



The Rape of the Text: Reading and Misreading Pope's Essay on Man

Harry M. Solomon

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First published in 1733-1734, *An Essay on Man*, Alexander Pope's best-known philosophical poem, was highly praised by many of Pope's European contemporaries, including Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant, and Hume. The poem, divided into four Epistles, deals with the nature of man and his place in the universe, man as an individual, man in society, and man in pursuit of happiness.

Voltaire called *An Essay on Man* "the most beautiful, most useful, most sublime didactic poem" in the English language, but what was formerly regarded as the pinnacle of 18th-century poetry now languishes largely unread or misread as a quaint period piece. In contrast, Harold Bloom recently described the *Essay* as a "poetic disaster" of "absurd theodicy." *The Rape of the Text* deconstructs the history of criticism for *An Essay on Man* to account for and to reverse over two hundred years of deformation and trivialization of Pope's text by literary critics, philosophers, and historians of ideas. After showing why the commonplaces about the *Essay* inscribed in Pope scholarship are suspect because of the mutual and abiding hostility of logocentric and aesthetic traditions of misreading, Solomon rebuts the objections made to Pope's "philosophy" in a series of chapters demonstrating more appropriate strategies for interpreting Pope's persona, tone, methodology, argument, and figurality. Cumulatively the chapters characterize a discourse work of "middle-state" Academic Skepticism that Pope shared with his admirers.

Although the characterization of Pope's discourse world in *The Rape of the Text* has implications for Pope and for 18th-century scholarship beyond the *Essay on Man*, it also has implications for reading all philosophical poetry. Solomon contends that criticism of the *Essay on Man* is only an extreme example of the deformation that occurs routinely when literary critics or philosopher interpret philosophical poetry, and in the final chapter he calls for a "naturalization" of philosophical poetry as a genre as the necessary remedy to our present willful blindness.

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