

An Essay on Pope

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An Essay on Pope, with certain References to Mr. Dryden and the occasional Allusion to Mr. Swift and Mr. Donne

for Daniel Dee Mast, Ph.D., thus fictionally named to protect his Reputation as a right and honourable Man, who would, under normal Circumstances and with great Aplomb, avoid such Drivel as this:

A brief Explanation of the Travail and accompanying Anguish as perceived on the Occasion of having been assigned to write an Essay concerning Dryden, Pope, or Both, and, in the case of this particular Response, presented in four Parts: the first, a Complaint; followed by the second, a brief Digression; the third, the ensuing Comparison of those distinguished Poets; and finally the fourth, a Conclusion, intended to clarify the unclear and otherwise appease the Appetite of those who hunger for Gibberish. The Reader of this Essay should not presume either didactic Intent or poetic Ability on behalf of the Author, perhaps the most humble and forthright of all the Servants of the Public Good, but rather that by publication of this Essay he sought only to fulfill the Requirements of the Assignment, which, by its very Nature, inherently requires the Use of Words and creates within the Breast of this humble Creature a mixed Emotion, consisting of an overwhelming Desire that the Poets had left a few Words unscathed and an endless Regret that they did not. Alas, such is the Lot of the over-zealous and under-tried, those who strain against Doors posted “pull” and presume all is well in a World gone perceptibly mad. In that vein he remains, as he ever shall be, your most humble Servant—*H. Stanbrough*.

I. A Complaint

in which your humble Servant shall strive to delineate, as self-appointed Spokesman for Wannabes everywhere, the Problems inherent in attempting to make a living through False Travail by attempting to explain what Others—the Greats—have achieved by virtue of their having practised *True Travail*, they being Persons who somehow managed to avoid the Conditioning that enables, even empowers, the Modern Poets to avoid the very Appearance of Travail of any kind, especially such Travail that may even remotely require Traits that eventually might lead to the actual Practice of *Poetic Craftsmanship*.

Herein I wish to illustrate *Travail*,
inheritance of Students. *Sans* their Ale
or other Cheer, do they, these arid Sons
and Daughters of the Pen, thus battle on
to cipher and decipher coupled Lines
that lift their Hearts, then delve into the Mines
of mitigating Humor.

In that Mode

did Pope and Dryden hit the Mother Lode.
Thus mining from the Cradle to the Urn,
they slipped no Shod and left no Dreg unturned.

They mined the Ore, then smelted and refined
and polished it into a perfect Line;
each Line, so shined and placed upon the last,
contains Poetic Holdings grown so vast
that none shall e'er approach them, nor recast
their glorious Glow—and so, we write for Mast.

Travail, bought thus in haste but harbored close,
and cov'ted for its Penchant to produce
the Anguish necessary for the Pen—
for Anguish stimulated better Men,
propelling them, so many Canon Balls
into the most remote Collegiate Halls—
this *True Travail* eludes the finest Hack
and, albatross-like, hangs about the Neck.
The Wannabe, wagged by its own Tail,
aspires to Greatness, runs to catch the Snail
(Then *probe* the Shell! Get at the *Meat* within!)
with Parody the Tool and Pride the Sin.
But having caught the Creepers, plodding slow
and steady into Sainthood as they do,
Wannabes dine, digest, delineate,
then write, rewrite, and finally (e'er too late),
attempt the Parody to no avail;
on into Sainthood plods the steady Snail,
and the pup resumes the chasing of his Tail.

II. A Digression

in which this most humble Servant of Readers, Publishers, and the *avant garde*—to whose Level he could never realistically aspire (a Blessing for which he is endlessly grateful), who are truly on the cutting Edge of all that is at once politically correct and lacking in *Poetic Craftsmanship*, and who somehow consistently manage to maintain their Status in that High Station by endorsing all that *is* politically correct without ever actually *saying* so—relapses into an Explanation, albeit a somewhat whiny one, of his own Problems, for, as a famous Gentleman once said, and having enjoyed the sound of it, then wrote, “*Dulce et decorum est, pro gibberish mori.*”

I, stranded here and left to blindly grope
the Wit of Dryden and the Sting of Pope
for Sake of Scholarship and to procure

the Blessings of the Mast, (inviting sure
and awful Retribution if I fail
in this Endeavor to explore *Travail*,
the Version *tried and true*, of greater Men,
who, if they lived, would never let *me* in
nor long peruse this Drivel; and if forced
no doubt would soon renounce their God, the Horace,
who set them on a Path they thought divine
until they viewed the Glory that is Mine),
will nonetheless attempt to clutch the Words
caressed so well by those two Master Bards
and hold them tightly 'til I've weaved a Hymn.
O, that I may not choke the Life from them!
But little fear have I, and little Time
to entertain the Frailties of Rhyme
or worry that my clumsy Mortal Pen
may denigrate the Greatness of those Kin
who would not claim their Ancestry of me
nor allow my sly Descendants to be.
So herein will I trudge and slog and stomp,
forgetting Circumstance, discounting Pomp,
and knead the Language with my calloused Feet,
without regard for Flavor or the sweet
Turn of the Phrase, for can't we say,
"As they did theirs, I shall in my *own* way!"
and let Time be the Judge of all forgone?
(Swift Time, O Time, smile kindly on this one!
O please, O *please* let not this come undone!)

But I digress, so back to my weak Verse:
I never fear that Dryden's Golden Curse
may drift unseen into my Consciousness
and leave me with a Hit (nor a Near Miss),
nor have I need to worry that my Words
(that stomp across the Page in Lines absurd
with Adjectives flung as if read unrehearsed
and Verbs and Subjects constantly reversed)
will serve to long replace *His* fine Repast.

