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John Sheffield’s *Essay upon Poetry*: The Use of Literature for Educational Purposes in the Long Eighteenth Century

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“Lit. MS E41”. As a number of articles in the present volume illustrate, over the past decade or so

this manuscript from the Canterbury Cathedral archive has played an important role in the scholarly career of Anthony W. Johnson. More often referred to as simply the “Orationes”, the “Lit. MS E41” was compiled by George Lovejoy while serving as headmaster of King’s School, Canterbury (1665–84). It consists of speeches and plays performed and (in many cases also) written by the students who attended the school during Lovejoy’s tenure.¹ The “Orationes” is an excellent example of how central literature was to pedagogical ideas in general during the early modern period, and the work carried out on the manuscript by Johnson and his colleagues demonstrates the variety of purposes literature could be made to serve in an educational context and what a pivotal role it played in the upbringing of (especially) boys.² The present study looks to explore the connection between learning and literature during largely the same period, but it will shift the arena from the grammar school to what we might broadly term the public realm. It will mainly be concerned with the education of adults.

More specifically, I will look at a particular type of poetry which flourished in much of Europe during the long eighteenth century, namely so-called didactic poetry.³ I wish to focus on one such poem, first published in the early 1680s: the *Essay upon Poetry* by John Sheffield, then 3rd Earl of Mulgrave.⁴ Being mainly concerned with the act of writing poetry, the poem belongs to what is essentially a sub-species, or sub-genre, of didactic poetry and falls squarely within a

¹ The manuscript comprises about five hundred folio leaves (c.200,000 words). The speeches and plays were staged in connection with four main annual festivities: right before Lent, 29 May (commemorating the birthday and restoration of Charles II), 5 November (commemorating the Gunpowder Plot), and before Christmas.

² E.g. Aleksi Mäkilähde, Tommi Alho and Anthony W. Johnson, “Performative Grammars: Genre and Allusion in a Restoration Manuscript,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 117, no. 2 (2016); Anthony W. Johnson, “Contingencies of Time and Place: A Contention for Honour and Riches, James Shirley, and the School Community,” in *Community-Making in Early Stuart Theatres: Stage and Audience*, eds. Roger D. Sell, Anthony W. Johnson and Helen Wilcox (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

³ In this article, the term “the long eighteenth century” is used in a broad sense to refer to the period stretching from roughly the time of the publication of the *Essay upon Poetry* till the end of the eighteenth century. This is done partly for convenience, but also because the general perspective on didactic poetry changed very little during this period.

⁴ Henceforth referred to simply as the *Essay*.

specific poetic tradition which stretched back to Horace's *Ars Poetica* (c.18-19 BCE) through, for example, Nicolas Boileau's *L'Art poétique* (1674) and Marco Girolamo Vida's *De arte poetica* (1527).

In the four or five decades after its first publication, Sheffield's *Essay* was much in vogue, appearing in several editions and earning the admiration of many of the period's most influential poets. This popularity has not been matched in modern times when, in general, critics have refrained from giving the *Essay* the sort of detailed critical treatment it warrants as a poem which, historically, was a significant contribution to the genre. In my effort to counter this critical neglect, I shall be stressing the importance of examining its educational function. At the heart of didactic poetry lies a wish to instruct a segment of the reading public on a given topic (for example poetic composition), and we therefore need to develop an understanding of how Sheffield attempted to do this. In other words, the present article looks to answer some basic yet fundamental questions. How did Sheffield envision the teaching situation? How did he address his audiences? And what precisely was it he wanted them to learn?

Having considered these questions, I shall finally turn to Sheffield's handling of one particularly acute pedagogical problem associated with didactic poetry: how not to offend or otherwise put off the people he meant to educate. In doing so, I will also consider the contrast between the status of didactic poetry today and in the long eighteenth century. Before we get that far, however, it seems pertinent to make a few points relating to the status and popularity of both didactic poetry in general and Sheffield's *Essay* in particular during the long eighteenth century.

“There Is Indeed Nothing in Poetry, so Entertaining”: Didactic Poetry in the Long

Eighteenth Century

In one study of the “Orationes”, Alekski Mäkilähde, Tommi Alho and Anthony W. Johnson argue that the staging of the plays and speeches included in the manuscript served as opportunities for the students of King’s School to perform, or display, their grammatical skills to a select audience.⁵ They further demonstrate that such pedagogical methods had their roots in classical antiquity, where this close connection between the study of grammar and literature was similarly pervasive:

[...] the *ars grammatica* taught at the higher levels was not simply grammar in the modern sense of syntax and morphology: rather, for the ancient world the term connoted a broader study of literature which included the ancillary disciplines relevant to (or language used in) what is often nowadays regarded as the literary domain.⁶

As Johnson and his colleagues indicate, such an amalgamation of literary and grammatical studies shows how, both in antiquity and during the early modern period, literature was often used in situations, and for purposes, that might well surprise some present-day readers. Another good example of this is didactic poetry.

The word “didactic” derives from the Greek verb *didaskhein*, meaning simply “to teach”, and a common denominator for didactic poetry was a wish to instruct readers on a given topic.⁷

However odd this might sound to our ears today, the aim was entirely genuine. As J. Paul Hunter

⁵ Johnson notes elsewhere that the audience would probably have consisted of church dignitaries, local gentry, parents and guardians (“Contingencies,” 382).

⁶ Mäkilähde, Alho and Johnson, “Performative Grammars,” 318.

⁷ Monica Gale, “Didactic Epic,” in *A Companion to Latin Literature*, ed. Stephen Harrison (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 101.

shows, in the long eighteenth century poets wrote such poems out “of a deep sense of commitment to public issues and social and moral choice” and they had “deeply committed and reformist aims of turning public sentiment persuasively in a particular direction”.⁸ To put it differently, poetry was considered a useful and effective medium for educating, not only grammar-school boys, but also the reading public at large.

In his influential *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783), the Scottish minister Hugh Blair said that “[t]here is indeed nothing in Poetry, so entertaining or descriptive, but what a Didactic Writer of genius may be allowed to introduce in some part of his work”.⁹ Blair was not alone in his admiration of didactic poetry and, in a sense, he simply gave voice to what had been the prevailing attitude towards the genre for at least the preceding two hundred years. Generally, didactic poetry was held in very high esteem throughout that period, an appreciation well exemplified by the great variety of didactic poems written, circulated, and published. Blair argued that “[t]he highest species” of didactic poetry was “a regular treatise on some philosophical, grave, or useful subject”, but his wording implies that such lofty poems were only the tip of the iceberg.¹⁰ And as for treatises on poetry from this period, their authors tended to concur with the Oxford scholar Joseph Trapp, who in his *Lectures on Poetry* (1711–19, 1742) argued that the corpus of didactic poetry could be divided into four large sub-genres: “those that relate to moral Duties; or philosophical Speculations; or the Business or Pleasures of Life; or, lastly, to Poetry itself”.¹¹

⁸ J. Paul Hunter, “Political, Satirical, Didactic and Lyric Poetry (I): From the Restoration to the Death of Pope,” in *The Cambridge History of English Literature, 1660–1780*, ed. John Richetti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 187, [dx.doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521781442](https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521781442).

⁹ Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (London, 1783), 365, Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

¹⁰ Blair, *Lectures*, 362.

