor seek slight Faults to find,
Where *Nature moves*, and *Rapture warms* the Mind;
Nor lose, for that malignant dull Delight,
The *gen'rous Pleasure* to be charm'd with Wit.
But in such Lays as neither *ebb*, nor flow,
Correctly cold, and *regularly low*, [240]
That shunning Faults, one quiet *Tenour* keep;
We cannot *blame* indeed – but we may *sleep*.
In Wit, as Nature, what affects our Hearts
Is nor th' Exactness of peculiar Parts;
'Tis not a *Lip*, or *Eye*, we Beauty call,
But the joint Force and full *Result* of *all*.
Thus when we view some well-proportion'd Dome,
The *World's* just Wonder, and ev'n *thine O Rome!*)

No single Parts unequally surprize;
All comes *united* to th' admiring Eyes; [250]
No monstrous Height, or Breadth, or Length appear;
The *Whole* at once is *Bold*, and *Regular*.

Whoever thinks a faultless Piece to see,
Thinks what ne'er was, nor is, nor e'er shall be.
In ev'ry Work regard the *Writer's End*,
Since none can compass more than they *Intend*;
And if the *Means* be just, the *Conduct* true,
Applause, in spite of trivial Faults, is due.
As Men of Breeding, sometimes Men of Wit,
T' avoid *great Errors*, must the *less* commit, [260]
Neglect the Rules each *Verbal Critick* lays,
For *not* to know some Trifles, is a Praise.
Most Criticks, fond of some subservient Art,
Still make the *Whole* depend upon a *Part*,
They talk of *Principles*, but Notions prize,
And All to one lov'd Folly Sacrifice.

Once on a time, *La Mancha's Knight*, they say,
A certain *Bard* encoutring on the Way,
Discours'd in Terms as just, with Looks as Sage,
As e'er cou'd *Dennis*, of the *Grecian Stage*; [270]
Concluding all were desp'rate Sots and Fools,
Who durst depart from *Aristotle's Rules*.
Our Author, happy in a Judge so nice,
Produc'd his Play, and beg'd the Knight's Advice,
Made him observe the *Subject* and the *Plot*,
The *Manners*, *Passions*, *Unities*, what not?
All which, exact to Rule were brought about,
Were but a *Combate in the Lists* left out.
What! Leave the Combate out? Exclaims the Knight;
Yes, or we must renounce the *Stagyrite*. [280]
Not so by Heav'n (he answers in a Rage)
Knights, Squires, and Steeds, must enter on the Stage.
So vast a Throng the Stage can ne'er contain.

Then build a New, or act it in a Plain.

Thus Criticks, of less *Judgment* than *Caprice*,
Curious, not *Knowing*, not *exact*, but *nice*,
Form *short Ideas*; and offend in *Arts*
(As most in *Manners*) by a *Love to Parts*.

Some to *Conceit* alone their *Taste* confine,
And glitt'ring *Thoughts* struck out at ev'ry *Line*; [290]
Pleas'd with a *Work* where nothing's just or fit;
One *glaring Chaos* and *wild Heap* of *Wit*;
Poets like *Painters*, thus, unskill'd to trace
The *naked Nature* and the *living Grace*,
With *Gold* and *Jewels* cover ev'ry *Part*,
And hide with *Ornaments* their *Want of Art*.
True Wit is *Nature* to *Advantage* dress't,
What oft was *Thought*, but ne'er so well *Exprest*,
Something, whose *Truth* convinc'd at *Sight* we find,
That gives us back the *Image* of our *Mind*: [300]
As *Shades* more sweetly recommend the *Light*,
So modest *Plainness* sets off sprightly *Wit*:
For *Works* may have more *Wit* than does 'em good,
As *Bodies* perish through *Excess* of *Blood*.