This Tidbit serves but to appease the Mast.
(It is a minor Snack, I will allow;
I'd write more-better, but I don't know how.)

O would the Greats have left a Legacy
that I might build upon, and not *for free**!
But neither Poet, in his worded Bliss,
would deign to leave his Meaning meterless,
or slip into the tawdry, the mundane,
and leave for me a Bit, nary a Stain
to cleanse and thereby reach their vaunted Height.
Nor could they dare to simplify their Might,
demystify the Sords (except in jest),
or grant in otherwise my bold Request.
Through Words and only Words could they atone
their Sins; now I must strive to find my own,
coercing here a Smile and there a Groan.

III. A Comparison

in which a penultimate Stab—indeed a near-killing Blow—is delivered by your most humble and least worthy Servant, at a poor Animal that is already critically wounded and no doubt wishing, even praying, for the sweet Relief that may be found only in a Swift and painless Death, such an one as is, unfortunately, not likely to occur anytime soon.

Enmeshed amidst the moon's own silv'ry Rays,
Their rhymes coerced the Mind, caressed the Lays
of Lyres and Harps,
then fell to bludg'ning Ears
with Scandal! Libel! Truth! and Truth to *fear*!
and, seemingly without a Thought to Time
they placed them in heroic couplet Rhyme.
As Dryden's had, so fell the Popæan Sword
and never missed a Stroke for lack of Words.
They were the Kings, and Zingers were their Jewels,
and in their Kingdom they made all the Rules.
Thus free to choose, each chose Iambic Verse.
(One wrote the better; neither wrote the worse.)

Pope taught the Critics elevated Prose,

remained at Odds with Publishers (or Blows),
critiqued the Kingdom and the Kingdom's wise,
the Scientists, the Poor, the Meek, the Size
of Earth and Sea; he even clipped the Curls
of Horses readied for Parade, and Girls.

J Dryden, ambidextrous in his Stride,
could switch from This to That, from Side to Side;
once Catholic, once Protestant, and then
the King returned—he's Catholic again.
“No problem,” quoth J Dryden. “Flame is Flame
and 'Priests of all Religions are the same.’”

So could A Pope perform a Quantum Leap,
sweet-talk Belinda, then slap her to sleep;
the condescending Introduction done,
his Verse convinced her she should be a Nun.
Such Magic did he wield within his Pen!
He formed pure Fairies of the Air, and then
snip-severed them and glued them back again.
He taught us Man, extinguished haughty Flames,
gave Sight to all the Blind, and *raised the Lame*!
No wait—that was another lofty One—
What was His Name? O yes, the Right John Donne!

So Back to Back, one here, the other there,
they pitched the Battle through the sizzling Air,
their blazing Tool the Rhetoric of old,
on which died Reputations and the Bold.
(No Blood was shed, dear Reader; keep your Peace.)
J Dryden and A Pope removed the Fleece
from a few emboldened Sheep, the Great Uncouth.
These, brought to Trial by Pen and damned by Truth,
condemned by Wit, no doubt were deeply pained
(we may assume) to find their Airs in vain,
and therein lay the Reason for the Quill
so brandished by the Poets—to fulfill
their Need to satirize, and thus coerce
their Country and their Countrymen—but worse,
another Reason yields to Scrutiny:

that those so satirized could ever be
the Envy of the ones ignored! So fell
the Irony; the ones who loudest yelled
of Libel and of Slander and the Rest
were happiest of all—they were The Best!
And those ignored by Dryden and by Pope?
They argued too, but argued in the Hope
that *they* should be a Target, for to sway
Pope's Pen would make them Kings. (Well, for a Day.)
Such was the Pope's Ability to prove
the Worth of Man through Venom versus Love
that all on either Side took him to Task
some to petition, others just to ask,
“What cause have Highbrows then to make a Fist?”
requiring Pope to answer, “They're all pissed
who either *did* or *did not* make the List.”

IV. The Conclusion

in which the Author, a humble Servant of the Public Good, and good for little Else than such weak Attempts as this at composing rambling and witless Bits of Verse, which he fervently hopes will play a Part, albeit (he is self-assured, and guaranteed by Others) an *Insignificant* Part, in healing the World's Ills and ailing the World's Heels, shall attempt, with every Fibre of his insubstantial Being, to conclude this Attempt at Essay, hoping, as ever, that he has concluded in Time to avoid being sought out and punched, with intent to do bodily Harm, in the Mouth by the unfortunate Reader.

Now I, submerged in reminiscent Awe
of Pope and Dryden and Poetic Law
must take my Leave, and leaving, must depart
e're I do damage to the Better Art
of these, the Better Men. *Their* Pens did quake
the Earth, and in that Trembling, shake
the Need for Some to even stay awake;
and so they drowse, the Wannabes, and remit
(in place of Essays) weak Iambic Wit,
unlike the Popes and Drydens or the Swift,
who, born with Pen in Hand, were born to shift
from good to better and from there to best;
who perched between the Insane and the Blessed;

who never missed a Nap or needed Rest.

In constant Tune with Fame, *They* heard the Call,
but left no Words for us—they milled 'em all—
so Students, seeking Mines to excavate,
discover only Shafts and explicate.
Thereby we seek to practice *True Travail*,
but know, at once, our Labor's doomed to fail.

Thus ends this verse. In May I will have gone
to my reward: a ringing telephone,
a classroom full of shining fill-me-ups,
and maybe—dare I hope?—a few good pups.

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* Dan Mast's least favorite phrase currently in use by humans is "for free" (instead of simply writing "free") as if "free" were an amount.