¹¹ Joseph Trapp, *Lectures on Poetry* (London, 1742), 188–89, Project Gutenberg. Trapp’s treatise was first published in Latin under the title *Praelectiones poeticae* (1711–19); it was translated into English in 1742 (Richard Sharp, “Trapp, Joseph (1679–1747),” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004), doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/27666). Similar delineations can be found in Joseph Wharton’s “Reflections on Didactic Poetry” (in *The Works of Virgil, in Latin and English* (London, 1753), Vol. 1, 395, Eighteenth Century Collections

Although such literary treatises drew heavily on examples from classical poetry (with Virgil's *Georgics* as the ubiquitous model), the broadness of their categories still reflected the contemporary diversity of didactic poems as well as the sheer bulk of material. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poets were keen to write didactic poems, and they produced them on a wide range of subject matters, from walking and brewing to religion, philosophy and, of course, poetry.

“A Master-piece in Its Kind”: John Sheffield's *Essay upon Poetry*

In his *Lectures on Poetry* Trapp also stated that “[p]oetry seems never to have employ'd her Time better, than upon herself”.¹² This reverence for “arts of poetry” (as such poems were often called) was something Trapp shared with Blair. On Blair's list of eight didactic poems considered especially noteworthy, he included four concerned with poetry itself: Horace's *Ars Poetica*, Vida's *De arte poetica*, Boileau's *L'Art poétique*, and Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* (1711).¹³ Trapp, for his part, highlighted Horace, Boileau, and Pope, too, but ignored Vida, while adding *An Essay on Translated Verse* (1684) by Wentworth Dillon, 4th Earl of Roscommon.¹⁴ But for reasons on which I shall later speculate, neither Trapp nor Blair mentions one particularly popular poem from this didactic sub-genre: the poem at the centre of this study, Sheffield's *Essay*.

The *Essay* circulated in manuscript in 1680, but was first printed in 1682.¹⁵ It was re-published several times during Sheffield's lifetime and was also included in the posthumous

Online.) and the anonymously published *The Art of Poetry on a New Plan* (London, 1762, 158, Eighteenth Century Collections Online.).

¹² Trapp, *Lectures*, 200.

¹³ Blair, *Lectures*, 362.

¹⁴ Trapp, *Lectures*, 200.

¹⁵ Greg Clingham, “Roscommon's ‘Academy,’ Chetwood's Manuscript ‘Life of Roscommon,’ and Dryden's Translation Project,” *Restoration* 26, 1 (Spring 2002): 18.

collection of his work edited by Pope.¹⁶ Even if neither Trapp nor Blair found it worthy of inclusion in their lectures, the number of editions in which the *Essay* appeared would seem to suggest that it did enjoy a certain amount of contemporary popularity. This is largely supported by the tributes paid to the poem by important literary figures of the time. Joseph Addison in *The Spectator* grouped it with Pope's *Essay on Criticism* and Dillon's *Essay on Translated Verse* as one of "three Poems in our Tongue, which are of the same Nature, and each of them a Master-piece in its kind" and, on separate occasions, Dryden, Pope and Dillon all paid their respects to it.¹⁷ Furthermore, in 1691 the poem was translated into Latin, and later in the eighteenth century two French translations came out.¹⁸ As Mark Van Doren has said, throughout the eighteenth century, many readers would continue to refer to the *Essay* for standards of "decency and urbanity".¹⁹

That said, not everyone rated the poem as highly, and towards the middle of the eighteenth century, in particular, its popularity seems to have gradually declined. The reason why Trapp and

¹⁶ The main text used for this article comes from J. E. Spingarn's *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957, Vol. 2, 286–96). This is a transcription of a copy held in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, of the 1682 edition. Further editions came out in 1691, 1697 and 1709 before the posthumous edition of 1723. Samuel Johnson said of the *Essay* that, "[u]pon this piece he [Sheffield] appears to have set a high value; for he was all his life improving it by successive revisals, so that there is scarcely any poem to be found of which the last edition differs more from the first" (*Lives of the English Poets*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905 [1783]), Vol.2, 175). This is an exaggeration. A cursory collation of the different versions published during Sheffield's life time show that, overall, the poem was not subject to major revisions. Changes were made, but most of these were restricted to single words and phrases and made between the first printed version of the poem and the second. The posthumous edition, however, introduced several significant changes, but it is not clear who was responsible, Sheffield or Pope. Joseph Spence reported that "Mr. Pope altered some verses in the [...] *Essay on Poetry*", but he is no more specific than that (*Observations, Anecdotes and Characters of Books and Men*, ed. James M. Osborn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), Vol.1, 36). We know that earlier (1717?), Sheffield had given Pope permission to correct some of his other poems (Alexander Pope, *The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, ed. George Sherburn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 386), but what precisely the nature of their collaboration was on the posthumous edition of the *Essay* is difficult to tell. Because of this uncertainty, and because we know Pope could be heavy-handed in his editing, I have chosen to exclude the 1723 edition from this discussion. When relevant, my discussion will refer to some of the changes made between the editions of 1682 and 1691.

¹⁷ This number of the *The Spectator* (no. 253) is dated 20 December 1711 (Donald F. Bond, ed., *The Spectator* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), Vol. 2, 486). Sheffield's *Essay* is commemorated in both Dillon's *An Essay on Translated Verse* and Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*. Dryden, for his part, lauded the *Essay* in the preface to *Sylvæ* (1685) and in the dedication to his translation of the *Aeneid* (1691). Other contemporary appraisals can be found in, for instance, Charles Gildon's *The Laws of Poetry* (1721) and Giles Jacob's *Poetical Register* (1719–20).

¹⁸ Spingarn, *Critical Essays*, Vol. 2, 354. The Latin translation was done by one John Morris and it was published alongside the *Essay* in both 1691 and 1697. The French translations came out in 1764 and 1775.

¹⁹ Mark Van Doren, *John Dryden. A Study of His Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1960), 92.

Blair omitted the *Essay* from their treatises could be that they shared Samuel Johnson and Joseph Wharton's reservations about the work's quality. Johnson and Wharton both suggested that much of the hype surrounding the poem was not the result of poetical merit, but of awe occasioned by Sheffield's social status at a time when criticism was not sufficiently developed to side-step such influence.²⁰ Sheffield was a fairly prolific writer and an active man of letters, and associated with some of the most important poets of his time. But having been born as heir to the earldom of Mulgrave, he was also an aristocrat, and used his wealth as a patron of artists and writers, not least Dryden, with whom he combined "the roles of patron and collaborator".²¹ In other words, Johnson and Wharton thought that Sheffield's role as an aristocrat and patron influenced public opinion in his *Essay*'s favour, at a time when the critical climate was less liberated than half a century later. To what extent this is true is hard to determine, but such pejorative assessments seem to have set the standards for future comments. Over the past century, scholars have rarely taken more than a cursory interest in either Sheffield or his work. He tends to be treated briefly in discussions of Dryden and Pope, but one of the most comprehensive accounts of his life is still Samuel Johnson's "Life of Sheffield" (1783).²² Likewise, detailed studies of his oeuvre are few and far between. Exceptions are John Burrows's recent examination of Dryden's involvement in the writing of Sheffield's "Essay on Satire" (1679) and John Harold Wilson's somewhat dated and quite judgemental reading of the *Essay upon Poetry*.²³ In the present study I am hoping, as I say, to

²⁰ Johnson, *Lives*, Vol. 2, 174–75; Wharton, "Reflections," 428. Horace Walpole was not impressed by Sheffield's work either and claimed the reason for his popularity was that his wife "was always purchasing places for him, herself, and their son in every suburb of the temple of Fame" (*The Works of Horatio Walpole, Earl of Orford* (London, 1798), Vol. 1, 435, Eighteenth Century Collections Online.).

