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An Essay on “An Essay on Criticism”: Derision as Inspiration

Part 1

The critical analyses of Alexander Pope,
 Delivered in heroic couplets, shatter any hope
 The reader might have had regarding putting words to verse.
 So if he meant to better things, he might have made them worse;
 For surely there's no better way of stifling the Muse
 Than telling wanting poets that their labour is no use,
 And criticizing literary critics when they try
 To dip their most inventive quill within a well that's dry.
 But this “pretending” (53) poet, who's abandoned standard prose,
 will prove himself in couplets and the author's aim propose.
 For though the condescending rhyme is here and there a rant,
 His inkwell overflows when Alexander says: You can't.

To Pope, 'tis perfect Nature that in poetry shines “bright” (70).
 No matter how Man's learning makes him think that he can write.
 Poor Pope has had it with his generation's lack of skill,
 And with his wit he dams the matter oozing out their quills.
 He writes: it isn't right to let the Muse's horse run free,
 The poet must restrain and guide her steed to some degree (84-85).
 And worse than wanting poets are the “coxcombs” that complain (27),
 Whose failed wits form critics: fools, to put it plain (37).
 You critics woo the Muse's maid (102), contemptuous Pope laments,
 your “dull receipts” (115) are “dryly plain” (114), and so are your judgments!
 With all your heavy study, Mistress Muse you wooeth not,
 For only “vulgar bounds” (154) would ever save your rhymes from rot
 Because the “nameless grace” (144) that “gains | The heart” (156-57) cannot be taught.
 With tirades such as these, Pope leaves the reader far behind,
 If he had thought himself to writing verses so inclined.
 For never, having read Pope's words, would e'er a poet try
 To match his skill of arguing in couplets in reply.
 Instead he “doubt[s]” his wit (200) and throws his scribbles on the fire.
 He lacks a “master hand” (145) and so his better's wit admires.

Part 2

Though Pope has demonstrated that he cannot be outdone,
 Does not the Moon shine bright by her reflection of the Sun?
 Should all the poets in the night remain here in the dark?
 Or with our lenses, by his light, attempt t'ignite a spark?
 A thousand embers in the night shine brighter than his days
 And though he'd have them smothered, we'll ignite them by his rays.
 So, Pope, this humble "narrow human wit" (61) will not retreat.
 You sought to crush his lines beneath your strong iambic feet,
 But all your scorn is rhymed in vain, this "witling" (40), you've inspired!
 In sloppy imitation, he creates the undesired,
 "launch[ed] beyond [his] depth...[to find] where sense and dullness meet" (50-51),
 Floundering his appendages, yet practicing "discreet" (50).
 O Pope, you tempt the witlings even as you them harass,
 Asserting that such heavy mules are "neither horse nor ass" (39),
 To search within their very soul to find their equine breed.
 For if the horse is thought a mule, how should the horse succeed?
 This witling's not the victor, but his verses make him glad.
 And though he's but "half-learn[è]d" (40), he is surely not half-bad.
 Methinks in your derision, you had hoped to stir him so,
 Predicting in his hot retort, he might reflect your glow.
 As such a learned poet, you'll know well that only trial
 can sharpen wanting wit in "fearless youth" (220) to pointed style.
 And so I say your aim was not to drown him in contempt,
 But anger, coax, and challenge him to his weak verse attempt.
 For after all, a witling, as a duckling to a duck,
 Should one day float "beyond [his] depth" (50), with practice and good luck.

Works Cited

Pope, Alexander. "An Essay on Criticism: Part 1." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1124-1128. Print.