

Its gaudy colors spreads on every place,
 The face of nature we no more survey.
 All glares alike without distinction gay:
 But true expression, like the 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 expressed,
 Is like a clown in regal purple dressed
 For different styles with different subjects sort,
 As several garbs with country town and court
 Some by old words to fame have made pretense,
 Ancients in phrase, mere moderns in their sense;
 Such labored nothings, in so strange a style,
 Amaze the unlearned, and make the learned
 smile.
 Unlucky, as Fungoso in the play,
 These sparks with awkward vanity display
 What the fine gentleman wore yesterday;
 And but so mimic ancient wits at best,
 As apes our grandsires in their doublets dressed.
 In words as fashions the same rule will hold,
 Alike fantastic if too new or old.
 Be not the first by whom the new are tried,

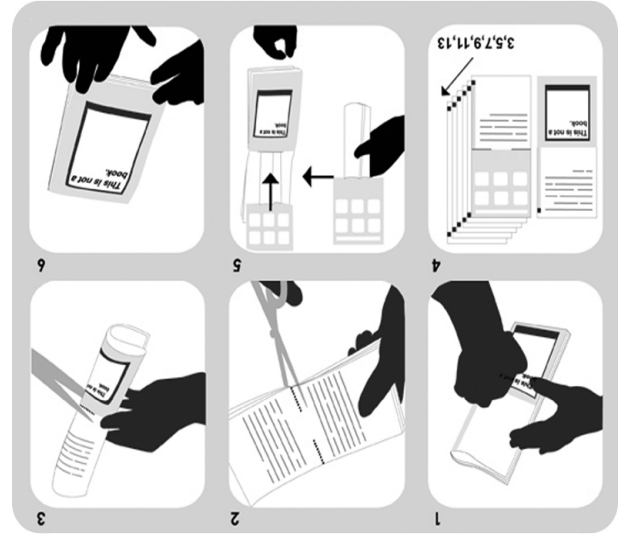
Pleased with a work where nothing's just or fit;
 One glaring chaos and wild heap of wit.
 Poets, like painters, thus, unskilled to trace
 The naked nature and the living grace,
 With gold and jewels cover every part,
 And hide with ornaments their want of art.
 True wit is nature to advantage dressed;
 What oft was thought, but ne'er so well
 expressed;
 Something, whose truth convinced 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 them
 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 style 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.

'Tis hard to say if greater want of skill
 Appear in writing or in judging ill,
 But of the two less dangerous is the offense
 To tire our patience than mislead 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 critic share
 Both must alike from Heaven derive their light,
 These born to judge as well as those to write
 Let such teach others who themselves excel,
 And censure freely, who have written well
 Authors are partial to their wit, 'tis true
 But are not critics to their judgment too?
 Yet if we look more closely we shall find
 Most have the seeds of judgment in their mind

PART I.
An Essay on Criticism
 A poem by Alexander Pope

An Essay on Criticism - Parts I and II

Alexander Pope



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An Essay on Criticism - Parts I and II
Alexander Pope
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Nature affords at least a glimmering light
 The lines though touched but faintly are drawn
 right,
 But as the slightest sketch if justly traced
 Is by ill coloring but the more disgraced
 So by false learning is good sense defaced
 Some are bewildered 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 critics in their own defense
 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 would be upon the laughing side
 If Maevious scribble in Apollo's spite
 There are who judge still worse than he can write.

Some have at first for wits then poets passed
 Turned critics next and proved plain fools at last
 Some neither can for wits nor critics pass
 As heavy mules are neither horse nor ass.
 Those half-learned witlings, numerous in our isle,
 As half-formed insects on the banks of Nile
 Unfinished things one knows not what to call
 Their generation is so equivocal
 To tell them would a hundred tongues require,

Or one vain wits that might a hundred tire,
 But you who seek to give and merit fame,
 And justly bear a critic's noble name,
 Be sure yourself 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 dullness
 meet.
 Nature to all things fixed the limits fit
 And wisely curbed 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 power 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 confined to single parts
 Like kings, we lose the conquests gained before,
 By vain ambition still to make them more
 Each might his several province well command,
 Would all but stoop to what they understand.

The following license of a foreign reign,
 Did all the dregs of bold Socinus drain,
 Then unbelieving priests reformed the nation.
 And taught more pleasant methods of salvation;
 Where Heaven's free subjects might their rights
 dispute,
 Lest God himself should seem too absolute:
 Pulpits their sacred satire learned to spare,
 And vice admired to find a flatterer there!
 Encouraged thus, wit's Titans braved the skies,
 And the press groaned with licensed blasphemies.
 These monsters, critics! 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 the infected spy,
 As all looks yellow to the jaundiced eye.