²¹ Margaret D. Sankey, "Sheffield, John, First Duke of Buckingham and Normanby (1647–1721)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004), doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/25297. In 1694, Sheffield received the title of Marquis of Normanby and, in 1703, he became 1st Duke of Buckingham and Normanby.

²² Johnson, *Lives*, Vol. 2., 167–79. The most comprehensive modern biography of Sheffield's life is Sankey's relatively brief entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

²³ John Burrows, "Mulgrave, Dryden, and 'An Essay Upon Satire'," *Script & Print: Bulletin of the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand* 33, 1–4 (2009): 76–91; John Harold Wilson, *The Court Wits of the Restoration*.

counter this critical neglect and, in the process, to suggest that the *Essay* is a poem which merits closer critical attention.

“T’Inform the Ignorant, and Warn the Bold”: The *Essay* and Its Audiences

Turning now more directly to the *Essay*’s educational dimension, how, exactly, was the reading public at large to be educated through the medium of poetry? I think the question is best approached by considering how Sheffield envisioned the teaching situation and the relationship between himself and his readers.

Given the central instructional aim of didactic poetry, it is not surprising that the genre also has a distinctive kind of addressivity, often clearly accentuating the roles of both addresser and addressee. As Peter Toohey puts it,

[t]hat there must be a single and recognizable instructor’s voice is a crucial point. It is this simple aspect which distinguishes didactic from, say, symposiastic literature (such as Plato’s symposium) which habitually engages several voices. That there is an addressee is just as important. This addressee can be specific or general [...]. Although the specific addressee may be dropped, many didactic poems have one. Usually they will then oscillate in their instructive apostrophe between the specific and the general addressee.²⁴

An Introduction (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 190–94. Wilson’s overall treatment of Sheffield is similarly disparaging.

²⁴ Peter Toohey, *Epic Lessons. An Introduction to Ancient Didactic Poetry* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 2.

Monica Gale is more succinct, describing didactic poetry as often positing a “triangular relationship” between an instructor, a specific addressee and a more general readership.²⁵ In this sense, didactic poems can be said to have something in common with eighteenth-century verse epistles which, as William C. Dowling has argued, are characterised by a kind of “double register”, or “double address”, speaking simultaneously to a named individual as well as a wider audience.²⁶ The question of the instructor’s voice and relationship to the topic at large will be discussed in detail later. Here it will suffice to say that the *Essay* has a distinct instructor’s voice that delivers the rules of poetry with confidence, conviction and without irony or any other feature which might undermine the truthfulness and validity of the precepts presented. When it comes to audience, the *Essay* falls within that group of didactic poems which, as Toohey says, drops the specific addressee. Sheffield does mention a number of individual poets and dramatists by name, but none of them constitute a specific addressee in the same sense as, say, the Pisos in Horace’s *Ars Poetica* or Augustus in Virgil’s *Georgics*. Most of the people mentioned were in fact dead by the 1680s. The exceptions are Dryden and Edmund Waller but, like the rest, these two appear as examples of writers of a particular type of poetry.²⁷

Sheffield’s reason for not including a specific addressee might well be explained by his social and cultural status: as an aristocrat and influential patron he had no immediate social or financial incentive to dedicate his poem to a particular individual. But his decision here could also have had something to do with his perception of the topic. As Martin Priestman rightly says, for a didactic poet the inclusion of a specific addressee can have certain pragmatic advantages: it

²⁵ Gale, “Didactic Epic,” 102.

²⁶ William C. Dowling, *The Epistolary Moment. The Poetics of the Eighteenth-Century Verse Epistle* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 12, 31–32.

²⁷ John Sheffield, *An Essay upon Poetry*, in *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. J.E. Spingarn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), Vol. 2, 290, ll. 25–30 and 289, l. 22. When referring to the *Essay*, I give the page number(s) and line number(s) from Spingarn’s *Critical Essays*.

“enables its user to move rapidly past the basics within an educated group to the pith of the argument, avoiding the hectoring note of a lecture to an implied audience of unknowns who may need instructing from the ground up”.²⁸ In other words, Sheffield’s choice to omit a specific addressee could imply that he rated broad public significance higher than concision and intimacy. This seems to be confirmed in the opening lines of the *Essay*, which make sure that readers understand the topic’s general public interest:

OF Things in which Mankind does most excel,
Nature’s chief Master-piece is writing well;
And of all sorts of Writing none there are
That can the least with *Poetry* compare;
No kind of work requires so nice a touch,
And if well done, there’s nothing shines so much;²⁹

The address here is broad in the extreme. Poetry is not merely significant for a segment of society, or a specific social or cultural grouping. Among all mankind’s endeavours, writing is the most important; and, among all the different types of writing, poetry has the highest potential but is also the most challenging. The laws of poetry are relevant for everybody so that when Sheffield concludes by calling for an epic poem to match those of Homer and Virgil, the lack of such a poem is naturally a concern for all men: “But what, alas, avails it poor *Mankind* / To see this promised Land [Homer and Virgil], yet stay behind?”.³⁰ On the other hand, however, a closer reading of the

²⁸ Martin Priestman, “Didactic and Scientific Poetry,” in *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature*, ed. David Hopkins and Charles Martindale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 413.

²⁹ Sheffield, *Essay*, 286, ll. 1–6.

³⁰ Sheffield, *Essay*, 296, ll. 8–9, *my italics*.

poem will reveal that, despite such claims to universal significance, Sheffield's address is less inclusive than it might initially appear.

The *Essay* does not comprise the kind of triangular (or double) address described by Toohey and Gale, or at least not in that specific sense. It may lack a specific addressee, and it does seem to address the broadest possible audience. Yet it also does speak to different reader groups simultaneously. Immediately before Sheffield tackles the first type of poem he plans to deal with, the song, he narrows the scope: "'Tis Wit and Sence that is the Subject here. / Defects of witty Men deserve a Cure, / And those who are so will the worst endure".³¹ The poem sets out to correct the faults of a certain group of people, "witty Men". Who these are meant to be is less clear, however. One might be inclined to think the expression had particular reference to the coterie of learned literary men who had gathered around Charles II in the first decades after the Restoration. Certainly the most famous of these so-called "court wits", John Wilmot, the 2nd Earl of Rochester, is soon criticised for his "[b]awdry barefac'd" songs, which only "pall'd the appetite [i.e. the erotic] he meant to raise".³² Yet as the *Essay* also makes clear, Rochester was already dead by the time it began circulating in manuscript, which placed him quite beyond "Cure" for his particular "defects".³³ As for the other court wits, to whose circle Sheffield himself is sometimes said to have belonged, none of them is mentioned by name.³⁴ And in point of fact, prior to the mention of "witty Men" Sheffield has already stressed that, even though "Folly abounds, nay, flourishes at Court", "*White-Hall* has nothing to fear" from his poem.³⁵

³¹ Sheffield, *Essay*, 288, ll. 2–4.