Others for *Language* all their *Care* express,
And value *Books*, as *Women Men*, for *Dress*:
Their *Praise* is still – *The Stile is excellent*:
The *Sense*, they humbly take upon *Content*.
Words are like *Leaves*; and where they most abound,
Much *Fruit* of *Sense* beneath is rarely found. [310]
False Eloquence, like the *Prismatic Glass*,
Its gawdy *Colours* spreads on ev'ry *place*;
The *Face* of *Nature* was no more *Survey*,
All glares *alike*, without *Distinction* gay:
But true *Expression*, like th' unchanging *Sun*,
Clears, and *improves* whate'er it shines upon,
It *gilds* all *Objects*, but it *alters* none.
Expression is the *Dress* of *Thought*, and still

Appears more *decent* as more *suitable*;
A vile Conceit in pompous Words exprest, [320]
Is like a Clown in regal Purple drest;
For diff'rent *Styles* with diff'rent *Subjects* sort,
As several Garbs with Country, Town, and Court.
Some by *Old Words* to Fame have made Pretence;
Ancients in *Phrase*, meer Moderns in their *Sense*!
Such *labour'd Nothings*, in so *strange* a *Style*,
Amaze th'unlearn'd, and make the Learned *Smile*.
Unlucky, as *Fungoso* in the Play,
These Sparks with aukward Vanity display
What the Fine Gentleman wore *Yesterday*! [330]
And but so mimick ancient Wits at best,
As Apes our Grandsires in their Doublets drest.
In *Words*, as *Fashions*, the same Rule will hold;
Alike Fantastick, if *too New*, or *Old*;
Be not the *first* by whom the *New* are try'd,
Nor yet the *last* to lay the *Old* aside.

But most by *Numbers* judge a Poet's Song,
And *smooth* or *rough*, with them, is *right* or *wrong*;
In the bright *Muse* tho' thousand *Charms* conspire,
Her *Voice* is all these tuneful Fools admire, [340]
Who haunt *Parnassus* but to please their Ear,
Not mend their Minds; as some to *Church* repair,
Not for the *Doctrine*, but the *Musick* there.
These *Equal Syllables* alone require,
Tho' oft the Ear the *open Vowels* tire,
While *Expletives* their feeble Aid *do* join,
And ten low Words oft creep in one dull Line,
While they ring round the same *unvary'd Chimes*,
With sure *Returns* of still *expected Rhymes*.
Where-e'er you find the *cooling Western Breeze*, [350]
In the next Line, it *whispers thro' the Trees*;
If *Chrystal Streams* with *pleasing Murmurs* creep,
The Reader's threaten'd (not in vain) with *Sleep*.
Then, at the *last*, and *only* Couplet fraught

With some *unmeaning* Thing they call a *Thought*,
A *needless Alexandrine* ends the Song,
That like a wounded Snake, drags its slow length along.
Leave such to tune their own dull Rhimes, and know
What's *roundly smooth*, or *languishingly slow*;
And praise the *Easie Vigor* of a Line, [360]
Where Denham's Strength, and *Waller's* Sweetness join.
True Ease in Writing comes from Art, not Chance,
As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance,
'Tis not enough no Harshness gives Offence,
The *Sound* must seem an *Eccho* to the *Sense*.
Soft is the Strain when *Zephyr* gently blows,
And the *smooth Stream* in *smoother Numbers* flows;
But when loud Surges lash the sounding Shore,
The *hoarse, rough Verse* shou'd like the *Torrent* roar.
When *Ajax* strives, some *Rocks'* vast Weight to throw, [370]
The Line too labours, and the Words move *slow*;
Not so, when swift *Camilla* scours the Plain,
Flies o'er th'unbending Corn, and skims along the Main.
Hear how *Timotheus'* vary'd Lays surprize,
And bid Alternate Passions fall and rise!
While, at each Change, the Son of *Lybian Jove*
Now *burns* with Glory, and then *melts* with Love;
Now his *fierce Eyes* with *sparkling Fury* glow;
Now *Sighs* steal out, and *Tears begin to flow*:
Persians and *Greeks* like *Turns of Nature* found, [380]
And the *World's Victor* stood subdu'd by *Sound*!
The Pow'rs of Musick all our Hearts allow;
And what *Timotheus* was, is *Dryden* now.