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First follow nature and your judgment frame
 By her just standard, which is still the same.
 Unerring nature still divinely bright,
 One clear, unchanged 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 the informing soul
 With spirits feeds, with vigor fills the whole,
 Each motion guides and every nerve sustains,
 Itself unseen, but in the effects remains.
 Some, to whom Heaven in wit has been profuse,
 Want as much more, to turn it to its use;
 For wit and judgment often are at strife,
 Though 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 generous horse,
 Shows most true mettle when you check his
 course.
 Those rules, of old discovered, not devised,
 Are nature still, but nature methodized;
 Nature, like liberty, is but restrained

To what base ends, and by what abject ways,
 Are mortals urged, through sacred lust of praise!
 Ah, never so dire a thirst of glory boast,
 Nor in the critic let the man be lost
 Good-nature and good sense must ever join;
 To err is human, to forgive, divine.
 But if in noble minds some dregs remain,
 Not yet purged off, of spleen and sour disdain;
 Discharge that rage on more provoking crimes,
 Nor fear a death in these flagitious times.
 No pardon vile obscenity should find,
 Though wit and art conspire to move your mind;
 But dullness with obscenity must prove
 As shameful sure as impotence in love.
 In the fat age of pleasure, wealth, and ease,
 Sprung the rank weed, and thrived with large
 increase:
 When love was all an easy monarch's care,
 Seldom at council, never in a war
 Jilts ruled the state, and statesmen farces writ;
 Nay, wits had pensions, and young lords had wit:
 The fair sat panting at a courtier's play,
 And not a mask went unimproved away:
 The modest fan was lifted up no more,
 And virgins smiled at what they blushed before.

By the same laws which first herself ordained.
 Hear how learned Greece her useful rules indites,
 When to repress and when indulge our flights.
 High on Parnassus' top her sons she showed,
 And pointed out those arduous paths they trod;
 Held from afar, aloft, the immortal prize,
 And urged the rest by equal steps to rise.
 Just precepts thus from great examples given,
 She drew from them what they derived from
 Heaven.
 The generous critic fanned the poet's fire,
 And taught the world with reason to admire.
 Then criticism the muse's handmaid proved,
 To dress her charms, and make her more
 beloved:
 But following wits from that intention strayed
 Who could not win the mistress, wooed the maid
 Against the poets their own arms they turned
 Sure to hate most the men from whom they
 learned
 So modern pothecaries taught the art
 By doctors 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,

In youth alone its empty praise we boast
 But soon the short lived vanity is lost.
 Like some fair flower the early spring supplies
 That gayly blooms but even 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 admired
 And still the more we give the more required
 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 ignorance undergo,
 Ah! let not learning too commence its foe!
 Of old, those met rewards who could excel,
 And such were praised who but endeavored well:
 Though triumphs were to generals only due,
 Crowns were reserved to grace the soldiers too.
 Now they who reach Parnassus' lofty crown,
 Employ their pains to spurn some others down;
 And, while self-love each jealous writer rules,
 Contending wits become the sport of fools:
 But still the worst with most regret commend,
 For each ill author is as bad a friend

Nor time nor moths e'er spoil 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 those explain the meaning quite away.

You then, whose judgment the right course would steer,
 Know well each ancient's proper character,
 His fable subject scope in every page,
 Religion, country, genius of his age
 Without all these at once before your eyes,
 Cavil you may, but never criticise.
 Be Homers 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 itself compared, his text peruse,
 And let your comment be the Mantuan Muse.

When first young Maro in his boundless mind,
 A work to outlast immortal Rome designed,
 Perhaps he seemed above the critic's law
 And but from nature's fountain scorned to draw
 But when to examine every part he came

But even 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 them live betimes
 No longer now that golden age appears
 When patriarch wits survived a thousand years
 Now length of fame (our second life) is lost
 And bare threescore is all even that can boast,
 Our sons their fathers falling language see
 And such as Chaucer is shall Dryden be
 So when the faithful pencil has designed
 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 colors 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 treacherous colors the fair art betray
 And all the bright creation fades away!
 Unhappy wit, like most mistaken things
 Atones not for that envy which it brings

Nature and Homer were he found the same
 Convinced, amazed, he checks the bold design
 And rules as strict his labored work confine
 As if the Stagirate overlooked 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.
 Music 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 license answer to the full
 The intent proposed that license 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 critics dare not mend,
 From vulgar bounds with brave disorder part,
 And snatch a grace beyond the reach of art,
 Which without passing through the judgment
 gains
 The heart and all its end at once attains.

What wonder modes in wit should 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 pleased to laugh.

Some valuing those of their own side or mind,
Still make themselves the measure of mankind:
Fondly we think we honor merit then,
When we but praise ourselves in other men.
Parties in wit attend on those of state,
And public faction doubles private hate.
Pride, malice, folly against Dryden rose,
In various shapes of parsons, critics, beaux;
But sense survived, when merry jests were past;
For rising merit will buoy up at last.
Might he return, and bless once more our eyes,
New Blackmores and new Millbourns must arise:
Nay, should 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 envied wit, like Sol eclipsed, makes known
The opposing body's grossness, not its own.
When first that sun too powerful beams displays,
It draws up vapors which obscure its rays,

In prospects, thus, some objects please our eyes,
Which out of nature's common order rise,
The shapeless rock or hanging precipice.
But though 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 compelled by need,
And have, at least, their precedent to plead.
The critic else proceeds without remorse,
Seizes your fame, and puts his laws in force.
I know there are, to whose presumptuous thoughts
Those freer beauties, even in them, seem faults
Some figures monstrous and misshaped appear,
Considered singly, or beheld too near,
Which, but proportioned to their light, or place,
Due distance reconciles to form and grace.
A prudent chief not always must display
His powers in equal ranks and fair array,
But with the 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.