³² Sheffield, *Essay*, 288, ll.23, 31. It should be noted that Sheffield and Wilmot were not on good terms and the passage may be clouded by personal animosity.

³³ Sheffield, *Essay*, 288, ll.24–25.

³⁴ Wilson, *Court Wits*.

³⁵ Sheffield, *Essay*, 287, l. 33; 288, l. 1. In 1691, the lines were changed to: "Fertile our Soil, and full of rankest Weeds, / And Monsters, worse than ever Nilus, breeds. / But hold, the *Fools* shall have no cause to fear, / 'Tis *Wit* and *Sense* that is the Subject here" (John Sheffield, *An Essay on Poetry* (London, 1691), 7, Early English Books Online.) By then, however, the idea of the Court Wit seems to have become a thing of the past.

Rather than pointing to a very specific group of famous privileged gentlemen, then, “witty Men” should be understood in a more general, abstract sense. A potent word at the time, “wit” often denoted the “powers of the mind”, “the mental faculties”, “the intellect”, with the added meaning of being related to the “imagination” and a “quickness of fancy”.³⁶ That said, it could also refer to a person in possession of the aforementioned qualities; a “man of fancy” or a “man of genius”.³⁷ In the *Essay*, Sheffield speaks of wit mainly as an intellectual capacity that is reflected in the very best of poetry but, importantly, also as a resource that has its limitations and therefore must be used in the right manner.³⁸ In this light, it would seem that “witty Men” simply refers to people who attempt to use their wit in order to write poetry, a group of people Sheffield obviously did not consider infallible.

Later, he defines this segment of his audience in more detail. In preparing to deal with the theatre, he says that this particular topic “will Malice, and may Envy bring; / Yet why should Truth offend, when only told / T’inform the Ignorant, and warn the Bold?”.³⁹ In 1691, Sheffield changed “inform” to the more ameliorative “guide”, but, either way, the passage further delineates that group of “witty Men”: it consists of people who are “Ignorant” and “Bold”.⁴⁰

To understand this part of Sheffield’s address more precisely, it is useful to look at *The Art of Poetry on a New Plan*, an anonymously published treatise of 1762. This stressed that, in general, didactic poetry was intended for two kinds of readers who were both considered unreceptive to other modes of teaching. First, it was aimed at those who “are fond of appearing wiser than they are, and though they wish for knowledge are unwilling to confess the want of it, or to seek after

³⁶ Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1755), s.v. “wit”, Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Sheffield, *Essay*, 286, ll. 12, 24; 288, l. 2; 289, l. 2; 292, l. 11; 293, l. 234; 294, ll. 6, 8. In addition, Sheffield also states that “wit” is a good topic for elegies (288, l. 34).

³⁹ Sheffield, *Essay*, 291, ll. 12–14.

⁴⁰ Sheffield, *Essay*, 1691, 17.

science for fear of being thought ignorant”; a group which the anonymous author felt comprised “most of the human race”.⁴¹ Secondly, didactic poetry was also meant for those (often young people) “who [...] fly from knowledge only because the roads to it are rugged, and the approaches difficult to access”.⁴² In using the word “Ignorant”, Sheffield would seem to have been thinking along similar lines: among the group of “witty Men” you would find people who, for one reason or another, were not familiar with the laws of poetry. His task was to inform such readers of those laws – to drag them out of their ignorance, even if they felt embarrassed or disinclined to careful study.

Sheffield would seem to differentiate between these “Ignorant” readers and those he describes as “Bold”. It is my impression, however, that he is simply talking about different character traits which can easily be found in one and the same person. A little after this delineation, he writes: “But to write Plays? Why, ’tis a *bold* pretence / To Language, Breeding, Fancy, and good Sense”.⁴³ Poets must understand and respect the nature of the task at hand: to write poetry is a “daring”, “brave” and “courageous” activity that entails a very real risk of being judged “impudent” and “rude”.⁴⁴ The implication, of course, is that the way to avoid these more negative verdicts is to avoid being “ignorant”, and that to avoid being “ignorant” is to know the laws of poetry.

However useful, it is clear that the description of the didactic poem’s audiences in the anonymous *Art of Poetry on a New Plan* is not comprehensive. Most importantly, and as pointed out by Toohey and Gale, didactic poems will often have a specific addressee and, usually, this person does not fall under any of the audience categories discussed so far. In fact, there will often

⁴¹ *The Art of Poetry*, 156.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Sheffield, *Essay*, 292, ll. 13-14, *my italics*.

⁴⁴ Johnson, *Dictionary*, s.v. “bold”.

be a strong qualitative difference between a poem's specific addressee and its more general audiences. The *Essay* might not be addressed to anyone in particular, but it does implicitly suggest that there is a group of "witty Men" out there who are less in need of instruction, a group for whom the poem would mainly be a confirmation of the rules and standards they already valued and practiced. The relationship between this group and those in need of instruction is an important one, but before it can be explored in more detail I must point out some limitations to Sheffield's address.

First, it is clear that, almost by default, the poem leaves out the relatively large part of the English population which, at the time, would not have been able to read or write. Unlike some other subjects of didactic poetry (for instance, brewing and walking), the *Essay* deals with a topic which is relevant only for people who have reached a relatively high level of literacy.

Secondly, Sheffield's perspective is an entirely masculine one, and a closer reading of the poem shows that words such as "Mankind" and "witty Men" should be understood quite literally. From the beginning, the poem seems fairly gender-neutral, holding open the possibility that it is just as relevant for women as it is for men. But in the section on the elegy, which comes fairly early, the act of writing poetry (specifically elegies) is dominated by a distinctly male view.⁴⁵ Here Sheffield objects to the frequent misuse of the elegaic genre as a medium for despairing lovers rather than for praising beauty, valour and wit. Conceding that women ("That Phoenix-she") do deserve their place in the elegy, he also says that women are often the favoured topic of "such Fops as vex Mankind". He actually admits that he himself has had to struggle to stay on course: "But here, as I too oft, alas, have tried, / Women have drawn my wandering thoughts aside". And in 1691, he gave this passage a less personal and more generally masculine outlook when the first line was changed to "But here, as *all our Sex* too oft have try'd",⁴⁶ so suggesting that female

⁴⁵ Sheffield, *Essay*, 288, ll. 32–34; 289, ll. 1–22.

⁴⁶ Sheffield, *Essay*, 1691, 11, *my italics*.

perspectives are of little interest in a serious discussion of poetry.

In short, the *Essay* is constructed around an address to a group of educated “witty Men”. Women have only a peripheral role to play here, but the group of men is understood to be divided into two sub-groups, those who already know, value and follow the laws of poetry and those who do not because they are unfamiliar with those laws. To understand this division better, it is necessary to consider precisely what Sheffield wanted his “Ignorant” (and “Bold”) readers to learn.

