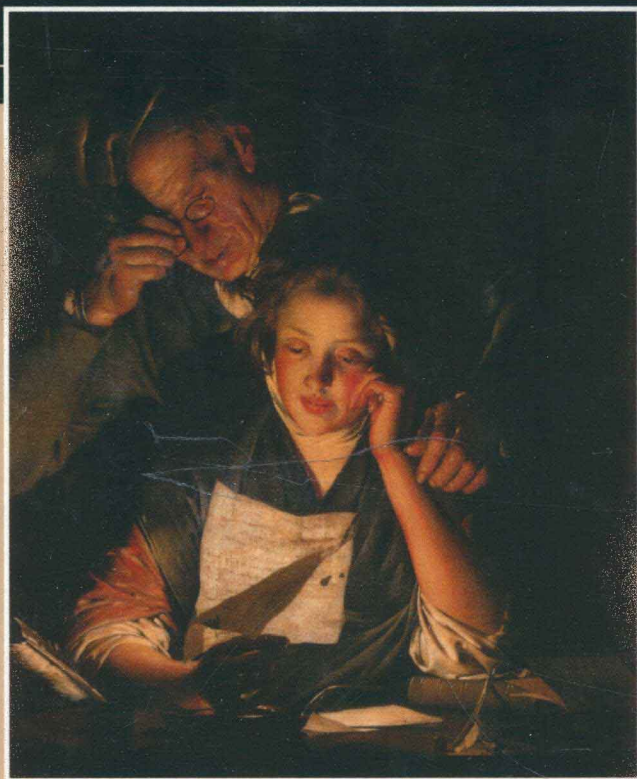


# Reading Eighteenth-Century Poetry

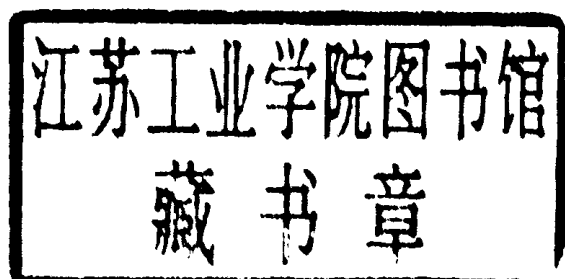


*Patricia Meyer Spacks*

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# Reading eighteenth-century poetry

Patricia Meyer Spacks



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# Preamble

For the purposes of this book, the eighteenth century begins in 1700 and ends in 1799. That may sound like an uncontroversial definition, but it is not: historians, both literary and political, have often described the eighteenth century – the “long eighteenth century” – as extending from 1660 to 1819, say, or even 1832. A friend recently explained to me that the “1890s” take in the years 1750 to 1914. Literary periods – like centuries, arbitrary designations – shift according to their designators’ purposes. The various spans assigned to a given period may all prove plausible, given that modes of writing remain always in flux, with varying degrees of continuity and change; different definitions suit different purposes. I prefer a definition that announces its own arbitrariness. Starting in 1700, ending in 1799, we may see a century’s poetic richness and see how trends grow and wane in every span of years.

Equally arbitrary is the division of the century roughly into thirds that organizes the chapters. Dominant literary practices changed in the course of a hundred years, and segmenting the century makes it easier to focus on the changes, just as dividing the eighteenth century from the seventeenth and the nineteenth helps to illuminate how distinct time spans differ from one another. They differ, and they remain the same. To call attention to this constant paradoxical pattern of literary development, the five chapters focused on each third of the century follow a common scheme. In each section, the first chapter examines the vision of the good life promulgated or suggested by the period’s poetry. The second chapter looks at the place of feeling in verse and the kinds of feeling that attract poetic interest; the third investigates a structural question; and the fourth examines issues of diction. The fifth chapter of each section focuses attention on a pair of the period’s poets, providing an opportunity for more detailed investigation of

individual poems than that possible in chapters concerned with general issues. The opportunity for comparison, implicit and explicit, created by the patterns of recurrence emphasizes complicated relations among the productions of different poets.

The tripartite division of the century and the chapter organization by topic rather than author guarantee that individual poets will make their appearance in more than one chapter – sometimes in several chapters. Alexander Pope, for instance, does not neatly confine himself to the first third of the century. Moreover, he concerns himself with the nature of the good life; he writes poetry of passionate feeling; his work exemplifies the power of the couplet; he varies his diction in provocative ways. He might plausibly appear in seven or eight chapters – and he actually figures prominently in six. This structural fact underlines a point that the book makes repeatedly in verbal terms: the poets treated here do not fit neatly into separate boxes. On the contrary, their conjunction demonstrates over and over how intricately their achievements comment on one another. I have deliberately tried to place at least some of them in diverse contexts in order to emphasize this fact.

