

Review of “Alexander Pope: Unlocking the Key”

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Review of Freya Johnston, “Alexander Pope: Unlocking the Key.” *Review of English Studies*, Vol. 67, 2016, pp. 897-913. *Oxford University Press Journals*.

Alexander Pope’s work is filled with complex language structures and meanings that many scholars have closely analyzed. Johnston’s article has a large focus on the “key” in Alexander Pope’s work, which Johnston defines as a “riddling device, furthering the obscurity rather than breaching the mysterious specificity” (897). She also states that the “key” permits either the further concealment or discovery of uncertain meanings, and sometimes both, within a single work (898). Johnston provides an interesting perspective on Pope’s work, but it tends to over-analyze and include too many details.

Johnston aims to explain the reasoning behind Alexander Pope’s work and the “key” to his supposedly hidden meanings while also exploring the very concealment of these meanings. Johnston compares different editions of Pope’s work, sometimes needlessly focusing on small changes (898). For instance, Johnston draws attention to two lines and how they changed slightly over different editions but essentially mean the same thing. Even though it is important to talk about the changes to help readers gain a better understanding of Pope’s poetry, I do not think it is always necessary in situations where the verses appear very similar on paper and have little significance.

However, Johnston does a close reading of some of the lines in Pope’s poems in ways that may be helpful and offer readers a story or context behind the poems. For instance, in *Rape of the Lock*, she takes two lines where one has changed and talks about the ways which the

meaning then becomes more definite and contains a more clear, concrete message. Johnston offers a fascinating way to look at Pope's works as she tells readers through her analysis the amount of locking, shutting, and closing done in a purposeful way as Pope tries to conceal but also encourage readers to unlock some of his meanings (900). She offers an analytical way in which the formality of *Rape of the Lock* reflects the state and restraints in which women lived during this time period. She exposes an important antithesis in Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, how Belinda (the main character) is confined but wishes to be unveiled.

Since some of Johnston's analysis can be subjective or difficult to back up, she includes additional authors to strengthen her argument. However, poetry can be rather subjective, and many people may view it in different ways. Johnston does a great job at using the actual poetry and coming to her own conclusions by doing such an in-depth analysis of lines that connect together and then coming up with an interpretation that fits what the poem is saying perfectly.

Johnston also brings up the Scriblerus club by briefly describing the genre of poetry that this eighteenth-century group of well-known authors established. However, when she refers to the club, she does not really explain who was involved, what it entailed, and how it was formed. From this, Johnston then goes into their satire and humour. These poets were infamously known for their satirical poetry and how they used it against each other's works (902-904).

Johnston then goes through what the "key" does and how it impacts the reader and the writer. This part of the article was very well written and gave insight as to how rhetoric works and what it means to decode a message. She refers to the messages of Pope's poetry in particular and how the "key" is between the "text and interpreter" (908). From this we take what we have read and unriddle the message of the poem which simultaneously diminishes the actual message

the poet is trying to portray. This section of the article is very helpful if we want to focus on encoding and decoding Pope.

Overall, Johnston's article was well written and illuminated Pope's poetry. Johnston uses his actual language and style to understand what Pope may be trying to illustrate. Johnston does tend to be detail-heavy in her piece, which can lead to too much information, but her article may be helpful for readers looking for that kind of elaboration. This is a helpful article when looking for a more in-depth explanation of what the function of language is, paired with how to decode Pope's poetry.



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