“But Who That Task Can after *Horace* Do?” The Laws of Poetry and What Readers Were Meant to Learn from the *Essay*

What, precisely, were those “Ignorant” (and “Bold”) readers meant to learn from the *Essay*? Basically, they were meant to learn what those “witty Men” who were not “Ignorant” already knew and valued. But what was that? This is not as straightforward a question as one might suppose. For a text that is primarily meant to teach readers how to write poetry, the *Essay* can come across as surprisingly vague. Take, for instance, the advice relating to odes (here quoted in its entirety):

A higher flight, and of a happier force,
Are *Odes*, the Muses most unruly Horse,
That bounds so fierce the Rider has no rest,
But foams at mouth, and speaks like one possest
The Poet here must be indeed Inspired,
And not with fancy, but with fury fired.
Cowley might boast to have perform'd this part,

Had he with Nature joyn'd the rules of Art;
But ill expression gives too great Alley
To that rich Fancy which can ne're decay.
Though all appears in heat and fury done,
The Language still must soft and easy run
These Laws may seem a little too severe,
But Judgment yields, and Fancy governs there,
Which, though extravagant, this Muse allows,
And makes the work much easier than it shews.⁴⁷

The passage begins by stating that odes “fly higher” and are “happier” than elegies, which have been dealt with in the previous section. It then proceeds to claim that the genre is characterised by a certain wildness (“the Muses most unruly Horse”) and that, in composing such poems, the writer must be “Inspired” and filled with “fury” rather than “fancy”. The odes of the seventeenth-century poet Abraham Cowley are then criticised for being governed too much by fancy and not displaying the kind of “soft and easy” language the ode really requires. The section concludes with a reassuring note: these precepts might seem difficult, but there is plenty of leeway in a genre which, basically, is not as difficult to master as it may seem. In terms of practical applicability, this is not entirely satisfactory. If it is to be useful to a would-be poet, the passage seems to require an implicit understanding (or deciphering of) several words and phrases.

Some parts of the *Essay* are a little more specific. As already mentioned, in the passage on elegies Sheffield provides thematic advice, urging poets to write less about women than beauty,

⁴⁷ Sheffield, *Essay*, 289, ll. 23–34; 290, ll. 1–4.

valour and wit.⁴⁸ Likewise, in the passages on drama, he recommends that the Aristotelian unities of action, time and place be followed; that soliloquies be kept short and impassioned in tone; and that characters should not be too perfect or faultless.⁴⁹ In general, however, the passage on odes reflects the manner in which advice is delivered, so that we can say (with Priestman in mind) that, although Sheffield seems to aspire to broad public significance, he does not sacrifice concision at its altar.

To understand this, we need to bear in mind that didactic poetry was not meant to be exhaustive. Wharton noted that poets should only pick such precepts

[...] as will bear to be delivered gracefully; and to be enliven'd with poetical imagery. It is not required or expected of a poet, to enter into a minute detail of dry precepts, but to single out those precepts, that will entertain as well as instruct his reader.⁵⁰

The anonymous *Art of Poetry on a New Plan* added that, even then, it was not imperative that the rules be discussed in depth: the poet “discloses just enough to lead the imagination into the parts that are concealed, and the mind, ever gratified with its own discoveries, is complimented when exploring and finding them out”.⁵¹ The point of didactic poetry was not to present readers with all they needed to know about the topic. Rather, it was meant to entertain them while, at the same time, encouraging further study.

Sheffield wrote the *Essay* with both these aims in view. Leaving aside the entertainment aspect for now, his attempts to entice readers to study more on their own is at its most palpable in

⁴⁸ Sheffield, *Essay*, 288, ll. 32–34, 289, ll. 1–22.

⁴⁹ Sheffield, *Essay*, 291, ll. 17–18; 291, ll. 23–30; 293, ll. 4–8.

⁵⁰ Wharton, “Reflections,” 395–96.

⁵¹ *The Art of Poetry*, 157.

his discussion of the dramatic dialogue:

All this together yet is but a part
Of Dialogue, that great and powerful Art,
Now almost lost, which the old *Grecians* knew,
From whence the *Romans* fainter Copies drew,
Scarce comprehended since by but a few.
Plato and *Lucian* are the best Remains
Of all the wonder which this art contains;
Yet to our selves we Justice must allow,
Shakespear and *Fletcher* are the wonders now:
Consider them, and read them o're and o're,
Go see them play'd, then read them as before.
For though in many things they grosly fail,
Over our Passions still they so prevail,
That our own grief by theirs is rockt asleep,
The dull are forc'd to feel, the wise to weep.
Their Beauties Imitate, avoid their faults;⁵²

In the English dramatic tradition, the best dialogues are found in the plays of Shakespeare and John Fletcher and prospective dramatists must draw lessons from their work. These Renaissance writers must be read again and again, after which they must be seen performed before being read again.

⁵² Sheffield, *Essay*, 292, ll. 19–34.

Finally, they should be imitated with sensitivity towards their qualities as well as their flaws. In short, to write and appreciate good dramatic dialogue requires a deep and intimate knowledge of Shakespeare's and Fletcher's oeuvres.

Sheffield uses the model of the individual poet (or work) consistently throughout the *Essay*. While in places he does present readers with more tangible advice, his main technique is to direct them towards writers and works which exemplify his points. The examples of Shakespeare and Fletcher show how he draws on both positive and negative models; such that should be emulated, and such that should be taken as something of a warning sign for prospective poets. There are aspects of Shakespeare's and Fletcher's work which are admirable, but others that are less so. Likewise, Cowley's odes might serve to show how not to write such poems, but that does not keep Sheffield from using this poet's work in general when he wants to illustrate how monumental an effort it would be to compose a modern epic to match those of Homer and Virgil.⁵³ The portrayal of Rochester, mentioned earlier, is entirely negative, but generally Sheffield prefers to use positive models, or at least to highlight a given writer's admirable qualities: Waller is praised for his *Panegyric to My Lord Protector* (1655), John Denham for *Cooper's Hill* (1642), Dryden for *Mac Flecknoe* (1682), Fletcher and Francis Beaumont for their soliloquies, Shakespeare for Falstaff, Ben Jonson for his plays in general, René Le Bossu for his *Traité du Poëme épique* (1675), and Milton, Spenser and Tasso for their contributions to the epic.⁵⁴

I have so far refrained from considering Sheffield's view on writers from classical antiquity, but, as the passage on dramatic dialogue shows, they are neither absent from, nor irrelevant to, a reading of the *Essay*. Even though Sheffield draws most of his examples from a recent English

⁵³ Sheffield, *Essay*, 296, ll. 18.

⁵⁴ Sheffield, *Essay*, 289, l. 22; 290, ll. 25–26; 291, l. 30; 293, l. 32; 295, l. 5; 296, ll. 1–5; 296, ll. 18–19. Le Bossu's *Traité* was not a poem, but Sheffield praises the work for its insights into epic poetry.

canon, he makes sure to highlight significant contributions from classical literature, which are often placed at the heart of his literary pantheon. In the passage on dramatic dialogues, for example, the work of Plato and Lucian is considered the most admirable of all, despite the good efforts of Shakespeare and Fletcher. Homer and Virgil have written the greatest epics, and the challenge for modern poetry is to compose something to match their achievements.⁵⁵ Similarly, Sheffield is keen to emphasise the relationship between his own *Essay* and Horace's *Ars Poetica*.

