

Review of “The Politics of Alexander Pope’s Urbanity”

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Review of Jason D. Solinger, “The Politics of Alexander Pope’s Urbanity.” *Genre*, Volume 36, Issue 1-2, 2003, 47-79. *Duke University Press*, DOI: 10.1215/00166928-36-1-2-47.

Jason D. Solinger’s essay begins by examining various depictions of Alexander Pope in canon-defining anthologies. He finds that *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*, *The Norton Anthology*, and *Oxford Poetry Library* argue that Pope’s elegance is self-evident. However, Solinger states that his objective “is not to evaluate the canonical representation of Pope so much as to repoliticize the language we use to talk about him” (49). Pope’s work is important because it reshapes the politics of his time, where men of power are no longer defined by wealth or birthright, but by their intelligence and wit. Solinger’s article offers an in-depth look at how Alexander Pope and his *Essay on Criticism* were able to change the political world through elegant poetry.

Solinger explains the awareness of the connection between literacy and class and how Pope sought the answer to the question “what kind of literature becomes a gentleman?” (51). Looking at Pope’s use of courtier poetics, Solinger comes to the conclusion that “By connecting his poetic practice with the verbal stratagems of a courtier...Pope effectively represents his poetic competence as the competency of a gentleman” (62). The poem is able to draw a connection between literacy and class because Pope’s verse has a purpose beyond the elegant language. An *Essay on Criticism* is a display of poetic genius and knowledge of the world, inadvertently linking the two in the eyes of society. Pope uses himself an example of intelligence equating to

class, as he is able to rise to fame and power through his wit. He embodies the idea, solely through his writing, that power lies in intelligence rather than rising to fame in innate social hierarchies. Solinger's main argument is that Pope's journey defied the social standards of his time by showing that people could gain power without being born into it. Solinger provides a unique perspective on the influence of *An Essay on Criticism* because he claims that it is not just Pope's text, but Pope himself that has an impact.

Pope also makes a deliberate attempt at societal impact, not only because he sets himself as an example, but because he describes real noblemen with intelligence. Towards the end of *An Essay on Criticism* Pope refers to the noblemen Buckingham, Walsh, and Roscommon, praising their education and literacy (ll. 723-33). Solinger argues that by doing this Pope creates a concrete link between intellect and social status. He normalizes the radical notion that one could become powerful through intelligence alone by presenting well-educated noblemen. Solinger writes that Pope "transforms the system and helps make new social arrangements possible; the identification of aristocratic power with a mode of literacy ultimately enables a substitution of literacy for birth" (68-69). Buckingham, Walsh, and Roscommon are powerful figures, though Pope emphasizes their intellectual achievements rather than their political power and disassociates their power from their social status. This shows that the influence of Pope's piece is not mere coincidence, but a conscious effort.

Although Solinger's essay contains a detailed history of the relationship between class and intellect, it does not provide much detailed information on how Pope's work affected politics. There is no account of how people reacted to Pope's essay. With this lack of evidence, the claim that Solinger makes about *An Essay on Criticism* being influential on politics is not completely supported. He also spends much of the essay discussing the history of the Early Modern

Period before Pope's influence. In his introduction, he claims that he will be "Focusing on Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, a text often hailed as the clearest statement of neoclassic poetics" (50), but, past his introduction, he writes for eight pages without even mentioning Pope's name or any of his works. Solinger's account of the relationship between intelligence and class in the Early Modern Period is extensive. He explains how men of lower classes were able to emulate the upper classes and the danger it presented to the political norms (59). However, the background knowledge he provides may be necessary in order to fully understand how politics began to change with the arrival of Pope. When he finally refers to Pope's influence, he stays grounded in the text rather than looking specifically at society's reaction as he does earlier in his essay. "The Politics of Alexander Pope's Urbanity" is not a poorly written essay, as it does show an extensive understanding about how literature affects social status, yet it focuses more on extraneous history rather than delivering the content it promises.



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