The authors – although not necessarily the specific poems – discussed in this volume for the most part coincide with those included in *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, eds. David Fairer and Christine Gerrard (Blackwell, 1999), and the texts for the poems included in that anthology are taken from it. For individual poems not printed in the anthology, the sources for texts are indicated in the bibliography (pp. 276–8).

Many of the texts reproduce the poems' original orthography, which may in some respects seem unfamiliar. Through much of the eighteenth century, capital letters began all nouns, common and proper alike. Proper nouns sometimes received the differentiation of italics, which might elsewhere serve the purpose of emphasis. Moreover, printers on occasion used italics rather than quotation marks to set off quotations. As the century went on, orthographic practices gradually moved closer to those of our own time. The relatively unfamiliar appearance of some earlier poetry, however, may provide a salutary reminder that this verse, from a different era, has necessary aspects of strangeness that should not be elided. Although much eighteenth-century poetry explores issues still pressingly important, it does so with a perspective inevitably different from our own. We learn by acknowledging difference as well as by recognizing similarity.

As its title indicates, this volume concerns itself above all with *reading*. Poetry, like prose, lends itself to many purposes. It may reveal political and social attitudes or reflect biographical facts or speak of an immediate or past national situation. Such matters receive glancing attention in the present study, but the book will concentrate primarily on the individual encounter with a text. From ancient times, writers and readers alike have believed that the written word provides both pleasure and instruction: enlightenment about particulars and about large and lasting truths. Pleasure, however, matters as much as instruction, and the pleasure provided by works from the past may remain inaccessible without help.

By sketching ways of reading individual texts, this book aspires to provide such help. To encounter multiple and varied examples of how eighteenth-century poetry works familiarizes readers with a range of possibilities and makes new encounters less startling than they might otherwise feel. To pay close attention to the workings of words exposes meanings and enriches perceptions. To think about poems in conjunction with one another reveals connections and clarifies nuances. Thus readers may come to see more in unfamiliar poems – and thus find new inlets for pleasure.

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# How to Live: The Moral and the Social

In 1700, the first year of a new century, John Dryden, not long before his death, composed *The Secular Masque*. At its conclusion, a group of mythological figures occupies the stage, reflecting in derogatory terms on the historical period immediately past. The final chorus ends,

'Tis well an Old Age is out,  
And time to begin a New.

New ages do not necessarily coincide with new centuries, yet years ending in double zeroes carry special imaginative weight. We want to believe that something important will happen as a century changes, although, inevitably, much remains the same. Let us begin our story, then, at the arbitrary starting point of 1700, a year that saw the publication not only of Dryden's *Masque*, with its skepticism about the past ("Thy Wars brought nothing about; / Thy Lovers were all untrue") and its implicit optimism about the future, but also of John Pomfret's enormously popular poem, *The Choice*, a work that holds in some respects to the distant past, although its large readership endured through much of the century to come.

Pomfret's subject, a favorite one in the eighteenth century, is the choice of life: how an individual man might determine the best circumstances and the best conduct available to him. The topic would have had particular urgency in 1700, less than sixty years after the English had executed their king, Charles I, in the immediate aftermath of a cataclysmic civil war. It would be hard to exaggerate this event's traumatic repercussions. To kill a king, a figure whose divine right to govern had long been a matter of general conviction, and to do so as a result of purportedly legal judicial determination: such an act not only overturned centuries of tradition; it also created new uncertainties. Who



## 2 *How to Live: The Moral and the Social*

could be trusted, if not the king? What could be counted on, if not the monarchy's continuity? Was the execution of Charles I justice or sacrilege? Such questions lingered long after the deed itself.

The 1642 execution did not produce a stable government. England became for a time a commonwealth, governed by Oliver Cromwell under the title of Lord Protector. By 1660, however, Charles II, son of the executed monarch, returned to the throne, to be succeeded in 1687 by his Catholic son, James II. Two years later, the so-called Glorious Revolution deposed James in favor of his sister Mary and her husband, William of Orange, Protestants both, who remained on the throne as the new century began. James, however, was still alive and well in France, and some believed him the rightful king. If the English felt uncertain of the monarchy's stability, they had reason.

