

An Essay on Criticism

Alexander Pope

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'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.
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;
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,
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;

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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,
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,
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* 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;
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,
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.
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*.

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'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
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*,
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*,
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,
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

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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*.

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,
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*.
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*:
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*.

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!
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!

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*!
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,
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 trowning *Alps* we try,

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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,
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*,
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;
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,
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* encountering on the Way,
Discours'd in Terms as just, with Looks as Sage,
As e'er cou'd *Dennis*, of the *Grecian* Stage;
Concluding all were desp'rate Sots and Fools,
Who durst depart from *Aristotle's* Rules.
Our Author, happy in a Judge so nice,

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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.
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;
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 drest,
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:
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.
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,
Is like a Clown in regal Purple drest;

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For different *Styles* with different *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*!
And but so mimick ancient Wits at best,
As Apes our Grandsires in their Doublets treat.
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,
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*,
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,
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,
The Line too labours, and the Words move *slow*;

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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,
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,
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,
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*,
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*,
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;
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,
'Twi'xt 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;
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,
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;
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;

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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,
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,
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,
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?
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*,
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;

An Essay on Criticism

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,
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,
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*,
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,
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,
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,

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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,
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,
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.
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 *Scribbling* 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,
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 Crouds 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,

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*,
 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!

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 prepossess*, 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*;
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*,
 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,

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Yet *judg'd* with *Coolness* tho' he sung with *Fire*;
His *Precepts* teach but what his *Works* inspire.
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;
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.

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*;
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!
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:
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*,
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;
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:
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*.