

# Poetic Means, Ethical Ends: A Review of *On Alexander Pope's Poetry*

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**Abstract** Ma Xian's *On Alexander Pope's Poetry* offers new insights on Pope based on thorough readings of his major works coupled with a new perspective on ethical literary criticism. In her engagement with Pope's poetry, Ma provides a comprehensive, invaluable survey and summary of scholarship, research, and problems that have been tackled by the previous scholars, which serve a strong critical point of departure of their critical work. The book is a wise and hopeful attempt to guide research in directions that will genuinely articulate and advance our knowing of Pope and his poetry. It is no exaggeration to claim that much of Ma's work has opened new areas of analyzing Pope and, in many respects, set the scholarly agenda for the rest of us in the field.

**Keywords** Alexander Pope; ethical literary criticism; concordia discors

Alexander Pope is considered as one of the most important English poets of the 18th century and has always remained a focus of scholarly investigation in the Western academics. The past decade witnessed an explosion of exploring Pope from multiple perspectives. To name a few, Paul Baines' *The Complete Critical Guide to Alexander Pope* (2001), Tom Jones' *Pope and Berkeley: The Language of Poetry and Philosophy* (2005), Pat Rogers' *The Alexander Pope Encyclopedia* (2004) and *The Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope* (2007), etc. The most recent addition to that list is Ma Xian's *On Alexander Pope's Poetry* (2013), which is the single most ground-breaking works on Pope by a non-Western scholar. In addition to an insightful introduction and a thought-provoking conclusion, the monograph is composed of six chapters.

The introduction begins with a rather informative sketch of the social and cultural context of Pope's poetic creations. The author observes that tremendous changes underwent in the fields of politics, economy and culture in England. In Ma's opinion, the 18<sup>th</sup> century is typically marked by the enlightenment movement, John Lock's philosophy, and affective ethics by David Hume and Adam Smith, which, according to

Ma, exerts significant impact upon Pope. In Ma's words, "what Pope's poetry project is capitalist ethics and morality" (8), which accounts for her employing the toolkits of ethical literary criticism when doing research on Pope. In her book, Ma attempts to uncover the complexity of ethical thought in Pope's poetry, which is mingled with the poet's meditations on nature, reason, order, and mean.

Chapter one investigates "concordia discors" in "Windsor-Forest". As is known, "Windsor-Forest" is usually considered as a poem on nature by critics. Yet, Ma has penetrated into the subtext of the poem and revealed "order in variety" embedded inside. In Ma's opinion, Pope tries to convey a warning to the human beings through writing a variety of discordant, hybridized and irrational natural phenomena: breaking up the natural laws and order will endanger the harmony of society. Finding the connections between nature and the poet's affections for his nation, nature and history, order and variety, the author spares no pains decoding the symbolic meanings of the "metamorphosis", and those images like Lodona, Diana, Loddon, Nymph, and Thames in particular. Through her close reading of "Windsor-Forest", Ma concludes that Pope fully fleshes out his idea about "concordiadiscors" based upon three levels: natural scenes, mythology, and human history.

Chapter two proceeds to the discussion of harmony and nature in Pope's *Essay on Criticism*. In this chapter, the author mainly addresses the following questions raised in *Essay on Criticism*: what is the relationship between art and nature? How can nature and reason be united? What are the moral principles that a poet should follow? In Ma's opinion, Pope seems to believe that nature is the very criterion to evaluate art. Specifically, art not only imitates nature but also takes its origin from nature. In illuminating the correlations between "Wit" and "Judgment", "Rules" and "Nameless Graces", Pope lays much stress upon the complementarity between art and nature, which co-work to produce "consenting Poems ring". In the same vein, Pope criticizes "Pride" of the critic on the one hand and calls for "right reason" on the other. To put it another way, what a critic needs to do is to combine "Good-Nature and Good-Sense". The most interesting part of this chapter is Ma's elaboration on the relationship between ethics and aestheticism. Reading Pope's arguments through his mentor and friend William Walsh, Ma examines the moral virtues enchanted by Pope and concludes that in his case, ethics offers a starting point for aesthetic appreciation.