During the long eighteenth century, it was commonplace to highlight the supremacy of the *Ars Poetica*. In the anonymous *Art of Poetry on a New Plan*, for example, Horace's epistle is described as "so perfect it seems almost to have precluded the necessity of any other", a perception also expressed by Sheffield in the *Essay*:

Here I should all the differing kinds rehearse
Of *Poetry* with various sorts of Verse;
But who that task can after *Horace* do,
That mighty Master and Example too?
Ecchoes at best, all we can say is vain,
Dull the design, and fruitless were the pain.⁵⁶

This might seem to make the *Essay* superfluous, but Sheffield stresses that his poem is no mere copy of Horace but meant to work as a kind of modern addendum: "modern Laws are made for later Faults, / And new Absurdities inspire new thoughts".⁵⁷ For obvious reasons, the *Ars Poetica*

⁵⁵ Sheffield, *Essay*, 296, ll. 16–19.

⁵⁶ *The Art of Poetry*, 196; Sheffield, *Essay*, 287, ll. 19–24.

⁵⁷ Sheffield, *Essay*, 287, ll. 29–30.

was not geared to deal with the wealth of contemporary faults and misconceptions, and the *Essay* had been written and published to fill a gap created by the passage of time. At the same time, the body of poetic precepts included in the *Essay* were not merely Sheffield's own, but also included or presupposed those present in the *Ars Poetica*, which, as was well known in the long eighteenth century, was itself an adaptation of the rules found in Aristotle's *Poetics* for a Roman context.⁵⁸ Prospective poets should not expect to find all they needed to know in the *Essay*. As a bare minimum, they should also consult the *Ars Poetica*.

More than aiming to teach certain "witty Men" a set of hard and fast rules regarding, for instance, the technical aspects of poetic composition, Sheffield looked to tell poets something about *how* to learn and improve their skills. The most tangible way he does this is by directing readers towards certain poets and writers whose work he considered in one way or another exemplary. One learns to write good poetry by studying the work of specific poets; reading them again and again and, thereby, learning from their mistakes as well as their achievements. By adopting this method, however, Sheffield also implicitly advanced a particular view of literary history, which included clear qualitative distinctions.

I noted earlier, that even though the *Essay* lacks a specific addressee, it does posit a distinction between those "witty Men" needing instruction because they are "Ignorant" (and "Bold") and those who do not because they already value and practice the rules advocated by Sheffield. Having outlined more precisely what he meant to teach, it is now possible to discuss in more detail what sort of audiences he had in mind when writing the *Essay*.

A few years after Sheffield published the *Essay*, one of the most famous literary debates of the period erupted with the publication of Sir William Temple's *Essay upon Ancient and Modern*

⁵⁸ Wharton, "Reflections," 424.

Learning (1690) and William Wotton's *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1694). As Joseph M. Levine has so excellently shown, the dispute between Temple and Wotton was in many ways just one particularly heated episode in a controversy which would continue into the eighteenth century, but which, in various permutations, also had roots stretching back into the Renaissance and even classical antiquity.⁵⁹ Within this dichotomy, it would appear that Sheffield stands with Temple and the ancients rather than Wotton and the moderns. He presents the *Essay* as an extension of the work carried out by Horace in the *Ars Poetica*, and modern dramatic dialogues as inferior to those of Plato and Lucian. Moreover, although Sheffield's concluding call for a modern epic to match those of Homer and Virgil is provocatively framed, it reads more as a declaration of the impossibility of the task than an expression of genuine belief in the possible emergence of such a poem.

Additionally, several passages in the *Essay* are close imitations of Boileau's *L'Art poétique*, a writer who was on the side of the ancients in the equivalent French dispute, and one from whom Temple drew support in his appraisal of classical literature.⁶⁰ Howard D. Weinbrot has discussed the English reception of *L'Art poétique* at length, arguing that poets such as William Soames, Dryden, and Pope found the politics of Boileau's poem to be disturbing (in particular, the reverence of an absolute monarch), but that, at the same time, they admired his classicism.⁶¹ Weinbrot stresses that Boileau represented a view of the present and the recent past to which writers who admired the ancients (like Soames, Dryden and Pope) could easily relate. Although France was a prosperous country, Boileau wrote *L'Art poétique* with the sense that his nation's future was hanging in the

⁵⁹ Joseph M. Levine, "Ancients and Moderns Reconsidered," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 15, no. 1 (Autumn, 1981).

⁶⁰ Spingarn, *Critical Essays*, Vol. 2, 354–56; Levine, "Ancients and Moderns," 74.

⁶¹ Howard D. Weinbrot, *Menippean Satire Reconsidered. From Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 193–230. Weinbrot discusses *L'Art poétique* mainly in relation to Soames and Dryden's English translation (1683) and Pope's *Essay on Criticism*.

balance: “France was just emerging from barbarism” and “[i]t needed to be broken, educated, polished, restrained, socialised, and set on a proper classical track immune from internal and external literary and moral infection”.⁶² In short, it needed to be civilised. Still feeling the political, religious and cultural tensions of the English Civil War (1642-1651), Soames, Dryden and Pope thought that their own country was in a similar predicament. They wrote, and translated, with the conviction that they would thereby prevent England from sliding back into chaos and anarchy. Given Sheffield’s reliance on *L’Art poétique*, it seems as if he wrote the *Essay* with a similar sense of relevance and urgency. It was important for the greater good of the country that poets were informed and instructed about the laws of poetry and, especially, the classical foundation on which they were thought ultimately to rest.

The spirit of the ancients runs throughout the *Essay*. But readers belonging to the modern camp would hardly have found Sheffield’s view of literary history too reactionary. During the long eighteenth century, debates between the ancients and the moderns certainly developed in a fair number of different intellectual contexts, but as Joseph M. Levine has pointed out,

[...] the field of eloquence, that is to say, rhetoric and poetry, history, oratory, moral philosophy, even the arts and architecture (in effect, the whole *studia humanitatis* of Cicero and the Renaissance humanists), remained for both parties still in the hands of the ancients. [...] If the moderns remained still critical of the absolute authority of the ancient models in the humanities, [...] and ready from time to time to hint at originality as a virtue, they yet continued to accept the classical authors and artists as the ultimate standards in life and art.⁶³

⁶² Weinbrot, *Menippean Satire*, 198.

⁶³ Levine, “Ancients and Moderns,” 85–86.

So when the *Essay* assumed the superiority of writers such as Horace, Plato, Lucian, Homer and Virgil, many moderns would have felt very much at home. Some might have quibbled with details, but they would have recognised and respected the general foundations on which the *Essay* was built. And in any case, they would also have noticed how Sheffield frequently recommended recent English writers for emulation.

It would seem, then, that the audience Sheffield aimed to instruct cannot be defined within a strict ancients-and-moderns dichotomy. He might have thought more like the ancients, but many moderns would have respected his disposition here. In fact, it is likely that for many of his learned readers (both “ancient” and “modern”), the *Essay* not only represented values they recognised and appreciate, but also helped them consolidate their own perception of the world. It worked to stabilise and strengthen a civilised community in which the work of a more or less specific group of poets was highly revered. It follows that the group of “Ignorant” (and “Bold”) men to whom the poem is most directly addressed should be understood as made up of readers for whom the standards of this community were unfamiliar. The task Sheffield had taken upon himself was to make it clear to such readers that to write poetry was not just a matter of putting together a few lines of iambic pentameter. Rather, true poetic composition was a matter of civilisation and cultivation. It required careful study and imitation of the best poetic models.