Avoid *Extreams*; and shun the Fault of such,
Who still are pleas'd *too little*, or *too much*.
At ev'ry Trifle scorn to take Offence,
That always shows *Great Pride*, or *Little Sense*;
Those *Heads as Stomachs* are not sure the best
Which nauseate all, and nothing can digest.
Yet let not each gay *Turn* thy Rapture move, [390]

For Fools *Admire*, but Men of Sense *Approve*;
As things seem *large* which we thro' *Mists* descry,
Dulness is ever apt to *Magnify*.

Some *foreign* Writers, some our *own* despise;
The *Ancients* only, or the *Moderns* prize:
(Thus *Wit*, like *Faith* by each Man is apply'd
To *one small Sect*, and All are *damn'd beside*.)
Meanly they seek the Blessing to confine,
And force *that Sun* but on a *Part* to Shine;
Which not alone the *Southern Wit* sublimes, [400]
But ripens Spirits in cold Northern Climes;
Which from the first has shone on *Ages past*,
Enlights the *present*, and shall warm the *last*:
(Tho' *each* may feel *Increases* and *Decays*,
And see now *clearer* and now *darker Days*)
Regard not then if *Wit* be *Old* or *New*,
But blame the *False*, and value still the *True*.

Some ne'er advance a Judgment of their own,
But *catch* the *spreading Notion* of the Town;
They reason and conclude by *Precedent*, [410]
And own *stale Nonsense* which they ne'er invent.
Some judge of Authors' *Names*, not *Works*, and then
Nor praise nor blame the *Writings*, but the *Men*.
Of all this *Servile Herd* the worst is He
That in *proud Dulness* joins with *Quality*,
A constant Critick at the Great-man's Board,
To *fetch* and *carry* Nonsense for my Lord.
What *woful stuff* this Madrigal wou'd be,
To some starv'd Hackny Sonneteer, or me?
But let a *Lord* once own the *happy Lines*, [420]
How the *Wit brightens!* How the *Style refines!*
Before *his* sacred Name flies ev'ry Fault,
And each *exalted Stanza teems* with *Thought!*

The *Vulgar* thus through *Imitation* err;
As oft the *Learn'd* by being *Singular*;

So much they scorn the Crowd, that if the Throng
By *Chance* go right, they *purposely* go wrong;
So Schismatics the *plain Believers* quit,
And are but damn'd for having *too much Wit*.

Some praise at Morning what they blame at Night; [430]
But always think the *last Opinion right*.
A Muse by these is like a Mistress us'd,
This hour she's *idoliz'd*, the next *abus'd*,
While their weak Heads, like Towns unfortify'd,
'Twixt Sense and Nonsense daily change their Side.
Ask them the Cause; *They're wiser still*, they say;
And still to Morrow's wiser than to Day.
We think our *Fathers Fools*, so *wise* we grow;
Our *wiser Sons*, no doubt, will think us so.
Once *School-Divines* this zealous Isle o'erspread; [440]
Who knew most *Sentences* was *deepest read*;
Faith, Gospel, All, seem'd made to be *disputed*,
And none had *Sense enough to be Confuted*.
Scotists and *Thomists*, now, in Peace remain,
Amidst their *kindred Cobwebs* in *Duck-Lane*.
If *Faith* it self has *diff'rent Dresses* worn,
What wonder *Modes* in *Wit* shou'd take their Turn?
Oft, leaving what is Natural and fit,
The *current Folly* proves the *ready Wit*,
And Authors think their Reputation safe, [450]
Which lives as long as *Fools* are pleas'd to *Laugh*.

