

## POPE'S PRINCIPLES OF CRITICISM.



**I**T is probable that the works of no poet have been the object of so widely different criticisms as those of Alexander Pope and his contemporaries.

Some eminent critics have placed them on a level with the works of poets such as Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Milton, while many others scarcely deem them worthy of a favorable remark. Any of us, I would think, who has read at least a part of Pope's works, will be at variance with both these classes of critics. For as other poets are remarkable for their originality and sublimity, in correctness and beauty of style Pope is surpassed but by a few. In reading his works, therefore, we should not expect to find many new ideas or sublime passages, but we meet with many old thoughts put in such a striking manner that we begin to think Pope a great poet. He was not, however, a great poet, but he probably thought he was, and could tolerate almost anything but unfavorable criticism. It was undoubtedly on account of this that he wrote his *Essay on Criticism*. This may be plainly seen from the very beginning of the poem, for it commences with the following lines :

" 'Tis hard to say if greater want of skill  
Appear in writing or in judging ill."

He then speaks of the great number of critics and their utter ignorance of true criticism. He admits, nevertheless, that "most have the seeds of judgment in their mind." Many of them, he says, are men who have failed in other kinds of writing, and to escape derision, have become critics.

" In search of wit these lose their common sense  
And then turn critics in their own defence.  
All fools have still an itching to deride,  
And fain would be upon the laughing side."

These last two lines expose a well known principle ; for we always see that those

who should not laugh, are always the most eager to do so.

After mentioning a few more kinds of literary men, Pope begins to lay down the rules which, in his opinion, we should follow if we would become true critics.

" Be sure yourself and your own reach to know  
How far your genius, taste and learning go."

By this is meant that we must know how much genius we have, and what we can do, lest we should get beyond our depth. Nature, moreover, has given knowledge but sparingly to men. When this is accomplished, then our first care is to follow Nature.

" First follow Nature and your judgment frame  
By her just standard, which is still the same."

For in all works of art, Nature is the standard, and the nearer the artist approaches nature the more perfect his work becomes.

The poet now calls our attention to Greece, who has encouraged her sons to become famous. Men were not then afraid to write, for critics were not disposed, as they are now, to cavil.

" The generous critic fanned the poet's fire,  
And taught the world with reason to admire."

Therefore if we wish to excel in any species of composition, we must first prepare ourselves by a thorough acquaintance with the ancient authors.

" Be Homer's works your study and delight,  
Read them by day and meditate by night."

This is undoubtedly what Pope has done himself, since he has written a translation of Homer's works. Virgil, he says, imitated Homer because he found Homer and nature the same.

" Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem,  
To copy Nature is to copy them."

This is giving very high praise to the ancients. It is, however, nothing less than we can expect from Pope, since he and the writers of his time are especially noted for their imitation of the ancient