Sheffield’s motivations for writing the *Essay* seem to include a desire to maintain certain standards. As I say, didactic poetry was conceived out of a sense of duty to public issues. Poems such as the *Essay* were written for the benefit of the public – for the public good, aiming to improve society at large by persuasively influencing the life of the individual. In other words, although Sheffield championed a certain literary canon, he most likely did so out of the conviction that knowledge of these poets, and imitation of their admirable qualities, would help keep society from

slipping back into chaos and anarchy. He was bent on extending that knowledge as far as he could by persuading “Ignorant” readers to reach the same conclusions.

“Highly Disagreeable to the Natural Pride of Man”

Instruction is a *sine qua non* for a didactic poem, but is also the poet’s greatest challenge, the feature which has proved most problematic with readers in general. When discussing didactic poetry, present-day critics will often reserve part of their discussion for pointing out (with varying degrees of lament) how, today, such poems struggle to find the kind of popularity they once had, for instance during the long eighteenth century. J. P. Hunter has said that “[l]ater readers have often responded badly to a sense of being preached to or lectured at”, while Terry Eagleton states with characteristic verve that

[b]ecause the modern age is neurotically suspicious of the didactic, with its curious assumption that to be taught must be invariably unpleasant, it tends to imagine that poems which seek to do this must be inferior modes of writing. They are relegated to the lowly status of the pragmatic, along with bus tickets and ‘No Entry’ signs.⁶⁴

Hunter and Eagleton argue that didactic poems are rarely read with pleasure today because there is an intrinsic conflict between what the didactic poem is essentially meant to do and what modern readers expect to find in a poem. Without suggesting Hunter and Eagleton are wrong in this

⁶⁴ Hunter, “Political,” 194; Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007): 89.

assessment, I would note that what they and other modern scholars tend to leave out in this context is that even during historical periods when didactic poetry was held in high esteem (such as the long eighteenth century) readers were also acutely sensitive to the unpleasantness of the instructive element.

True, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century readers were generally a lot more positive towards didactic poetry than their modern counterparts. But this is not to say they were ready and willing blindly to accept instruction of any kind as long as it was delivered in rhyming couplets. Far from it. In *An Essay on Criticism*, Pope advised poets and critics to remember that “Men must be *taught* as if you taught them *not*; / And Things *unknown* propos’d as Things *forgot*”.⁶⁵ Pope’s memorable couplet points to a more generally accepted pedagogical assumption in the period, to the effect that people tended to find teaching thoroughly disagreeable and that, if instruction was to have the desired educational effect, it could not be delivered in too straightforward a manner.

In a sense, Pope’s couplet was self-referential, because the specific advantage of didactic poetry was often thought to be precisely that it was capable of making instruction less palpable and therefore more pleasing. Wharton, for example, elaborated on this idea:

To render instruction amiable, to soften the severity of science, and to give virtue and knowledge a captivating and engaging air, is the great privilege of the didactic muse; [...] Profess’d teaching is highly disagreeable to the natural pride of man, as it implies a superiority of understanding over the person instructed. That precepts may gain an easy admission into the heart, it is necessary to deliver them in a concealed indirect manner,

⁶⁵ Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, in *Pastoral Poetry and An Essay on Criticism. The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. E. Audra and Aubrey Williams (London: Methuen, 1961), 306, ll. 574–75.

divested of all pretensions to a larger share of reason, and of all dogmatical stiffness.⁶⁶

Similar to a modern popular science book, poetry was thought capable of facilitating learning for those who found it hard to digest the “severity” of prosaic, scientific texts. But it was not without pitfalls of its own. Poetry might be a suitable medium for teaching readers something or other, but poets had to be consciously aware that they were positing an unequal relationship between themselves and some of their readers, and that special measures might be needed to smooth over this potentially off-putting disparity.

The passages quoted from the *Essay* thus far should clearly illustrate that the poem does have “a single and recognisable instructor’s voice”, to use Toohey’s phrase.⁶⁷ This voice is also granted a position of superiority and authority in relation to significant parts of the imagined readership, allowing it to lecture them on what it takes to write poetry and how they ought to perceive literary history.

Now as we saw, Johnson and Wharton felt that the relationship between Sheffield, the instructor, and his audience was problematic, and to Sheffield’s own advantage. They thought his social and cultural status had gained the *Essay* a better reputation than it really warranted. The disparity between Sheffield and his readers had been so great that it overruled all other concerns. This can hardly be the whole story, however, and the poem’s popularity in the decades after its first publication suggests that he managed to level or mediate the implicit disparity between his instructional persona and his addressees to an extent that many of them found appropriate. The measures he took to achieve such success are largely those mentioned in prose treatises on poetic composition from Addison’s “Essay on Virgil’s *Georgics*” (1697) through Wharton’s “Reflections

⁶⁶ Wharton, “Reflections,” 394–95.

⁶⁷ Toohey, *Epic Lessons*, 2.

on Didactic Poetry” to Blair’s *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*.

In the long eighteenth century, the methods advanced for dealing with the kind of writer-reader disparity found in didactic poetry were often underwritten by a pedagogical principle enunciated by Lucretius in *De Natura Rerum*, translated into English by Tomas Creech in 1682:

... For as *Physicians* use,
In giving *Children* draughts of bitter Juice,
To make them take it, tinge the Cup with Sweet,
To *cheat* the lip: *This* first they *Eager* meet,
And then drink on, and take the *bitter* Draught,
And so are *harmlessly deceiv’d*, not *caught*;⁶⁸

This was not to propose that the solution lay in creating a more egalitarian relationship between poet and audience. Rather, success depended on how well instructional poets could trick their readers by applying poetic techniques of various kinds. As I say, one tactic was to include only such precepts as could be delivered in an entertaining manner: the rules being taught should “bear to be delivered gracefully” and “enliven’d with poetical imagery”, as Wharton said in his “Reflections on Didactic Poetry”, adding that “bold and forcible metaphors”, “glowing and picturesque epithets” as well as “pomp of numbers, and majesty of words” are essential for countering the dryness of the instructive element.⁶⁹

The relative vagueness of the precepts in Sheffield’s *Essay* can be explained along the same

⁶⁸ Titus Lucretius Carus, *De Natura Rerum*, translated by Thomas Creech, (Oxford, 1682), 102, Early English Books Online.

⁶⁹ Wharton, “Reflections,” 403–05.

lines. The poem was meant to be instructive, but equally important was that it be pleasing to read. Several passages show Sheffield adopting just the Lucretian kind of pedagogy promoted by Wharton and others, but none is more striking than the extended eagle-narrative which marks the transition from poetry to drama:

Here rest, my Muse, suspend thy cares awhile,
A greater Enterprize attends thy toil;
And as some Eagle that intends to fly
A long and tedious Journy through the Sky,
Considers first the perils of her case,
Over what Lands and Seas she is to pass,
Doubts her own strength so far, and justly fears
That lofty Road of Airy Travellers;
But yet incited by some great design,
That does her hopes beyond her fears incline,
Prunes every feather, views her self with care,
Then on a sudden flounces in the Air;
Away she flies so strong, so high, so fast,
She lessens to us, and is lost at last:
[...]
On then, my Muse, adventrously engage
To give Instructions that concern the Stage.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Sheffield, *Essay*, 290, ll. 31–34; 291, ll. 1–10, 15–16.