Some valuing those of their own, *Side* or *Mind*,
Still make themselves the measure of Mankind;
Fondly we think we honour Merit then,
When we but praise *Our selves* in *Other Men*.
Parties in *Wit* attend on those of *State*,
And publick Faction doubles private Hate.
Pride, *Malice*, *Folly*, against *Dryden* rose,
In various Shapes of *Parsons*, *Criticks*, *Beaus*;
But *Sense* surviv'd, when *merry Jest*s were past; [460]

For rising Merit will *buoy up* at last.
Might he return, and bless once more our Eyes,
New *Blackmores* and new *Milbourns* must arise;
Nay shou'd great *Homer* lift his awful Head,
Zoilus again would start up from the Dead.
Envy will *Merit* as its *Shade* pursue,
But like a Shadow, proves the *Substance* true;
For envy'd Wit, like *Sol* Eclips'd, makes known
Th' *opposing Body's* Grossness, not its *own*.
When first that Sun too powerful Beams displays, [470]
It draws up Vapours which obscure its Rays;
But ev'n those Clouds at last adorn its Way,
Reflect new Glories, and augment the Day.

Be thou the *first* true Merit to befriend;
His Praise is lost, who stays till *All* commend;
Short is the Date, alas, of *Modern Rhymes*;
And 'tis but just to let 'em live *betimes*.
No longer now that Golden Age appears,
When *Patriarch-Wits* surviv'd *thousand Years*;
Now Length of *Fame* (our *second* Life) is lost, [480]
And bare Threescore is all ev'n That can boast:
Our Sons their Fathers' *failing language* see,
And such as *Chaucer* is, shall *Dryden* be.
So when the faithful *Pencil* has design'd
Some *bright Idea* of the Master's Mind,
Where a *new World* leaps out at his command,
And ready Nature waits upon his Hand;
When the ripe Colours *soften* and *unite*,
And sweetly *melt* into just Shade and Light,
When mellowing Years their full Perfection give, [490]
And each Bold Figure just begins to *Live*;
The *treach'rous Colours* the fair Art betray,
And all the bright Creation fades away!

Unhappy *Wit*, like most mistaken Things,
Attunes not for that *Envy* which it brings.

In *Youth* alone its empty Praise we boast,
But soon the Short-liv'd Vanity is lost!
Like some fair *Flow'r* the early *Spring* supplies,
That gaily Blooms, but ev'n in blooming *Dies*.
What is this Wit which must our Cares employ? [500]
The *Owner's Wife*, that *other Men* enjoy,
Then most our *Trouble* still when most *admir'd*,
And still the more we *give*, the more *requir'd*;
Whose Fame with *Pains* we guard, but lose with *Ease*,
Sure *some* to vex, but never *all* to please;
'Tis what the *Vicious fear*, the *Virtuous shun*;
By *Fools 'tis hated*, and by *Knaves undone*!

If *Wit* so much from *Ign'rance* undergo,
Ah let not *Learning* too commence its Foe!
Of old, those met *Rewards* who cou'd excel, [510]
And such were *Prais'd* who but *endeavour'd* well:
Tho' *Triumphs* were to *Gen'ral's* only due,
Crowns were reserv'd to grace the *Soldiers* too.
Now, they who reached *Parnassus'* lofty Crown,
Employ their *Pains* to spurn some others down;
And while *Self-Love* each jealous *Writer* rules,
Contending Wits becomes the *Sport of Fools*:
But still the *Worst* with most *Regret* commend,
For each *Ill Author* is as bad a *Friend*.
To what base *Ends*, and by what abject *Ways*, [520]
Are *Mortals* urg'd thro' *Sacred Lust of praise*!
Ah ne'er so *dire* a *Thirst of Glory* boast,
Nor in the *Critick* let the *Man* be lost!
Good-Nature and *Good-Sense* must ever join;
To err is *Humane*; to *Forgive*, *Divine*.

