

idiom of their language, he did not enough comply with the idiom of ours. If I would compare him with Shakespeare, I must acknowledge him the more correct poet, but Shakespeare the greater wit.⁹ Shakespeare was the Homer, or father of our dramatic poets; Jonson was the Virgil, the pattern of elaborate writing; I admire him, but I love Shakespeare. To conclude of him; as he has given us the most correct plays, so in the precepts which he has laid down in his *Discoveries*, we have as many and profitable rules for perfecting the stage, as any wherewith the French can furnish us."

1668

From The Author's Apology for Heroic Poetry and Heroic License¹

["Boldness" of Figures and Tropes Defended:
The Appeal to "Nature"]

* * * They, who would combat general authority with particular opinion, must first establish themselves a reputation of understanding better than other men. Are all the flights of heroic poetry to be concluded bombast, unnatural, and mere madness, because they are not affected with their excellencies? It is just as reasonable as to conclude there is no day, because a blind man cannot distinguish of light and colors. Ought they not rather, in modesty, to doubt of their own judgments, when they think this or that expression in Homer, Virgil, Tasso, or Milton's *Paradise* to be too far strained, than positively to conclude that 'tis all fustian and mere nonsense? 'Tis true there are limits to be set betwixt the boldness and rashness of a poet; but he must understand those limits who pretends to judge as well as he who undertakes to write: and he who has no liking to the whole ought, in reason, to be excluded from censuring of the parts. He must be a lawyer before he mounts the tribunal; and the jurisdiction of one court, too, does not qualify a man to preside in another. He may be an excellent pleader in the Chancery, who is not fit to rule the Common Pleas. But I will presume for once to tell them that the boldest strokes of poetry, when they are managed artfully, are those which most delight the reader.

Virgil and Horace, the severest writers of the severest age, have made frequent use of the hardest metaphors and of the strongest hyperboles; and in this case the best authority is the best argument, for generally to have pleased, and through all ages, must bear the force of universal tradition. And if you would appeal from thence to right reason, you will gain no more by it in effect than, first, to set up your reason against those authors, and, secondly, against all those who have admired them. You must prove why that ought not to have pleased which has pleased the most learned and the most judicious; and, to be thought knowing, you must first put the fool upon all mankind. If you can enter more deeply than they have done into the causes and resorts² of that

9. Genius.

1. This essay was prefixed to Dryden's *State of Innocence*, the libretto for an opera (never produced), based on *Paradise Lost*. Dryden had been ridiculed for the extravagant and bold imagery and rhetorical figures that are typical of the style of his rhymed heroic plays. This preface is a defense not only of his own predilection for

what Samuel Johnson described as "wild and daring sallies of sentiment, in the irregular and eccentric violence of wit"; but also of the theory that heroic and idealized materials should be treated in lofty and boldly metaphorical style; hence his definition of wit as poetry.

2. Mechanical springs that set something in motion.

which moves pleasure in a reader, the field is open, you may be heard: but those springs of human nature are not so easily discovered by every superficial judge: it requires philosophy, as well as poetry, to sound the depth of all the passions, what they are in themselves, and how they are to be provoked; and in this science the best poets have excelled. * * * From hence have sprung the tropes and figures,³ for which they wanted a name who first practiced them and succeeded in them. Thus I grant you that the knowledge of Nature was the original rule, and that all poets ought to study her, as well as Aristotle and Horace, her interpreters.⁴ But then this also undeniably follows, that those things which delight all ages must have been an imitation of Nature—which is all I contend. Therefore is rhetoric made an art; therefore the names of so many tropes and figures were invented, because it was observed they had such and such effect upon the audience. Therefore catachreses and hyperboles⁵ have found their place amongst them; not that they were to be avoided, but to be used judiciously and placed in poetry as heightenings and shadows are in painting, to make the figure bolder, and cause it to stand off to sight. * * *

[Wit as "Propriety"]

* * * [Wit] is a propriety of thoughts and words; or, in other terms, thought and words elegantly adapted to the subject. If our critics will join issue on this definition, that we may *convenire in aliquo tertio*;⁶ if they will take it as a granted principle, it will be easy to put an end to this dispute. No man will disagree from another's judgment concerning the dignity of style in heroic poetry; but all reasonable men will conclude it necessary that sublime subjects ought to be adorned with the sublimest, and, consequently, often with the most figurative expressions. * * *

