*Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* shares the theme common to satirists since the days of the Roman poets Horace and Juvenal: the constant struggle of “good” writers to maintain their standards of artistic achievement and integrity in a world dominated by “bad” writers and their corrupt patrons and sycophants. Pope imaginatively realizes this struggle by guiding readers through a kind of “rogue’s gallery”: Codrus is a supremely bad writer, Sporus a monster of duplicity and deceit, and Bufo a “patron of the arts” with absolutely no genuine interest in art and artists beyond his own self-aggrandizement.

For Pope, however, more lies at stake than art. For art, though a supremely important means of expressing human value and meaning, is merely one aspect of civilization as a whole. Its “diseased” condition is only a symptom, an indicator of a problem that runs much deeper. This problem (Pope refers to it as a “Plague”) is not so much “bad writing” as it is “bad thinking” and, by extension, “bad living.” What has created this problem? For Pope, nothing more or less than a fundamental distortion in human values. A world, after all, in which creatures such as Bufo and Sporus can prosper is a world whose values have been turned topsy-turvy. It is a “sick” world badly in need of a doctor’s curative abilities.

Arbuthnot is that doctor, and Pope is his assistant. Just as Arbuthnot’s medicinal skills had helped Pope survive one disease after another in his “long disease, my life,” so now Arbuthnot’s moral goodness can prove therapeutic for society. Why? In part, because goodness is still possible; good men and women, though perhaps in the minority, still exist. In the concluding lines of the poem, having spent his passion excoriating Sporus and his kind, and having claimed for his own poetry the task of seeking “Virtue’s better end,” Pope turns quietly and reverently to his parents, whose “spotless” lives exist as proof that something of real human value yet remains for the poet to celebrate—and to protect.

*Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* thus “means” what all great poetry will always mean: that what is truly human is redeemable and is well worth the cost of redemption.

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