But if in *Noble Minds* some *Dregs* remain,
Not yet purg'd off, of *Spleen* and sow'r *Disdain*,
Discharge that *Rage* on more *Provoking Crimes*,
Nor fear a *Dearth* in these *Flagitious Times*.
No *Pardon* vile *Obscenity* should find, [530]

Tho' *Wit* and *Art* conspire to move your Mind;
But *Dulness* with *Obscenity* must prove
As Shameful sure as *Importance* in *Love*.
In the fat Age of Pleasure, Wealth, and Ease,
Sprung the rank Weed, and thriv'd with large Increase;
When *Love* was all an easie Monarch's Care;
Seldom at *Council*, never in a *War*:
Jilts rul'd the State, and Statesmen *Farces* writ;
Nay *Wits* had *Pensions*, and young *Lords* had *Wit*:
The Fair sate panting at a *Courtier's Play*, [540]
And not a Mask went *un-improv'd* away:
The modest Fan was liked up no more,
And Virgins *smil'd* at what they *blush'd* before –
The following Licence of a Foreign Reign
Did all the Dregs of bold *Socinus* drain;
Then Unbelieving Priests reform'd the Nation,
And taught more *Pleasant* Methods of Salvation;
Where Heav'ns Free Subjects might their *Rights* dispute,
Lest God himself shou'd seem too *Absolute*.
Pulpits their *Sacred Satire* learn'd to spare, [550]
And Vice *admir'd* to find a *Flatt'rer* there!
Encourag'd thus, Witt's *Titans* brav'd the Skies,
And the Press groan'd with Licenc'd *Blasphemies* –
These Monsters, Criticks! with your Darts engage,
Here point your Thunder, and exhaust your Rage!
Yet shun their Fault, who, *Scandalously nice*,
Will needs *mistake* an Author *into Vice*;
All seems Infected that th' Infected spy,
As all looks yellow to the Jaundic'd Eye.

Learn then what *Morals Criticks* ought to show, [560]
For 'tis but *half a Judge's Task*, to *Know*.
'Tis not enough, Taste, Judgment, Learning, join;
In all you speak, let Truth and Candor shine:
That not alone what to your *Sense* is due,
All may allow; but seek your *Friendship* too.

Be *silent* always when you *doubt* your *Sense*;
And *speak*, tho' *sure*, with *seeming Diffidence*:
Some positive persisting Fops we know,
Who, if *once wrong*, will needs be *always* so;
But you, with *Pleasure* own your *Errors* past, [570]
An make each Day a *Critick* on the last.

'Tis not enough your *Counsel* still be *true*,
Blunt Truths more *Mischief* than *nice Falsehood* do;
Men must be *taught* as if you taught them *not*;
And Things *unknown* propos'd as Things *forgot*:
Without *Good Breeding*, *Truth* is disapprov'd;
That only makes *Superior Sense* *belov'd*.

Be Niggards of *Advice* on no *Pretence*;
For the *worst Avarice* is that of *Sense*:
With mean *Complacence* ne'er betray your *Trust*, [580]
Nor be so *Civil* as to prove *Unjust*;
Fear not the *Anger* of the *Wise* to raise;
Those best can *bear Reproof*, who *merit Praise*.

'Twere well, might *Criticks* still this *Freedom* take;
But *Appius* reddens at each *Word* you *speak*,
And *stares*, *Tremendous!* with a *threatning Eye*
Like some *fierce Tyrant* in *Old Tapestry!*
Fear most to tax an *Honourable Fool*,
Whose *Right* it is, *uncensur'd* to be *dull*;
Such without *Wit* are *Poets* when they *please*. [590]
As without *Learning* they can take *Degrees*.
Leave dang'rous *Truths* to unsuccessful *Satyrs*,
And *Flattery* to fulsome *Dedicators*,
Whom, when they *Praise*, the *World* believes no more,
Than when they promise to give *Scribling* o'er.
'Tis best sometimes your *Censure* to restrain,
And *charitably* let the *Dull* be *vain*:
Your *Silence* there is better than your *Spite*,
For who can *rail* so long as they can *write*?
Still humming on, their drowzy *Course* they keep, [600]

And *lash'd* so long, like *Tops*, are *lash'd asleep*.
False Steps but help them to renew the Race,
As after *Stumbling*, Jades will *mend* their Pace.
What Clouds of these, impenitently bold,
In *Sounds* and jingling *Syllables* grown old,
Still *run on* Poets in a raging Vein,
Ev'n to the Dregs and *Squeezings* of the *Brain*;
Strain out the last, dull droppings of their Sense,
And Rhyme with all the *Rage* of *Impotence*!