Appearing more or less at the middle of the *Essay*, this epic simile is undoubtedly intended to counter any growing sense of tediousness among the poem's readers. The language is "pompous" and "majestic", and as a metaphor for the task ahead and the importance of dramatic production it is also "bold" and "forceful".

Furthermore, the passage also works in accordance with another set of techniques considered useful for alleviating the unpleasant inequality of a poem's instructional dimensions. The inclusion of longer narrative sections or digressions was considered especially important here. Wharton stressed that the didactic poet should invigorate his poem "at proper intervals [with] pleasing digressions of various kinds naturally arising from the main subject, and closely connected with it"; this was one of the things Virgil had got just right in the *Georgics*, and one of the main reasons why that work had "been the delight and admiration of his own, and all succeeding ages."⁷¹ Sheffield's eagle-narrative can be said to function in a similar fashion. It creates a vibrant, grandiose scene which is sufficiently powerful and well developed to divert readers' attention away from (the dreariness of) the precepts. On several levels, then, the passage can be seen to sit well within a simple Lucretian pedagogical framework: a set of entertaining poetical images are presented with the aim of making readers momentarily forget what is actually going on.

Again in line with Lucretian pedagogics, the eagle narrative does not work to create a more egalitarian relationship between poet and readers, teacher and students. On the contrary, the eagle can itself be taken as a metaphor for the instructor, thereby stimulating a perception of his voice as rather awesomely exalted position in relation to his audience. On the other hand, however, there are also some narrative digressions which do work to ameliorate the relationship between the

⁷¹ Wharton, "Reflections," 397.

instructional Sheffield and his readers, creating, indeed, a sense of camaraderie and solidarity. At the beginning of the poem, for instance, Sheffield argues that real poetry has an ineffable, enigmatic quality: he talks of a “Spirit”, “something of Divine”, a “heat that glows in every word that’s writ”.⁷² This leads him to ask where this quality is to be found. Where does it come from?

Where dost thou dwell? What caverns of the Brain
Can such a vast and mighty thing contain?
When I at idle hours in vain thy absence mourn,
O where dost thou retire? and why dost thou return,
Sometimes with powerful charms to hurry me away
From pleasures of the night and business of the day?
Ev’n now, too far transported, I am fain
To check thy course, and use the needful rein.
As all is dullness, when the Fancy’s bad;
So, without Judgment, Fancy is but mad:
And Judgment has a boundless influence,
Not upon words alone, or only sence,
But on the world, of manners, and of men:
Fancy is but the Feather of the Pen;
Reason is that substantial, useful part,
Which gains the Head, while t’other wins the Heart.⁷³

⁷² Sheffield, *Essay*, 286, ll. 20, 24, 23.

⁷³ Sheffield, *Essay*, 287, ll. 3–18.

Pondering on the origins of this enigmatic quality leads Sheffield to include a rather personal experience: how poetry sometimes draws him away from business and pleasure. He then realises that he has let himself be carried away (“too far transported”). He corrects himself, and returns to the topic at hand which is to give advice on how to balance those two vital elements in poetry, “Fancy” and “Judgment”, against each other. This rhetorical move can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, it allows Sheffield to flash his technical skills. He shows by example the precise practice he proceeds to call for: “Fancy” drew him away from the didacticism of the poem in the direction of personal experience, but his “Judgment” helped him back on track. On the other, the element of personal experience would also seem to diminish the perceived distance between instructor and student: the former struggles with challenges the latter will encounter. A similar move towards an element of shared experience and camaraderie in the face of the difficulties of mastering poetic composition is also noticeable in the passage on elegies mentioned earlier, where Sheffield mentions how distracting women could be even for him:

That Phoenix-she deserves to be beloved;
But Noisy Nonsense, and such Fops as vex
Mankind, take most with that fantastick Sex:
This to the praise of those who better knew,
The many raise the value of the few.
But here, as I too oft, alas, have tried,
Women have drawn my wandering thoughts aside.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Sheffield, *Essay*, 289, ll. 3–9.

Conclusion

Following on from the insights of Anthony W. Johnson and his colleagues into the use of literature in the seventeenth-century grammar school, the present article has examined how literature was used for educational purposes in the public realm during largely the same period. The focal point has been Sheffield's *Essay*, a poem which, despite its contemporary popularity, has received surprisingly little scholarly attention.

It has been an aim of the study to counter this critical neglect, restoring to public attention a poem which, though not among the greatest in the English canon, is still interesting for what it can tell us about how literature was used for educational purposes in the past. This was done, first, by briefly charting the status and popularity of didactic poetry in general, and of the *Essay* in particular, during the long eighteenth century. Given the lack of previous scholarship, the study then looked to answer some basic, but fundamental questions relating to the poem's educational mission. In light of its broad public appeal, how did Sheffield envision the teaching situation in the *Essay*? Who was he aiming to teach? What did he want them to learn? And how did he go about teaching them?

With regards to the audience, the *Essay* lacks the specific addressee so often found in didactic poetry. Its addressivity is nonetheless complicated, since Sheffield implicitly distinguishes between two broad types of audience: those who know the rules of poetry and those who do not. This analysis of the poem's audiences was undertaken because it facilitated an understanding of what precisely it was Sheffield wanted his audiences to learn. The aim of the *Essay* was not to teach its so-called "Ignorant" (and "Bold") readers specific poetic techniques or compositional

methods. In accordance with the spirit of the genre, he avoided tiring his readers with materials that would have been too technical and lack-luster. Instead, he looked to provide them with an entertaining poem that, primarily, advised less knowledgeable readers on how to improve their skills and where to look for real advice and inspiration. In this latter respect, Sheffield's *modus operandi* was to single out a number of poets and works from both modern and classical literature. He thus tacitly propounded a view of literary history that revered classical texts while still acknowledging the achievements of more recent poets and dramatists. In this way, Sheffield can be said to have consolidated a view of literature and learning which was broadly accepted among the intellectual elite of his time.

In the final section of the article, I considered how Sheffield addressed his readers. Modern scholars have often seen this as a particularly acute problem for didactic poetry in general. Its relative unpopularity today is a result of the genre's instructive tone. Unlike in eighteenth century, for instance, present-day readers simply do not like to be lectured through poetry. However, this distinction between the inclinations of present-day and earlier readers is not as complete as recent critics have made it sound. In the long eighteenth century, it was considered vital that didactic poets did what they could to make the instructive aspect less palpable, so creating a sense that the relationship between poet and readers was more egalitarian than the genre would otherwise imply. There were a number of acknowledged techniques for achieving this, and they are employed in Sheffield's *Essay*. But rather than creating a sense of equality between poet and readers, they worked in accordance with a simple Lucretian pedagogy by tricking readers into momentarily forgetting the educational context.

If there is a dislike for didactic poetry's instructive element today, and if the same dislike was also present in the eighteenth century, how can we account for such poetry's popularity then

and its unpopularity today? Perhaps it is the manner in which the teaching was conducted, rather than the didactic aim itself, which makes the difference. Perhaps the deception underlying the simple Lucretian pedagogy is something we feel more acutely today. Personally, at least, I find the *Essay* to be most moving – and its instruction most engaging – in the passages where Sheffield builds on his own experiences to create a feeling of solidarity and camaraderie with other poets.

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