The political forces that generated this confused sequence of rulers had religious and moral aspects as well. Antagonism between Protestants and Catholics shaped the rebellion against James II. Catholics had become a small minority in England; the decision to expel a Catholic king reflected a strong majority view. More deeply disturbing, because more widely divisive, was the split that had produced the civil war. On one side, the so-called Puritans represented Protestants who dissented from the doctrine of the Church of England, following stricter moral and more rigid doctrinal principles. The Cavaliers, who supported the monarchy of Charles I, espoused more moral permissiveness and laxer theological discipline than did their opponents. Aristocrats predominantly, although not invariably, supported the Cavaliers and the king; the Puritans attracted wide advocacy among commoners. Thus class interests as well as theological ones worked to generate conflict.

The Puritans won the war, but eighteen years later the Cavaliers triumphed, with the return of Charles II. A long, painful struggle had in a sense resolved nothing. The conflicts at issue in the mid-seventeenth century, between different forms of belief, different modes of conduct, and different class allegiances, remained alive at the beginning of the eighteenth century. A personal choice of life could thus be understood as a political commitment. Many, however, might hope for a kind of choice that could separate them from politics. The proliferation of poetry about the subject, although it seemed to concern individuals, in fact had large social implications.

*The Choice* sets forth details of what purports to be Pomfret's personal choice. No practical restrictions limit his imagining. He conjures

up an ideal situation, in which friends remain ever faithful and agreeable, a mistress both intelligent and attractive is at his disposal, no wife or children impede his pleasures, the natural environment abounds in delights, and he possesses as much money as he desires.

With the fierce civil war just behind them, the English would have found a vision of gratifying and peaceful noninvolvement especially appealing. More to the point, they would find poetry articulating such a vision attractive. The poetry of the Restoration (the period beginning in 1660, when Charles II ascended the throne; the term loosely designates the last forty years of the seventeenth century) had included much political verse, often fiercely partisan about religious and national matters, and much bawdiness. Cynicism often controlled poetic utterance. Thus Samuel Butler, at the beginning of his popular *Hudibras* (1663), could write of England's agonizing civil war, not long past:

When *Civil Dudgeon*-first grew high  
And men fell out they knew not why;  
When hard words, *Jealousies*, and *Fears*  
Set Folks together by the ears,  
And made them fight, like mad, or drunk,  
For Dame *Religion*, as for Punk [prostitute],  
Whose honesty they all durst swear for,  
Though not a man of them knew wherefore . . .  
(1-8)

Religion had been a matter of life and death, yet the poet felt free to suggest that men who killed and were killed did not even know why they fought.

Pomfret's tone of reflective seriousness, his respectful claims of piety, and his insistent modesty differentiate him sharply from poets like Butler, or the often obscene Rochester, or even the poet laureate Dryden in his characteristic rhetorical dignity. Unlike such important Restoration figures, he appears to make few claims on his readers, demanding neither cynicism nor large tolerance. *The Choice* provides easy reading.

Like many poems that followed it, though, it is less simple than it seems. For one thing, it bears a complicated relation to literary tradition. As classically educated eighteenth-century readers would notice, Pomfret drew on the verse of the great Latin poet, Horace, as a model. An ideal of rural retirement informs many of Horace's epistles, which

may turn, implicitly or explicitly, on a contrast between the corruption of the court and the innocence of the country. Inasmuch as Pomfret could be seen as alluding to Horace, he might be seen also as commenting on the relative corruption of public men – not only courtiers, but also politicians. *The Choice* advocates opting out.

Closer to Pomfret's historical moment were the many country-house poems of the seventeenth century that celebrated a luxurious version of the rural retreat. A poet writing in 1700 could plausibly expect his readers to notice both his allusions to and his differences from such models. The differences help to locate Pomfret's achievement. Ben Jonson, writing *To Penshurst* in 1616, praised the estate as a place of plenty, rich in provisions for hospitality. Here he describes the catching of fish and game to supply the table:

The painted partrich lyes in every field,  
And, for thy messe [meal] is willing to be kill'd.  
And if the high-swolne *Medwaye* fail thy dish,  
Thou hast thy ponds, that pay thee tribute fish,  
Fat, aged carps, that runne into thy net,  
And pikes, now weary their own kinde to eat,  
As loth, the second draught, or cast to stay,  
Officiously [dutifully], at first, themselves betray.  
Bright eeles, that emulate them, and leape on land,  
Before the fisher, or into his hand.