Such shameless *Bards* we have; and yet 'tis true, [610]
There are as mad, abandon'd *Criticks* too.
The Bookful Blockhead, ignorantly read,
With *Loads* of *Learned Lumber* in his Head,
With his own Tongue still edifies his Ears,
And always *List'ning to Himself* appears.
All Books he reads, and all he reads assails,
From *Dryden's Fables* down to *Durfey's Tales*.
With *him*, most Authors steal their Works, or buy;
Garth did not write his own *Dispensary*.
Name a new *Play*, and *he's* the Poet's *Friend*, [620]
Nay show'd his Faults – but when wou'd Poets mend?
No Place so Sacred from such Fops is barr'd,
Nor is *Paul's Church* more safe than *Paul's Church-yard*:
Nay, fly to *Altars*; *there* they'll talk you dead;
For *Fools* rush in where *Angels* fear to tread.
Distrustful *Sense* with modest *Caution* speaks;
It still *looks home*, and *short Excursions* makes;
But *ratling Nonsense* in full *Vollies* breaks;
And never shock'd, and never turn'd aside,
Bursts out, resistless, with a thundering Tyde! [630]

But where's the Man, who Counsel *can* bestow,
Still *pleas'd* to *teach*, and not *proud* to *know*?
Unbiass'd, or by *Favour* or by *Spite*;
Not *dully prepossest*, nor *blindly right*;
Tho' Learn'd well-bred; and tho' well-bred, sincere;

Modestly bold, and Humanly severe?
Who to a *Friend* his Faults can freely show,
And gladly praise the Merit of a *Foe*?
Blest with a *Taste* exact, yet unconfin'd;
A *Knowledge* both of *Books* and *Humankind*; [640]
Gen'rous Converse; a *Sound* exempt from *Pride*;
And *Love to Praise*, with *Reason* on his Side?

Such once were *Criticks*, such the *Happy Few*,
Athens and *Rome* in better Ages knew.
The mighty *Stagyrite* first left the Shore,
Spread all his Sails, and durst the Deeps explore;
He steer'd securely, and discover'd far,
Led by the Light of the *Maeonian Star*.
Poets, a *Race* long unconfin'd and free,
Still fond and proud of *Savage Liberty*, [650]
Receiv'd his Laws, and stood convinc'd 'twas fit
Who conquer'd *Nature*, shou'd preside o'er *Wit*.

Horace still charms with graceful *Negligence*,
And without *Method* talks us into *Sense*,
Will like a *Friend* familiarly convey
The *truest Notions* in the *easiest way*.
He, who *Supream* in Judgment, as in *Wit*,
Might boldly censure, as he boldly writ,
Yet *judg'd* with *Coolness* tho' he sung with *Fire*;
His *Precepts* teach but what his *Works* inspire. [660]
Our Criticks take a contrary *Extream*,
They *judge* with *Fury*, but they *write* with *Fle'me*:
Nor suffers *Horace* more in wrong *Translations*
By *Wits*, than *Criticks* in as wrong *Quotations*.

See *Dionysius Homer's* Thoughts refine,
And call new Beauties forth from ev'ry Line!

Fancy and Art in gay *Petronius* please,
The *Scholar's Learning*, with the *Courtier's Ease*.

In grave *Quintilian's* copious Work we find
The justest *Rules*, and clearest *Method* join'd; [670]
Thus *useful Arms* in Magazines we place,
All rang'd in *Order*, and dispos'd with *Grace*,
But less to please the Eye, than arm the Hand,
Still fit for Use, and ready at Command.

