

An Essay on Criticism

Introduction (or *What This is Not*)

This analysis is not exactly a critique, but in some ways it may well be. One would be daring to criticize a master such as Pope. However, this is about analyzing the metrical variations that Pope has employed in his work. In some instances, the verses do not seem to follow without our stumbling across certain words. When the construction of the verse is explained, we can see how the verse is to be read. For the most, Pope is very consistent yet there are still variations which require the reader to be alert. Often we immediately look for the iambic rhythm, but this is not always the case and the verse will not read well if we enforce this rhythm.

This analysis consists of the metrical variations used in the entire work. For the verses to be analyzed, I have also included the companion verse in the couplet which is being analyzed.

Substitutions of the first foot of a trochee for iamb are not considered in this analysis as it is a common substitution to take place, and generally the reader will have little difficulty in reading the verse correctly. The verses being looked at are those for which the *metrical accent* does not match the *speech stress* if we assume a normalized pentameter line.

Metrical Variations

Verse 102:

102 *Then Criticism the Muse's handmaid prov'd,*
103 *To dress her charms, and make her more belov'd:*

The companion verse (103) is of no concern for the following analysis since it is a straight-forward iambic pentameter line.

103 Tō drēss | hēr chārms | ānd māke | hēr mōre | bēlōv'd

We can sense the beautiful rhythm to this verse that seems to bounce along in perfect harmony of the content. However, verse 102 does not appear to possess that same rhythm. On first reading, it seems to be something associated with *criticism*. Partially because we are looking for iambicity, and the pronunciation of *criticism*. The difficulty is that the word *criticism* sounds like it has four syllables, whereas it only has three: *crit-i-cism*. It is the sounding of *-cism* that throws our sought after iambicity for the verse.

| 102 Thēn Crīt | ĩcĭsm | thĕ Mūs | ě's hānd | mǎid prōv'd

This may well do it, but there would be a promotion of the last syllable of *criticism* which does not naturally fit with the speech stress. This and also taking into account that verse 101 ends with a period, we could be tempted to say the verse 102 opens with the stress on *then*.

| 102 ~ Thēn | Crītĭcĭsm | thĕ Mūs | ě's hānd | mǎid prōv'd

There are still those five metrical accents, but they are aligning with the natural speech stress and give a more compelling reading and sounding of the verse. This verse cannot really be taken out of context with either reading, but the second is more desirable.

Verse 152:

| 152 *Great Wits sometimes may gloriously offend,*
 153 *And rise to Faults true Criticks dare not mend;*

When we casually read the first verse we are liable to trip over the last couple of feet. A quick analysis shows that *gloriously* is the stumbling block.

| 152 Greāt Wĭts | sōmetĭmes | mǎy glōr | ĩoŭslŷ | ǒffēnd

For the most, the verse is iambic apart from the fourth foot. *Gloriously* definitely upsets the iambicity of the verse, but the word is not meant to fit the pure iambic framework. Clearly the first three and fifth foot are iambic which basically leaves the fourth foot to be anapestic. The anapest is a valid substitution for the iamb and is positioned well. Hence we have a *speedier* fourth foot keeping three syllables in the space and timing of two.

The companion verse is as expected with the beautiful iambic flow:

| 153 **Ānd rīse | tǒ Faūlts | trūe Crīt | icks dāre | nōt mēnd**

The combination does give a wonderful variation, provided it is not used often or too closely to another verse of the same or similar construction.

Verse 286

| 285 *Thus Criticks, of less Judgment than Caprice,*
| 286 **Curious, not Knowing, not exact, but nice,**

A typical iambic pentameter verse in most respects:

| **Thūs Crīt | icks ōf | lēss Jūdg | mēnt thān | Căprīce**

There may be a slight promotion of metrical accent on *of* and *than*, but both are dependent on the reader for speech stress for the required emphasis. As for the line in question, there a number of possible interpretations:

| **Cūrīoūs | nōt knōw | ینگ nōt | ěxāct | bŭt nīce (a)**

| **Cūrīoūs | nōt knōw | ینگ nōt | ěxāct | bŭt nīce (b)**

| **Cūrīoūs | nōt knōwīng | ° nōt | ěxāct | bŭt nīce (c)**

Emphases on the occurrences of *not* are different. In the first, leads to an emphasis with *knowing* (what) and the second specifies how.