(29–38)

The fanciful notion that birds and fish alike demonstrate eagerness to be killed for the master's table animates the verse, creating a bizarre vision of coordinated activity, the animal world unified in happy self-sacrifice, as fish from the Medway River or from the estate's ponds rush into the net and eels leap into the fisherman's hand. Jonson offers this not as literal description, but as a metaphor of abundance, one of many such images in the poem.

Pomfret traffics in no such exaggeration. Avoiding the extravagance of much seventeenth-century poetry, he stresses the modesty of his desires, in this respect resembling Horace: he wants a house "Built Uniform, not little, nor too great" (6), containing only things "Useful, Necessary, Plain" (10), the capacity to live "Genteelly, but not Great" (34), and so on. Frequent invocations of "Heaven" remind us that the speaker seeks to govern himself by Christian imperatives. The poem

ends by imagining a death as peaceful and harmonious as the life that has been evoked. "Then," it concludes, "wou'd my Exit so propitious be, / All men wou'd wish to live and dye like me" (166–67).

This final couplet consolidates abundant earlier suggestions that, despite the speaker's proclaimed moderation, his fantasy has its own extravagance. Everyone, everywhere would realize it if they could, once they perceived its perfection. Above all, the vision Pomfret offers speaks of human harmony. Not only the nation as a whole but also, frequently, individual families had found themselves divided by opposed political views that became causes for bloodshed during the civil war. *The Choice* imagines male friends "Not prone to Lust, Revenge, or envious Hate; / Nor busy Medlers with Intrigues of State" (90–91); a female companion "Civil to Strangers, to her Neighbours kind, / Averse to Vanity, Revenge, and Pride" (121–22); and a self "concern'd in no litigious Jarr, / Belov'd by all, not vainly popular" (140–41). It provides a detailed alternative to division.

The harmonious verse of *The Choice* reiterates the ideal of harmony and thus emphasizes the poem's import. Like most of his contemporaries, Pomfret wrote in heroic couplets: ten-syllable lines rhymed successively and patterned by iambic meter, a sequence of unstressed followed by stressed syllables. "'Most Women have no Characters at all'": this, the second line of Alexander Pope's *An Epistle to a Lady*, exemplifies the regularity and easy emphasis of iambic verse. Even within such regularity, though, much variation flourished. In Pomfret's hands, the couplet became a soothing form. *The Choice* moves smoothly. Its rhymes (lend–spend, contain–Plain, Row–grow) seldom surprise and never shock. Each couplet typically encapsulates a complete thought, yet the larger sense proceeds through several couplets, following readily recognizable logical patterns. Although the poem generates little urgency – nothing is obviously at stake – the verse draws the reader along, placing few obstacles in the way. The rhythm never slows us down; the meaning develops so clearly that we rarely need pause to ponder. The poem feels inevitable, an effect achieved both metrically and logically.

It comes as no surprise, given the emphasis on straightforwardness in all its devices, that Pomfret's poem offers little opportunity and makes no demand for profound exegesis. It does not depend heavily on symbolism; its meanings appear to lie all on the surface. Yet the pressure of the counterfactual suggests a level of complexity in addition to that

of the poem's relation to classic and vernacular tradition. *The Choice* begins with the word "If," which locates all that follows it in the realm of conceptual possibility rather than that of actuality. Everything depends on "Heav'n," which may grant – or, more probably, refuse to grant – individuals a choice of life. Typically, human beings have little choice about their economic circumstances. The vision of ideal existence that the poem constructs therefore accretes poignancy: it has not been realized, and its conceivable realization hinges on an act of divine benevolence.

The poem, then, knows itself to be fantasy. In this context, the tension between the declarations of moderation and the desire for perfection assumes special meaning. The speaker often formulates his wishes in terms of negatives: "not little, nor too great"; "no other Things . . . But what are Useful"; "Genteelly, but not Great"; "healthy, not luxurious"; "no such rude Disorders"; "not Uneasy," and so on. He thus calls attention to the fact that he's not requesting too much. In the context of his knowledge of that portentous "If" at the beginning, his awareness that free choice is a stupendous gift, he must be careful – he knows, after all, that he is asking for an enviable mortal condition.