1677

From A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire¹

[The Art of Satire]

* * * How easy is it to call rogue and villain, and that wittily! But how hard to make a man appear a fool, a blockhead, or a knave without using any of those opprobrious terms! To spare the grossness of the names, and to do the thing yet more severely, is to draw a full face, and to make the nose and cheeks

3. I.e., such figures of speech as metaphors and similes; "Tropes"; the use of a word in a figurative sense.

4. In the words of the French critic René Rapin, the translations were made by Dryden and other writers, among them William Congreve. Dryden traces the origin and development of verse satire in Rome and in a very fine passage contrasts Horace and Juvenal as satiric poets. It is plain that he prefers the "tragic" satire of Juvenal to the urbane and laughing satire of Horace. But in the passage printed here, he praises his own satiric character of Zimri (the duke of Buckingham) in *Abelom and Achitophel* for the very reason that it is modeled on Horatian "raillery," not Juvenalian invective.

5. Deliberate overstatement or exaggeration. "Catachresis"; the use of a word in a sense remote from its normal meaning.

6. "To find some means of agreement, in a third term, between the two opposites" (W. P. Ker's note).

1. This passage is an excerpt from the long and ram-

28

stand out; and yet not to employ any depth of shadowing.² This is the mystery of that noble trade, which yet no master can teach to his apprentice; he may give the rules; but the scholar is never the nearer in his practice. Neither is it true that this fineness of railery³ is offensive. A witty man is tickled while he is hurt in this manner, and a fool feels it not. The occasion of an offense may possibly be given, but he cannot take it. If it be granted that in effect this way does more mischief; that a man is secretly wounded, and though he be not sensible himself, yet the malicious world will find it out for him; yet there is still a vast difference betwixt the slovenly butchering of a man, and the fineness of a stroke that separates the head from the body, and leaves it standing in its place. A man may be capable, as Jack Ketch's⁴ wife said of his servant, of a plain piece of work, a bare hanging; but to make a malefactor die sweetly was only belonging to her husband. I wish I could apply it to myself, if the reader would be kind enough to think it belongs to me. The character of Zimri in my *Absalom*⁵ is, in my opinion, worth the whole poem: it is not bloody, but it is ridiculous enough; and he, for whom it was intended, was too witty to resent it as an injury. If I had railed,⁶ I might have suffered for it justly; but I managed my own work more happily, perhaps more dexterously. I avoided the mention of great crimes, and applied myself to the representing of blindides, and little extravagancies; to which, the wittier a man is, he is generally the more obnoxious.⁷ It succeeded as I wished; the jest went round, and he was laughed at in his turn who began the frolic. * * *

1693

From The Preface to *Fables Ancient and Modern*¹

[In Praise of Chaucer]

In the first place, as he is the father of English poetry, I hold him in the same degree of veneration as the Grecians held Homer, or the Romans Virgil. He is a perpetual fountain of good sense; learned in all sciences;² and, therefore, speaks properly on all subjects. As he knew what to say, so he knows also when to leave off; a continence which is practiced by few writers, and scarcely by any of the ancients, excepting Virgil and Horace. * * *

Chaucer followed Nature everywhere, but was never so bold to go beyond her; and there is a great difference of being *poeta* and *nimis poeta*,³ if we may believe Catullus, as much as betwixt a modest behavior and affectation. The verse of Chaucer, I confess, is not harmonious to us; but 'tis like the eloquence

2. Early English miniaturists prided themselves on the art of giving roundness to the full face without painting in shadows.

3. Satirical mirth, good-natured satire.

4. A notorious public executioner of Dryden's time (d. 1686). His name later became a generic term for all members of his profession.

5. *Absalom and Achitophel*, lines 544-568 (pp. 1804-5).