Both (a) and (b) are plausible, but stretch *knowing* which can make the reading somewhat awkward or at least the speech stress unnatural. A normal expected reading would have *not knowing* running quickly to maintain the rhythm. Also in (a), the dactyl followed by the iamb has thrown the rhythm slightly at the start. The verse does recover but generally a trochee would be better to help develop the rhythm. The use of the amphibrach gives a little more cohesion to the verse.

In (c) we find the presence of a clipped foot which makes more sense and can be thought of as the punctuation being metrically timed as opposed to a mere pause-foot. The verse seeks more of a pause after *knowing* which is

more evident and clearer than options (a) and (b). The dactyl followed by the amphibrach give that speedier first part to the verse, allowing the iambs to take over and complete the verse with the expected rhythm. Thus (c) has far more merit.

Verse 357:

356 *A needless Alexandrine ends the Song*
357 ***That like a wounded Snake, drags its slow length along.***

Examining the content (and context) of these verses, we can plainly see that there is no error in the length or rhythm of either verse. The first is a typical and well-formed/composed iambic pentameter verse, although there may be a slight promoted metrical accent on the first syllable of *Alexandrine*.

356 **Ā nēed | lēss Āl | ěxān | drīne ēnds | thě Sōng**

The companion verse is clearly longer and is *iambic hexameter* having six metrical feet. This is what we would call an **Alexandrine** in English poetry, and is typically made up of two *iambic trimeters*. Often it is very difficult to construct to keep a pleasant flow. Here we find that the hexameter has been expertly constructed with just enough pause to carry it through.

357 **Thăt like | ă wōund | ěd Snāke | drāgs ĩts | slōw lēngth | ălōng**

However, we do find that the second trimeter is not quite as iambic as expected and is better represented as:

drāgs ĩts | slōw lēngth | ălōng

The pause after *Snake* allows the trochee to pick up the rhythm in a more dramatic manner than an iamb would permit.

Pope has developed a series of rules in which he would not allow the *Alexandrine*, however he did let them creep into some of his work. Personally, I find it a very obnoxious thing to use in most cases, but here its use is carried off perfectly.

Verse 363:

362 *True Ease in Writing comes from Art, not Chance,*
363 *As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance.*

Once more we find that one verse comes as a little more awkward in the first reading than the companion verse of the couplet. Most times this is noticeable when the first verse is as expected (normalized iambic pentameter), and then there is a variation, albeit slight, in the second. This couplet is an example of such.

The first verse is a beautifully constructed iambic pentameter line, the type of we we naturally look for in Pope's work:

362 **Trūe Eāse | ĩn Wrīt | ĩng cōmes | frōm Ārt | nōt Chānce**

We also note the metrical accent aligns perfectly with the speech stress giving it a very natural flow and sound. Magnificent!

If we continue in the same mode we will stumble. The ten syllables will generally sit well in iambic pentameter if metrical accent and speech stress align reasonably well. An eleventh is mostly feminine if iambs and trochees feature. Yet this verse is not feminine which would imply that another foot (trissyllabic) has been used for substitution.

363 **Ās thōse | mōve eās | ĩēst | whō hāve lēarn'd | tō dānce**

This is the most logical interpretation of the verse and we may find a minor promotion of metrical accent on the first and last syllables of *easiest*, but it comes as quite natural in the reading.

There are two possibilities left to us with the fourth foot since the presence of iambs is obvious. *Learn'd* obviously needs the accent and stress to make sense of the reading. However, there is the choice of accent and stress placed on *who*:

whō hāve lēarn'd

Hence an *anapest* or *cretic*, both of which would be appropriate and both giving a quicker reading for the substituted foot. In some respects the *cretic*

would be more appealing because of the emphasis on *who* which would make the verse more dramatic. There is also a yearning for a slight pause after *easiest* making the increased accent and stress on *who* more palatable.

If the anapest were used, there would be little if any difference in interpretation, and in a way, a slightly better rhythm. Again, an interesting and successful variation.