In the company of his chosen friends, the speaker writes, he "cou'd not miss, / A permanent, sincere, substantial Bliss" (ll. 95–96). The word *Bliss* carries powerful overtones. It suggests the divinely ordained happiness of heaven as well as, conceivably, the transcendent satisfactions of erotic love. Pomfret's envisioned life promises delights more enduring than those of love, more immediate than those of heaven. *The Choice* articulates the precise nature of the happiness it promises: "substantial" in its accumulation of particulars; permanent because its endurance is essential to the vision; sincerely imagined and sincerely longed for. Yet the longing remains poignant in its historical context, not only because of the vision's counterfactual nature but also because of the national circumstances that would have made it seem especially difficult to realize. It is not surprising that readers avidly purchased and perused a poem that fully specified a happy ideal, one that might provide material for dreams if not for realization.

*The Choice* articulates a model of a good life. It has little autobiographical bearing, except as fantasy: the poet was married when he wrote his encomium of an existence without human encumbrances. It participates, though, in a lively eighteenth-century tradition. If it seems escapist in its emphatic rejection of public life, it chooses escapism as

a deliberate alternative to internecine strife. The good life, at Pomfret's historical moment, might plausibly seem the life of opting out.

In the twenty-first century, poetry would seem a peculiar genre for advice about life. We turn, rather, to self-help books, or to biographies and autobiographies for possible models of conduct, or conceivably to novels for delineations of imagined life choices. In the first third of the eighteenth century, though, novels had not developed into an important genre, nor had biography and autobiography, beyond narratives of conversion. Conduct books flourished, recommending proper behavior for specific situations, but they did not deal significantly with fundamental choices beyond, say, a young woman's decision about what man to marry.

Readers turned to poetry for investigation of such matters as how one should live not primarily because of the absence of other resources, but rather because they believed poetry a particularly authoritative literary mode. The assumption that verse dealt with important concerns permeated literate society. Moralists would soon complain that novels dwelt only on love; no one could say that about verse. Poetry aspired to educate, even to reform, both individuals and society at large. It considered philosophical issues, politics, and morality, but also how to shear sheep or grow cucumbers. It criticized governments and inveighed against such social habits as tea-drinking and gambling. And it dared to claim authority even about such fundamental matters as how a man should live in order to go to heaven.

The convention that allowed poets to hold forth on such subjects permitted them on occasion to say unexpected things. For an extreme example, we might consider Sarah Fyge Egerton (1670–1723), whose assertive utterances about the female situation ring with outrage about the limited choices open to women. Her implicit prescriptions about the proper conduct of female life emerge indirectly, almost entirely through her expressed indignation at things as they are.

Shall I be one of those obsequious Fools,  
That square their lives by Customs scanty Rules;  
Condemn'd for ever to the puny Curse,  
Of Precepts taught at Boarding-school, or Nurse,  
That all the business of my Life must be,  
Foolish, dull Trifling, Formality.  
Confin'd to a strict Magick complaisance,

And round a Circle of nice visits Dance,  
 Nor for my Life beyond the Chalk advance.  
 (*The Liberty*, 1–9)

Shall I be one of those fools, she asks, going on to specify the nature of the fools in such a way that the noun becomes synonymous with “respectable young women.” *The Liberty* answers the question most eloquently by asking it in those terms. Its speaker finally specifies, with some bravado, how she proposes to differ from others of her sex, but she holds forth no hope that her kind of behavior will be imitated.

Unpredictable adjectives fill urgent needs in the opening lines of *The Liberty*. *Obsequious* establishes the outrage that permeates the poem. Women’s folly perhaps consists in their obsequiousness, their servile compliance; or perhaps women are fools because they are forced to be compliant. In any case, the poem’s speaker loathes folly and obsequiousness, whether or not they are identical. But the targets of her anger, as conveyed by the adjectives, become less predictable as she continues her discourse. “Customs scanty Rules”: *scanty* meaning “deficient in extent, compass, or size.” From a woman’s point of view, the deficiency of the rules intended to govern her inheres in their limitation. Inadequate in their imagining, they limit her possibilities in ways echoing their own limitations.