The vulgar thus through imitation err;
As oft the learned 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 damned 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 used,
This hour she's idolized, the next abused;
While their weak heads, like towns unfortified,
'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.
Who knew most sentences was deepest read,
Faith, Gospel, all, seemed 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 itself has different dresses worn,

Still green with days 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 learned their increase
bring;
Hear, in all tongues consenting Paeans ring!
In praise so just let every voice be joined,
And fill the general chorus of mankind.
Hail! bards triumphant! born in happier days:
Immortal heirs of universal praise!
Whose honors 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 celestial fire,
The last, the meanest of your sons inspire,
(That, on weak wings, from far pursues your
flights,
Glow while he reads, but trembles as he writes),
To teach vain wits a science little known,
To admire superior sense, and doubt their own!

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,
Though 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 writing, but the men.
Of all this servile herd the worst is he
That in proud dullness joins with quality
A constant critic at the great man's board,
To fetch and carry nonsense for my lord
What woful stuff this madrigal would be,
In some starved hackney 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 every fault,
And each exalted stanza teems with thought!

PART II.

Of all the causes which conspire to blind
Man's erring judgment and misguide the mind,
What the weak head with strongest bias rules,
Is pride, the never-failing vice of fools.
Whatever nature has in worth denied,
She gives in large recruits of needful pride;
For as in bodies, thus in souls, we find
What wants in blood and spirits, swelled with
wind:

Pride where wit fails steps in to our defense,
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 yourself, but your defects to know,
Make use of every friend - and every foe.

A little learning is a dangerous thing
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again.
Tired 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

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 subdued by sound?
The power of music all our hearts allow,
And what Timotheus was, is Dryden now.
Avoid extremes, and shun the fault of such,
Who still are pleased too little or too much.
At every trifle scorn to take offense,
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 through mist
descry,
Dullness is ever apt to magnify.

But more advanced behold with strange surprise,
New distant scenes of endless science rise!
So pleased at first the towering Alps we try,
Mount o'er the vales and seem to tread the sky,
The eternal snows appear already passed
And the first clouds and mountains seem the last.
But those attained we tremble to survey
The growing labors of the lengthened way
The 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 generous pleasure to be charmed with wit
But in such lays as neither ebb nor flow,
Correctly cold and regularly low
That, shunning faults, one quiet tenor keep;
We cannot blame indeed - but we may sleep.
In wit, as nature, what affects our hearts
Is not the exactness of peculiar parts,
'Tis not a lip, or eye, or beauty call,
But the joint force and full result of all.

Leave such to tune their own dull rhymes, and know
 What's roundly smooth or languishingly slow;
 And praise the easy 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 learned to dance
 'Tis not enough no harshness gives offense,
 The sound must seem an echo 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 should like the torrent
 roar,
 When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to
 throw,
 The line too labors, and the words move slow;
 Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,
 Flies o'er the unbending corn, and skims along
 the main.
 Hear how Timotheus' varied lays surprise,
 And bid alternate passions fall and rise!
 While, at each change, the son of Libyan Jove

Thus, when we view some well proportioned
 dome
 (The worlds just wonder, and even thine, O
 Rome!),
 No single parts unequally surprise,
 All comes united to the 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 every 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,
 To avoid great errors, must the less commit:
 Neglect the rules each verbal critic lays,
 For not to know some trifles is a praise.
 Most critics, fond of some subservient art,
 Still make the whole depend upon a part:
 They talk of principles, but notions prize,
 And all to one loved folly sacrifice.
 Once on a time La Mancha's knight, they say,
 A certain bard encountering on the way,

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 though 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 music there
 These equal syllables alone require,
 Though 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 unvaried chimes,
 With sure returns of still expected rhymes,
 Where'er you find "the cooling western breeze,"
 In the next line it "whispers through the trees"
 If crystal streams "with pleasing murmurs creep"
 The reader's threatened (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.

Discoursed in terms as just, with looks as sage,
 As'er could Dennis, of the Grecian stage,
 Concluding all were desperate sots and fools,
 Who durst depart from Aristotle's rules
 Our author, happy in a judge so nice,
 Produced his play, and begged 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 combat in the lists left out
 "What! leave the combat out?" exclaims the
 knight.
 "Yes, or we must renounce the Stagirate."
 "Not so, by heaven!" (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 critics 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 glittering thoughts struck out at every line;