

Poetic Qualities in An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot by A. Pope

M. A. Semester I

CC-4

Unit I

Part - I

Alexander Pope's *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* is a formal satire in which he speaks in his own person, ridicules folly, condemns vice and recommends virtue. The satire contains personal reflection, philosophical meditation, anecdote, ridicule turned either to entertain or to attack, and moral denunciation.

The poem opens with an expression of impatience and annoyance felt by Pope at the visit of poetasters; individuals who think that they have been endowed with a gift for writing poetry but are actually pathetic in the poetic art. The narrator says, "What walls can guard me, or what Shades can hide? / They pierce my thickets, thro' my grove they glide". People from all walks of life are present in the community of poetasters including clergy, nobility, law and even criminals. Pope does not shy away in mentioning the actual names of the personalities who have accused him of having a bad influence on their family members.

In the tradition of an epistle, ~~an~~ a poem in the form of a letter or a series of letters, Pope addresses Dr. Arbuthnot as a "Friend to my life" and shares his dilemma with him. If he encourages the poetasters he would be subjected to the torture of being read more and more of their worthless verses. If he denounces their work or offers an unfavourable opinion they would turn hostile towards him. The only alternative left is to remain silent and indifferent which Pope

cannot manage to avail. He finally settles at suggesting them to "keep your piece nine years" instead of trying to get them published. The same advice has been given by Horace to unworthy writers in Ars Poetica.

The poetasters come to Pope seeking various favours like arranging for a patron or writing a prologue to their meritless work and sometimes even for financial assistance. Failing them can sometimes attract reactions whereby ^athe poetaster could join hands with a notorious book-seller named Edmund Curll to attack Pope through some periodical.

One such poetaster sends a tragic play to Pope and seeks his opinion as well as his recommendation to a theatre-manager in order to stage the play. The title of the play 'The Virgin Queen' is suggestive of ugly repetition of classical works of poetry. Pope is sure that the play if staged is bound to be rejected by the audience. If the play fails at the theatre, Pope would be expected to recommend it to Bernard Lintot for publication. He would also be offered half the share of what Lintot would provide in return for publication. Pope has no patience for such disgraceful proposals and despite being warned by Dr. Arbuthnot of repercussions if he tries to expose these poetasters he asserts that he would publically shame them through his satires like Dunciad.

Pope thinks that there is no inhumanity in exposing the folly and worthlessness of an inferior poet. Pope says, "No creature smarts so little as a fool" and tries to validate his statement by mentioning poets like Codrus, Colley Cibber, John Henley, Moore Sym Synthe, Ambrose Philips and Lady Mary who are thick-skinned, stolid and insensitive to any form of criticism. They reject to acknowledge the

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lack of their literary merit and the shallowness and short-comings of their work. In spite of being interrupted by Dr. Arbuthnot advising him to avoid taking names, Pope says that he would choose open condemnation to flattery.

Further Pope ridicules other poetsasters who in their sheer stupidity have left no stones unturned to tarnish his public image. One such poet dedicated his work to Pope in 'high heroic prose' making the praise ridiculous, absurd and laughable. Another tries to defend Pope's reputation in such a way that it tends to ~~have the opposite~~ oppose the intended impact. A bookseller published his letters without his permission to make some money. Another expects bribe to publish his work.

Pope also ridicules his flatterers who used to compare him to ancient Roman poet Horace on the basis of his cough and Alexander the Great owing to a slightly abberated shoulder. One such flatterer likens Pope's nose to that of Ovid. Another used to tell him that Virgil too held his head exactly like him when he had a headache. Pope is confident that someone would surely tell him as he lay dying that Homer died in the same way centuries ago.

Pope then tells the readers why he chose to become a writer. It was only because poetry came to him naturally. He says, "As yet a child, nor yet a fool to fame / I lis'd in numbers, for the numbers came." He had not given up any profession to become a poet. He had not compromised with any duty or disobeyed his father to become a poet. He had not written poetry to please a wife. But poetry provided him relief from his physical suffering which rendered him a life-long invalid.

To be continued...