6. Reviled, abused. Observe that the verb differed in meaning from its noun, defined above.

7. Liable.

1. Dryden's final work, published in the year of his death, was a collection of translations from Homer,

of one whom Tacitus commends, it was *auribus istius temporis accommodata*:⁴ they who lived with him, and some time after him, thought it musical; and it continues so, even in our judgment, if compared with the numbers of Lydgate and Gower,⁵ his contemporaries; there is the rude sweetness of a Scotch tune in it, which is natural and pleasing, though not perfect. 'Tis true I cannot go so far as he who published the last edition of him;⁶ for he would make us believe the fault is in our ears, and that there were really ten syllables in a verse where we find but nine; but this opinion is not worth confuting; 'tis so gross and obvious an error that common sense (which is a rule in everything but matters of faith and revelation) must convince the reader that equality of numbers in every verse which we call heroic⁷ was either not known, or not always practiced in Chaucer's age. It were an easy matter to produce some thousands of his verses which are lame for want of half a foot, and sometimes a whole one, and which no pronunciation can make otherwise. We can only say that he lived in the infancy of our poetry, and that nothing is brought to perfection at the first. * * *

He must have been a man of a most wonderful comprehensive nature, because, as it has been truly observed of him, he has taken into the compass of his *Canterbury Tales* the various manners and humors (as we now call them) of the whole English nation in his age. Not a single character has escaped him. All his pilgrims are severally distinguished from each other; and not only in their inclinations but in their very physiognomies and persons. Baptista Porta⁸ could not have described their natures better than by the marks which the poet gives them. The matter and manner of their tales, and of their telling, are so suited to their different educations, humors, and callings that each of them would be improper in any other mouth. Even the grave and serious characters are distinguished by their several sorts of gravity: their discourses are such as belong to their age, their calling, and their breeding; such as are becoming of them, and of them only. Some of his persons are vicious, and some virtuous; some are unlearned, or (as Chaucer calls them) lewd, and some are learned. Even the ribaldry of the low characters is different: the Reeve, the Miller, and the Cook are several⁹ men, and distinguished from each other as much as the mincing Lady Prioresse and the broad-speaking, gap-toothed Wife of Bath. But enough of this; there is such a variety of game springing up before me that I am distracted in my choice, and know not which to follow. 'Tis sufficient to say, according to the proverb, that here is God's plenty. * * *

1700

4. "Suitable to the ears of that time." Tacitus was a

Roman historian and writer on oratory (A.D. ca. 55-ca. 117).

5. John Gower (d. 1408) was a poet and friend of Chaucer. John Lydgate (ca. 1370-ca. 1449) wrote poetry that shows the influence of Chaucer. "Numbers": versification.

6. Thomas Speght's Chaucer, which Dryden used, was first published in 1598; the second edition, published

in 1602, was reprinted in 1687.

7. The pentameter line. In Dryden's time few readers knew how to pronounce Middle English, especially the syllabic *e*. Moreover, Chaucer's works were known only in corrupt printed texts. As a consequence Chaucer's verse seemed rough and irregular.

8. Ciambattista della Porta (ca. 1535-1615), author of a Latin treatise on physiognomy.

9. Different.

29

Wit is Nature; it instances something that we have all thought, but whose sheer truth the poet now makes compelling through his or her language. True wit is subtle, sharp, and, above all, surprising—a striking image, a vivid metaphor, a paradoxical figure of speech. Addison and Johnson also delve into the nature of wit, but it is Pope who exemplifies the meanings of this complex word and idea more inventively than any other writer in the canon of eighteenth-century English literature.

The most memorable assessment of the *Essay* remains Samuel Johnson's: "[The *Essay*] exhibits every mode of excellence that can embellish or dignify didactic composition, selection of matter, novelty of arrangement, justness of precept, splendour of illustration, and propriety of digression." It is a hopeful work, all the more affecting in light of the political quarrels and ferocious literary feuds in which Pope engaged later in his career. These climaxed in his gigantic satire of literary idiosyncrasy, *The Dunciad*, in *Four Books*, published in October 1743. In this great last text of his poetic career, Pope describes the sublime awfulness of hordes of pedants, false poets, and dunces. His dazzling punitive wit here takes on the grotesque grandeur of mock-epic, on a scale eclipsing that displayed in the elegant, highly cultivated early work. *The Dunciad* shows Pope's angry realization of the difficulty in winning wide acceptance for the neoclassical views that he had advocated and had described with both power and grace in *An Essay on Criticism*.

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Alexander Pope

An Essay on Criticism

—Si quid novisti rectius istis,
Candidus imperti; si non, his utere mecum.

—HORAT.

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,
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 glimmering 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 are wilder'd in the Maze of Fools.
In search of Wit these lose their common Sense,
And then turn Criticks in their own Defence.

