

Review of Robert A. Erickson's "Pope and Rapture"

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Robert A. Erickson's article "Pope and Rapture" is an engrossing analysis of Alexander Pope's legendary life as a poet. As readers of Pope agree, there are never instances where a line is redundant. Every word is carefully placed. By interpreting Pope's poetry through the critical approach of understanding Pope's personal growth, struggles, relationships, and development, Erickson is able to unravel a profound reading of Pope's works and offer a deeper understanding into how Pope was able to rise from being a secluded child prodigy into the "untouchable" (26) and world renowned figure we know him as today.

The two main kinds of rapture Erickson focuses on are those of religious passion and sexual passion. Erickson defines rapture in the religious sense as a "mental transport," being "carried away in spirit" by feelings of "ecstatic delight or joy" (3). Here, Erickson distinguishes between this kind of "rapture in both a passive and an active sense" (4). Rapture in the sexual sense is defined in terms of Pope's "adolescent" fascination with "female power and wit in the face of distressed and absurd male sexuality" (5). Erickson defines erotic rapture in this way because of Pope's "gift for identifying with [the] female experience" (5). Through the lens of this definition of erotic rapture, Erickson explores the idea of Pope's works as his own "self-expressions" (5).

The article is divided into two main phases of Pope's life according to the two definitions of rapture mentioned above; Pope's days of youth and the period between his childhood and his teenage years are connected with "erotic rapture" (1), while the later stages of Pope's career are associated with an active sense of rapture that Erickson describes as "satiric predation" (1). Intertwined in the two main sections are analyses of Pope's poetic relationship and correspondence with Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. Through looking at the two poets' similarities, Erickson is able to explain Pope's "transition from poet of rapturous, death-haunted female love to poet of avenging satirical rapture" (1). Through this way of analyzing Pope's career development, both in style and content, Erickson offers an enlightening perspective, along with a thought-provoking passage into who Pope was and the extent of his literary brilliance.

Erickson is wonderfully thorough in his inclusion of evidence. At all times, claims are grounded in textual support both from Pope's poems and from scholarly sources written on Pope's life. In speaking on Pope's disease and disfigurement in his early years and how that caused him to identify with female struggles, Erickson draws upon two female figures of Pope's translation and creation in showing that "Sappho and Eloisa are in significant respects figurative self-expressions of the young poet" (6). In addition to citing evidence from Pope's translation of Ovid and Pope's "Eloisa to Abelard," Erickson includes strong secondary sources by building upon work from authors including Isobel Grundy, Robert Halsband, and Cynthia Lowenthal. His points made about the bond shared between Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Pope (14-15) are convincing.

Although complex and at times abstract to the casual reader, an indisputable strength of the article is its ability to keep ideas fresh and interesting. From the first phase of Pope's life and career, the article transitions seamlessly into the second phase by analyzing Pope's "breakup

with Lady Mary” and how that “helped to transform Pope from epistolary guardian angel into satiric avenging angel” (16). At this point in the article, the kind of rapture that was the content of Pope’s craft is said to have changed, and Erickson does a superb job in calibrating the evidence to show the details as to how Pope’s transformation comes into fruition. From here, the article continues to transition with strong evidence to examine the final idea — that Pope finishes his career as “a kind of satiric vigilante” (19) who in ways had “a power beyond God” (26).

The distinctions and claims this article makes are illuminating and esoteric. Readers specializing in the field of eighteenth-century literature and poetry will find this article helpful in reaching deeper levels of understanding concerning Alexander Pope’s transformation as one of history’s most powerful poets. To grasp the entirety of Erickson’s argument in the article, readers must have at their disposal pre-existing knowledge of Pope’s major works. Once properly navigated, this article provides a nicely structured and thorough overview of Pope’s life through the lens of his works containing the subject matter of rapture. For the avid Pope enthusiast, this article will uncover certain gems about Pope’s poetry.



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