Chapter three turns to the issue of morality and parody in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. Written in the form of Mock-Heoric, *The Rape of the Lock* mainly depicts four distinctive images of women: Gnomes, Salamanders, Nymphs, and Sylphs. Taking Gnomes and Sylphs as his foci of attention, Pope portrays the manners and behaviors of the upper class. In her examining Pope's portraitures of these women images, Ma discloses the moral implication conveyed by the poet: people need to

follow principles of “honesty” and “moderation” so as to maintain “good sense” and “order” in social activities. To concretize his ethical claims, Pope parodies the epic in almost every sense of the word, which is exemplified in such aspects as proposition, characterization, war, and gods. From Ma’s perspective, the purpose of Pope’s employment of parody is to drive his ethical aims home. By criticizing “fraud”, “betray”, “ravish”, and “force”, Pope attempts to raise people’s awareness of value of “honor” and to maintain social norms based upon “order”.

Chapter four centers on Pope’s *An Essay on Man*, which is as equally important as his *Essay on Criticism*. This chapter mainly explores Pope’s views on the order of the universe. Specially, it takes a close look at the ethical correlations between man and society, man and universe, as well as the happiness and the nature of human beings. In Pope’s view, mankind is just one part of the “Vast chain of being”. Therefore, it is essential for mankind to recognize their imperfections, which are partly caused by their “pride” and imbalance between “passion” and “reason”. To realize a man’s self-perfection in moral sense, according to Pope, is to follow the principles of “self-love” and “reason”. In Ma’s reading, the conflicts between “passion” and “reason” stand for the conflicts between “good” and “evil”, which explains the importance for a man to know his position in society and to deal with his relations with others properly. In Pope’s case, the means for a man to become an ethical being is to be a part of “chain of love”, and to derive “great harmony” from “thinking right, and meaning well”. By connecting “chain of being” with “chain of love”, Ma grasps the essence of Pope’s arguments about the order, reason, and harmony.

Chapter five focuses on Pope’s *Moral Essays*, which is chiefly concerned about a fundamental moral principle — “mean.” Ma scrutinizes Pope’s arguments on “mean” from such aspects as complexity of characters of men, characters of women, fortune, and architecture. Specifically, Pope tries to make a full use of “Ruling Passion” to evaluate a variety of mankind’s defects, among which is “Lust of Praise”; when revealing the “contrarities” and “change” of female characters, he suggests that they should possess enough “Good Sense” and “Good Humor”; criticizing the two negative attitudes towards fortune — “Avarice or Profusion”, he intends to ask people to adopt “The due Medium, and the true use of Riches” (194); taking “Palladian style” as an ideal model, he lays much emphasis upon “good taste” for architecture. Combined together, these arguments disclose the fact that Pope is a moralist who has a serious attitudes toward society, life and universe, on which I agree with Ma.

Chapter six makes an in-depth exploration of *The Dunciad*, which is one of the last pieces of work produced by Pope. In this part, Ma tries to reveal the ethical implications of Pope’s mockery of Muse and his depiction of Dulness. In describing Dulness, Pope uses a lot of negative words to convey a sense of disorder in society,

such as dotage, idiot, grave, and anarchy. Additionally, Ma connects with Pope's seemingly despair with the ethical environment in which he strides for a world of harmony and order. Ma persuasively concludes that if Pope's idea on harmony and order were not concretized in reality, it has been fully fledged in the artistic world of poetry created by him.

What strikes me most impressively is the critical approach adopted by Ma throughout the book — ethical literary criticism, which “attempts to read, interpret and analyze literature from an ethical perspectives” (Nie 13). According to Nie Zhenzhao, “literature is a unique expression of ethics and morality within a certain historical period”, and “The primary purpose of literature is not to provide entertainment but to offer moral examples for human being to follow, to enrich their material life and spiritual life with moral guidance, and to achieve their self-perfection with moral experience” (13). In “Ethical Criticism and Literary Studies” (2013), I have pointed out that Nie's ethical literary criticism “exemplifies the best resource for the study of literature by facilitating new ways of engaging with literature and fostering new understandings of literary history” (Shang 5). Influenced and Trained by Nie, Ma has consistently used this critical approach to shed new light upon Pope's works.

In summary, this excellent book offers new insights on Pope based on thorough readings of his major works coupled with a new perspective on ethical literary criticism. In her engagement with Pope's poetry, Ma provides a comprehensive, invaluable survey and summary of scholarship, research, and problems that have been tackled by the previous scholars, which serve a strong critical point of departure of their critical work. This is a wise and hopeful attempt to guide research in directions that will genuinely articulate and advance our knowing of Pope and his poetry. Much of Ma's work has opened new areas of analysis and, in many respects, set the scholarly agenda for the rest of us in the field. On the whole, I must recommend this scholarly achievement for anyone doing research in 18<sup>th</sup> century English poetry, Pope in particular.

### Works Cited

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