The poetic counterpart of Jonathan Swift was Alexander Pope, chief poet of his age. His carefully wrought poems, like the fictional writings of Swift, combine moral indignation and playful wit. His style in poetry, like Swift’s in prose, aims at elegance, conversational ease, and precision. His beliefs, like Swift’s, were Tory neoclassical, and he defended them with comparable fervor. He excelled in satirical poetry as did Swift in satirical prose.

The life of Pope almost exactly spanned the Augustan period of British literature, and he deserves his reputation as the leading spokesman for its values. His life, like his art, was narrow but intense. His religion, Catholicism, and his frail constitution (weakened in childhood by spinal tuberculosis) kept him from pursuing an education at Oxford or Cambridge (closed to non-Anglicans) as well as from taking the other normal steps to a career in public life. Confined to his family home in Twickenham, dwarfed and crippled by severe curvature of the spine, the young Pope read in the standard classical authors and developed his talent for poetry. The painful limitations of “this long disease, my life” gave his creative energies a powerful focus, helping him concentrate on what he could do best.

His developing art received a further focus from the advice of an influential poet-critic, William Walsh, who introduced him to literary London. “He used to encourage me much, and used to tell me that there was one way left of excelling: for though we had several great poets, we never had any one great poet that was correct; and he desired me to make that my study and aim.” Through Walsh the precocious young Pope became acquainted with the older generation of satiric poets still writing in the Drydenian tradition rather than with the new sentimentalists. He therefore set himself the task of achieving perfection in the standard neoclassical verse form, heroic couplets, and in the familiar neoclassical genres. He gained what he sought: the distinction of being the most “correct” poet of his age.

Pope’s career divides naturally into three periods. Between the publication of his Pastorals in 1709 and his first volume of collected poems in 1714, Pope, still in his twenties, dazzled London readers with works of genius. Among these were An Essay on Criticism (1711), a brilliant distillation of neoclassical literary theory into verse, and The Rape of the Lock (1714), a sparkling mock-heroic burlesque of an incident that had estranged two Catholic families of high society. Meanwhile, Pope became part of a literary circle that met in St. James Palace in the lodgings of the court physician, John Arbuthnot. The Scriblerus Club, composed of Swift and other Tory wits, engaged in intellectual discussion and planned satires on current literary and social fashions. From 1715 to 1726 Pope translated Homer and edited Shakespeare. His Iliad (1715-20) and Odyssey (1725-26) in heroic couplets were huge undertakings, rivaled only by his edition of Shakespeare’s plays in 1725. Though deficient in exact scholarship, these volumes made available to neoclassical readers the greatest of epic and dramatic poets in formats they could appreciate and understand.
In 1726 a hostile review of Pope's edition of Shakespeare launched the now famous poet into the last phase of his career, that of satirist and moralist. The reviewer, Lewis Theobald (pronounced Tibbald), became the hero of Pope's *Dunciad* (1728; 1729), a mock epic ridiculing pedantry in general and Theobald in particular. Later, in an updated version (1743), Theobald was mercifully replaced as king of the dunces with the Whig poet laureate Colley Cibber. In the meantime, Pope planned and partially executed a series of philosophical *verse epistles* intended as a complete exposition of moral truth. Central among these was *An Essay on Man* (1733-34), which in deistic fashion attempts to found a universal system of morality on natural theology. Through natural observation and reason, rather than through supernatural revelation, this treatise in verse undertakes to "vindicate the ways of God to man" and to summon man to his moral duty. It succeeded no better than have other efforts to substitute a rational for a religious basis of morality. Nevertheless, it is an important part of the intellectual history of the period.

Whatever Pope's theological failings, his aim as a poet was a noble one: to render truth beautiful and memorable. Lines such as the following give valuable emphasis and edge to moral truth:

Vice is a monster of so frightful mien  
As, to be hated, needs but to be seen;  
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,  
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

Because of his mastery of the maximlike *heroic couplet* and his *didacticism*, Pope is the most often quoted of British writers except Shakespeare.

*from*  
*An Essay on Man*

*This treatise in verse is addressed to the Tory political leader, orator, philosopher, and libertine Henry St. John (pronounced Sinj'n), Viscount Bolingbroke, from whose deistical ideas it is largely drawn. While affirming the rule of a creator and arguing for His wisdom, goodness, and power, the poem urges man to be content with natural knowledge and to accept his role as "sole judge of truth." Though Pope did not realize it, he was setting his readers on a direct path to modern secular humanism.*

Awake, my St. John! leave all meaner* things  
To low ambition, and pride of kings.  
Let us (since life can little more supply  
Than just to look about us and die)  
Expatriate free* o'er all this scene of man;
A mighty maze! but not without a plan;  
A wild, where weeds and flowers promiscuous shoot;*  
Or garden, tempting with forbidden fruit.  
Together let us beat* this ample field,  
Try* what the open, what the covert* yield;  
The latent tracts,* the giddy heights, explore  
Of all who blindly creep, or sightless soar;*  
Eye Nature's walks,* shoot folly as it flies,  
And catch the manners living as they rise;  
Laugh where we must, be candid* where we can;  
But vindicate the ways of God to man.  
Say first, of God above, or man below,  
What can we reason, but from what we know?  
Of man, what see we but his station* here,  
From which to reason, or to which refer?  
Through worlds unnumbered though the God be known,  
'Tis ours to trace him only in our own.  
He, who through vast immensity can pierce,  
See worlds on worlds compose one universe,  
Observe how system into system runs,  
What other planets circle other suns,  
What varied being peoples every star,  
May tell why Heav'n has made us as we are.  
But of this frame the bearings, and the ties,  
The strong connections, nice* dependencies,  
Gradations just, has thy pervading soul  
Looked through? or can a part contain the whole?  
Is the great chain,* that draws all to agree,  
And drawn supports,* upheld by God, or thee?  

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan;  
The proper study of mankind is man.  
Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,  
A being darkly wise, and rudely* great:  
With too much knowledge for the skeptic side,  
With too much weakness for the Stoic's pride,  
He hangs between; in doubt* to act, or rest;  
In doubt to deem himself a god, or beast;  
In doubt his mind or body to prefer;  
Born but to die, and reasoning but to err;  
Alike in ignorance, his reason such,  
Whether he thinks too little, or too much:  
Chaos of thought and passion, all confused;  
Still* by himself abused,* or disabused;*  
Created half to rise, and half to fall;
Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled:
The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!