Yet more unexpected is “strict Magick complaisance.” As a glance at any conduct book will reveal, “complaisance,” or willingness to please, was insistently recommended to eighteenth-century women, whose capacity to please others would largely determine their fates. The only kind of power legitimate for women, complaisance might have the metaphorically magic capacity to transform their destiny – but a capacity that, Egerton’s phrasing emphasizes, can operate only within strict bounds. The poem’s speaker, therefore, resents even the resources she has: too scanty, too strictly regulated, all part of what she tellingly alludes to as “the puny Curse”: trivial in conception and in articulation, yet as potent as any prophet’s imprecation in deforming women’s lives.

I hardly know whether to admire more the energy or the economy of the phrasing through which Egerton conveys her sense of the female plight and of a female response to it. The poem’s resolution is equally striking. *The Liberty* continues specifying restraints on women, with the speaker increasingly articulate about her own defiance of them:

Some boast their Fetters of Formality  
Fancy they ornamental Bracelets be,  
I'm sure they're Gyves and Manacles to me.  
(26–28)

Then she concludes by forthrightly stating her intentions:

I'll blush at Sin, and not what some call Shame,  
Secure my Virtue, slight precarious Fame.  
This Courage speaks me Brave, 'tis surely worse,  
To keep those Rules, which privately we Curse:  
And I'll appeal to all the formal Saints,  
With what reluctance they indure restraints.  
(47–52)

The firm separation of sin and shame and the scorn for mere reputation give way to a conclusion marked by increasing self-assertion and defiance. The speaker declares her own courage, suggesting it as self-justification. Distinguishing between sin, which conscience detects, and the shame responsive to pressure from without, she insists on her virtue, even though she implicitly rejects concern for the reputation of virtue. In the final couplet, she appeals ironically for support from "all the formal Saints." The noun *formality* has appeared twice earlier, both times with a negative weight: we have encountered the "Trifling [and] Formality" that define the business of a good girl's life and the "Fetters of Formality" that bind her. The formality of the "Saints" now alluded to presumably refers to the precision and rigorous observance that marked many Puritan sects of the period – some of which, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us, referred to their own members as saints. If such "saints" responded to the speaker's appeal, they would have to throw off the hypocrisy that, to her mind, characterizes them: enduring restraint without complaining, they hide in practice the reluctance they actually feel. The voice of the poem, celebrating its own courage, declares integrity by self-revelation instead of concealment, and the poem glorifies its speaking out, even while tacitly acknowledging the isolation implicit in such defiance of social norms.

Like Pomfret, Egerton offers no direct advice about the proper way to lead one's life. She speaks only of how she herself would want to live, implying the meretriciousness of female lives conducted purely by social standards. Although *The Liberty* presents itself as intensely



personal, it too is inflected by immediate political actualities. Religious politics, which had played a large role in the civil war, colors the poem's choice of reference. More inclusively, gender politics – a concept that, of course, had not yet been formulated – shapes the entire work. Egerton's dissatisfaction focuses on the impossibility of living a personal life apart from social constraints. The individual life, virtually all eighteenth-century poems on the subject acknowledge, necessarily takes place within society, and society implies the pressures of a specific time and place. Few before her had articulated the same perception, but Egerton points out that those pressures impinge with special force on women.

The loudest poetic voice offering recommendations about conduct was that of Alexander Pope, who even in his early *Essay on Criticism* (written about 1709, when the poet was 21 years old) constructed an ideal figure to model the way a good man would behave.

But where's the man, who counsel can bestow,  
Still pleas'd to teach, and yet not proud to know?  
Unbiass'd, or by favour, or by spite;  
Not dully preposses'd, or blindly right;  
Tho' Learn'd, well-bred; and tho' well-bred, sincere;  
Modestly bold, and humanly severe?

(631–36)

Meaning infuses form here, and form shapes meaning. The six lines exemplify how flexible and powerful an instrument the heroic couplet provided for eighteenth-century poets. The lines comprise a single interrogative sentence (the question mark at the end of the first couplet does not in fact mark a sentence's end) that establishes a set of crucial characteristics and defines relationships among them.

Those relationships depend centrally on balance and antithesis, enacted by as well as stated in the verse. Different conjunctions (*or . . . or, Not . . . nor, Tho' . . . and*) together with the adverbial pairing *Still* (here meaning *always*) and *yet*, enforce a single point: the good man harmoniously incorporates a series of paradoxically related qualities. The shifting rhythms and pace possible within the iambic pentameter couplet emphasize meanings. Thus in the first line, the iambic structure underlines *can*, the line's most important word. The fact that the hypothetical good man has the capacity to give wise counsel differentiates