Verse 373:

372 *Not so, when swift Camila scours the Plain*
373 ***Flies o'er th'unbending Corn, and skims along the Main***

When reading the second verse, it is not entirely obvious that the verse is longer than usual for a couplet. It is actually an *Alexandrine*, but it sits superbly and compliments its companion very well.

The first verse is what we have come to expect in Pope's work with couplets, and that is a perfect iambic pentameter verse.

372 **Nōt sō | whĕn swĭft | Cāmĭl | lă scōurs | thĕ Plāin**

There is definitely no confusion about this verse's structure or rhythm. It leads naturally into the second without any awkwardness at all:

373 **Flies o'ēr | th'ŭnbĕnd | ĭng Cōrn | ānd skĭms | ālōng | thĕ Māin**

This verse also exhibits one of Pope's eliding techniques in the use of *th'unbending*. This would normally be written as *the unbending* if we were not to elide. The result is to move from three to two syllables with *th'unbending* being pronounced as one word, as in *thunbending*. This a technique that keeps the meter and hence rhythm of words and verses.

Once again, this verse is not an error but a simple variation which may be easily overlooked because of the ease with which it follows its companion verse.

Verse 490:

490 **When mellowing Years their full Perfection give,**
491 *And each Bold Figure just begins to Live;*

I will reinforce again that pre-reading serves a great purpose. In this case we would not stumble in the first verse if we had taken time to check the verse. There is clearly something happening with *mellowing*.

Moving from verse 489, we find there will be a minor metrical promotion on *When* at the start of verse 490:

489 **And sweetly melt into just Shade and Light**

However, this promotion is minor and not as great as that on the first syllable of *mellowing*.

There are clearly five speech stresses and this corresponds to the five metrical accents in five feet, leaving us with the anapest in the second foot.

490 **Whěn mēl | lōwǐng Yēars | thěir fūll | Pěrfēct | iōn gīve**

The continuation from iamb to anapest is smooth and fast, making the second foot appear more as an iamb, but the anapest has done its job well and smoothly carries through to the remaining iambs by creating a quicker verse beginning and slowing to give importance to the remaining three feet.

The companion verse is a typical iambic pentameter verse:

491 **Ānd eāch | Bōld Fig | ūre jūst | bēgīns | tō Live**

Flowing and well constructed!

Verse 588:

588 ***Fear most to tax an Honourable Fool,***
589 *Whose Right it is, uncensur'd to be dull;*

Verse 588 sounds as though there are only four metrical accents and indeed the speech stressed to align for four feet. There is no escaping the *quartus paeon*, which although a rarity, does occur in English verse.

| 588 Fĕar nōt | tǒ tāx | ān Hōn | ōurāblĕ Fōol

Not only is the *quartus paeon* required, it also give the required speed to the verse. The speech stress and metrical accent will not align in the case of pure iambs:

| 588 Fĕar nōt | tǒ tāx | ān Hōn | ōurā | blĕ Fōol

The is too much accent in the fourth foot and it has a very unnatural pronunciation.

The second verse, picks up the normal iambic pentameter rhythm:

| 589 Whōse Rīght | ĭt ĩs | ŭncĕn | sŭr'd tō | bĕ dŭll

and closes the couplet.

Verse 692:

| 691 *A second Deluge Learning this o'er-run*
| 692 *And the Monks finish'd what the Goths begun.*

The first verse is as expected:

| 691 Ā sĕc | ōnd Dĕl | ŭge Lĕarn | ĭng thŭs | o'ĕr-rŭn

so there are no difficulties with this, but leading into the second verse we find a difficulty in to places. Namely with *Monks* and *finish'd*.

Although the verse is of the appropriate length, it does not sound with the five metrical accents or with speech stress. It certainly sounds and feels like four feet.

| 692 Ānd thĕ Mōnks | fĭnish'd whāt | thĕ Gōths | bĕgŭn

The reason is that the beginning is marked with two anapests and finishes with two iambs. A unique combination, but definitely workable.

Notable Verses:

v215

| **A little Learning is a dang'rous Thing**

v525:

| **To err is Humane; to Forgive, Divine**

Humane was a common earlier spelling of *human*.

V625:

| **For Fools rush in where Angels fear to tread**

Ferrick Gray

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