A Review of William Bowman Piper's "The Conversational Poetry of Pope"

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Piper, William Bowman. "The Conversational Poetry of Pope." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1970, pp. 505–524.

"The Conversational Poetry of Pope" by William Bowman Piper is an article discussing the differences in Alexander Pope's work over the course of his career. Piper argues that Pope wrote his greatest works between 1733-1738, because he had matured and refined his craft of creating fluid conversational poetry before abandoning the style in 1738 (515). *Rape of the Lock* displays how people react over a stolen lock of hair, which is "hardly ready to compose serious talks on serious subjects" (508). Piper claims during that period, Pope had a very limited view of polite conversation, which was rigid and uninteresting (508). Twenty years after Pope wrote *Rape of the Lock*, he mastered the "flexible give-and-take of spirited conversation" (522). Piper deems his works following 1938 to be full of "egocentric speeches" that lack politeness and common sense valued by Augustans (519). Although it seems to only last a short period of his career, this engagement in dialogue, politeness, and appeal to common sense are what Piper deems to be Pope's greatest achievement in his poetry.

Piper does provide a comprehensive look across Pope's work in a very short review piece; however, it is quite dense if one is not familiar with titles or names of characters within his work, and Roman and Greek mythology. No experience is required to understand Piper's interpretation; however, it would be beneficial for a deeper understanding of the text. Piper explains that Pope had an affiliation with Augustan values, a literary style active during Queen

Anne's reign, which favoured the Ancients (506). He also provides insight for someone unfamiliar with Pope's work, specifically when defining his style, as well as the changes to those styles overtime. For example, I did find Pope much easier to understand when posed as a conversation, which I had not fully grasped prior to reading this article.

Piper does leave the reader wondering why Pope abandoned the conversational style and why his later work has "no formulation of an opinion and no discovery of an experience which could serve as the basis or the beginning of any common sense" (519). The fact that Piper does not elaborate more on Pope's biography while criticizing change in style leaves much for readers to research, which makes me wonder why he chose to omit this.

This article is an excellent starting place for someone wishing to do research into Pope or to simply choose where to start their reading, because it does provide a timeline of Pope's different styles and progression. If someone would like to take a class featuring Pope because they liked *Rape of the Lock*, I would suggest they read this article beforehand, because it thoroughly explains the different, more serious tone later in his career. The review provides a rich number of examples of style changes to back up Piper's claim and thoroughly explains each one in depth. I was not aware of a major style change, so this article makes me wonder how very different *Rape of the Lock* and *The Dunciad* are considering they were written three decades apart from each other. There are now different aspects of Pope I look forward to reading, and this article has expanded much of my expectation of Pope beyond his strict adherence to politeness. I began to wonder if Pope was a Horatian satirist at the beginning of his career, and then shifted to Juvenalian satire by *The New Dunciad*. This article recommends Pope's work between 1733-1738 with such gusto that it makes me wonder if I will also find that to be Pope's greatest work.

Piper's article had many strong observations; however, I believe he has gone too far in suggesting Pope's work outside of 1933-1938 is not interesting. Piper takes an all-or-nothing approach that is unnecessary in determining the quality of Pope's work. He urges us to not forget the "great series of creative conversations by which [*The New Dunciad*] was preceded" (524); however, I urge that we must not take only his opinion, and thus overlook what he considers to be either "uninteresting" (508) or "monolithic dron[ing]" (523). What he determines to be great, writing in 1970, may not be today's standard, and we should remember to keep in mind the shifting values of the times when learning and conducting research.

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