HORACE (65–8 B.C.E.), Epistles 1.6.67–68: "If you know any maxims better than these, be so good

2. Judge.
3. Pretenders to learning, condescended access.

30

30 Each burns alike, who can, or cannot write,
Or with a *Rival's*, or an *Ennuch's* spite,
All *Fools* have still an Itching to deride,
And faint *wou'd* be upon the *Laughing Side*:
If *Mævius* Scribble in *Apollo's*⁴ spight

35 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* nor *Ass*.

40 Those half-learn'd *Witlings*, num'rous in our *Isle*,
As half-form'd *Insects* on the Banks of *Nile*:⁵
Unfinish'd Things, one knows not what to call,
Their Generation's so *equivocal*:
To tell 'em, wou'd a *hundred Tongues* require,

45 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;

50 Launch not beyond your *Depth*, but be discreet,
And mark that *Point* where *Sense* and *Duiness* 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*;

55 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*⁷ only will one *Genius* fit;
So vast is *Art*,⁸ so *narrow* Human *Wit*:
Not only bounded to *peculiar Arts*,
But oft in *those*, confin'd to *single Parts*.

60 Like *Kings* we lose the *Conquests* gain'd before,
By vain *Ambition* still to make them more:
Each might his *several Province* well command,
Wou'd all but *stoop* to what they *understand*.
First follow *NATURE*,⁹ and your *Judgment* frame
By her just *Standard*, which is still the same:¹
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*.

65 First follow *NATURE*,⁹ and your *Judgment* frame
By her just *Standard*, which is still the same:¹

70 *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*,² 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.

80 Some, to whom *Heav'n* in *Wit* has been profuse,
Want as much more, to turn it to its use;
For *Wit's* 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* *Speed*,⁴
Restrain his *Fury*, than provoke his *Speed*.

85 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*,⁵ 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*⁷ Top her *Sons* she show'd,
And pointed out those arduous *Paths* they trod,
Held from afar, aloft, th' *Immortal Prize*,

90 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*, wou'd the *Maid*;
Against the *Poets* *their own Arms* they turn'd,
Sure to hate most the *Men* from whom they *learn'd*.

95 So modern *Poethecaries*, taught the *Art*
By *Doctor's* *Bills*⁸ to play the *Doctor's* *Part*,
Bold in the *Practice* of *mistaken Rules*,
Prescribe, apply, and call their *Masters* *Fools*.
Some on the *Leaves*⁹ 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*¹ how *Poems* may be made:
These leave the *Sense*, their *Learning* to display,
And these explain the *Meaning* quite away.

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,
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Some *dryly plain*, without *Invention's* *Aid*,
Write dull *Receipts*¹ how *Poems* may be made:
These leave the *Sense*, their *Learning* to display,
And these explain the *Meaning* quite away.

Pope here recalls the familiar Latin maxim *ars est celare artem* (the art is to conceal the art).

Wit has a range of meanings, including reason, power, intelligence, mental soundness, sanity, subtlety or perception or judgment, and the ability to see relationships between seemingly disparate things. It also can refer to a person's sound judgment and perception.

Pegasus, the winged horse of classical mythology, identified with inspiration. Muse: one of the

9. Life is short, but art [sometimes translated 'science'] is long, opportunity fleeting, experiment dangerous, judgment difficult.

10. The term encompasses the physical world, the sum of human experiences, and the principle of order and coherence in the universe.

11. Compare JOHN DRYDEN's claim in *Parallel* *Poetry and Painting* (1695): "For Nature is still the same in all ages, and can never be contrary to herself."

4. Greek and Roman god of poetry. Mævius: a bad poet (1st c. B.C.E.), to whom both Virgil (*Eclogue* 3) and Horace (*Epode* 10) allude.

5. The ancients believed that forms of animal and insect life were spontaneously generated on the banks of the Nile River.

6. Count.

7. Branch of learning. Hippocrates (469-399 B.C.E.), celebrated Greek phys-

9. daughters of Memory who preside over the arts and all intellectual pursuits.

5. High spirited, noble.

6. In the manuscript, Pope wrote "monarchy" the Muse, and Dionysus.

8. Medical prescriptions. "Poethecaries": druggists.

9. Pages.

1. Recipes; prescriptions.