Thee, bold *Longinus!* all the Nine inspire,
And bless *their Critick* with a *Poet's Fire*.
An ardent *Judge*, who Zealous in his Trust,
With *Warmth* gives Sentence, yet is always *Just*;
Whose *own Example* strengthens all his Laws,
And *Is himself* that great *Sublime* he draws. [680]

Thus long succeeding Criticks justly reign'd,
Licence repress'd, and *useful Laws* ordain'd;
Learning and *Rome* alike in Empire grew,
And *Arts* still follow'd where her *Eagles* flew;
From the same Foes, at last, both felt their Doom,
And the same Age saw *Learning* fall, and *Rome*.
With *Tyranny*, then *Superstition* join'd,
As that the *Body*, this enslav'd the *Mind*;
Much was *Believ'd*, but little *understood*,
And to be *dull* was constru'd to be *good*; [690]
A *second Deluge* Learning thus o'er-run,
And the *Monks* finish'd what the *Goths* begun.

At length, *Erasmus*, that *great, injur'd* Name,
(The *Glory* of the Priesthood, and the *Shame!*)
Stemm'd the *wild Torrent* of a *barb'rous* Age.
And drove those *Holy Vandals* off the Stage.

But see! each *Muse*, in *Leo's* Golden Days,
Starts from her Trance, and trims her wither'd Bays!
Rome's ancient *Genius*, o'er its *Ruins* spread,
Shakes off the *Dust*, and rears his rev'rend Head! [700]
Then *Sculpture* and her *Sister-Arts* revive;
Stones leap'd to *Form*, and *Rocks* began to live;

With sweeter *Notes* each *rising Temple* rung;
A *Raphael* painted, and a *Vida* sung!
Immortal *Vida!* on whose honour'd Brow
The Poet's *Bays* and Critick's *Ivy* grow:
Cremona now shall ever boast thy Name,
As next in Place to *Mantua*, next in Fame!

But soon by Impious Arms from *Latium* chas'd,
Their *ancient Bounds* the banish'd Muses past: [710]
Thence Arts o'er all the *Northern World* advance,
But *Critic Learning* flourish'd most in *France*.
The *Rules*, a Nation born to serve, obeys,
And *Boileau* still in Right of *Horace* sways.
But *we*, brave *Britons*, *Foreign Laws* despis'd,
And kept *unconquer'd* and *unciviliz'd*,
Fierce for the *Liberties of Wit*, and bold,
We still defy'd the *Romans* as of old.
Yet *some* there were, among the *sounder Few*
Of those who *less presum'd*, and *better knew*, [720]
Who durst assert the *juster Ancient Cause*,
And here *restor'd Wit's Fundamental Laws*.
Such was the Muse, whose *Rules and Practice* tell,
Nature's chief Master-piece is writing well.
Such was *Roscomon* – not more *learn'd* than *good*,
With *Manners gen'rous* as his *Noble Blood*;
To him the *Wit of Greece and Rome* was known,
And ev'ry Author's *Merit*, but his own.
Such late was *Walsh*, – the *Muse's Judge and Friend*,
Who justly knew to blame or to commend; [730]
To *Failings mild*, but *zealous* for *Desert*;
The *clearest Head*, and the *sincerest Heart*.
This humble Praise, lamented *Shade!* receive,
This Praise at least a grateful Muse may give!
The Muse, whose early *Voice* you taught to Sing,
Prescrib'd her *Heights*, and prun'd her tender *Wing*,
(Her Guide now lost) no more attempts to *rise*,
But in low Numbers short *Excursions* tries:

Content, if hence th' Unlearned their Wants may view,
The Learn'd reflect on what before they knew: [740]
Careless of *Censure*, not too fond of *Fame*,
Still pleas'd to *praise*, yet not afraid to *blame*,
Averse alike to *Flatter*, or *Offend*,
Not *free* from Faults, nor yet too vain to *mend*.