



The Works Of Alexander Pope Esq.

In Nine Volumes Complete. With His Last Corrections, Additions, And Improvements; As they were delivered to the Editor a little before his Death

Containing His Miscellaneous Pieces In Verse and Prose

Pope, Alexander

London, 1751

Of the Poet Laureate, Nov. 19, 1729

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O F T H E
P O E T L A U R E A T E .

November 19, 1729.

THE time of the election of a Poet Laureate being now at hand, it may be proper to give some account of the *rites* and *ceremonies* anciently used at that Solemnity, and only discontinued through the neglect and degeneracy of later times. These we have extracted from an historian of undoubted credit, a reverend bishop, the learned Paulus Jovius ; and are the same that were practised under the pontificate of Leo X, the great restorer of learning.

As we now see an *age* and a *court*, that for the encouragement of poetry rivals, if not exceeds, that of this famous Pope, we cannot but wish a restoration of all its *honours* to *poesy* ; the rather, since there are so many parallel circumstances in the *person* who was then honoured with the laurel, and in *him*, who (in all probability) is now to wear it.

I shall translate my author exactly as I find it in the 82d chapter of his *Elogia Vir. Doct.* He be-

gins with the character of the poet himself, who was the original and father of all Laureates, and called Camillo. He was a plain country-man of Apulia, (whether a *shepherd* or *thresher*, is not material.) “ This man (says Jovius) excited by the
 “ fame of the great encouragement given to poets
 “ at court, and the high honour in which they
 “ were held, came to the city, bringing with him
 “ a strange kind of lyre in his hand, and at least
 “ some *twenty thousand of verses*. All the wits
 “ and critics of the court flocked about him, de-
 “ lighted to see a *clown*, with a ruddy, hale com-
 “ plexion, and in his own long hair, so top full of
 “ poetry; and at the first sight of him all agreed
 “ he was born to be *Poet Laureate*^a. He had a
 “ most hearty welcome in an *island* of the river
 “ Tiber (an agreeable place, not unlike our Rich-
 “ mond) where he was first made to *eat* and
 “ *drink plentifully*, and to *repeat his verses to every*
 “ *body*. Then they adorned him with a new and
 “ elegant garland, composed of *vine-leaves*, *lau-*
 “ *rel*, and *brassica* (a sort of cabbage) so composed,
 “ says my author, emblematically, *Ut tam sales quam*
 “ *lepide ejus temulentia, brassicæ remedio cobibenda,*
 “ *notaretur*. He was then saluted by common
 “ consent with the title of *archi-poeta*, or *arch-*
 “ *poet*, in the style of those days, in ours, *Poet*
 “ *Laureate*. This honour the poor man received

^a Apulus præpingui vultu alacer, et prolixè comatus, omnino dignus festâ laurea videretur.

“ with the most sensible demonstrations of joy, his
“ eyes drunk with tears and gladness^b. Next, the
“ public acclamation was expressed in a *canticle*,
“ which is transmitted to us, as follows :

Salve, brassicea virens corona,
Et lauro, archipoeta, pampinoque!
Dignus principis auribus Leonis.

*All hail, arch-poet without peer!
Vine, bay, or cabbage, fit to wear,
And worthy of the prince's ear.*

From hence, he was conducted in pomp to the
Capitol of Rome, mounted on an *elephant*, thro'
the shouts of the populace, where the ceremony
ended.

The historian tells us further, “ That at his in-
“ troduction to Leo, he not only poured forth
“ verses innumerable, like a torrent, but also *sung*
“ them with *open mouth*. Nor was he only *once*
“ introduced, or on *stated* days (like our Lau-
“ reates) but made a *companion* to his *master*, and
“ entertained as one of the instruments of his *most*
“ *elegant pleasures*. When the prince was at ta-
“ ble, the poet had his place at the window.
“ When the prince had^c half eaten his meat, he
“ gave with his own hands the rest to the poet.
“ When the poet drank, it was out of the prince's
“ own flaggon, insomuch (says the historian) that

^b Manantibus præ gaudio oculis.

^c Semefis opsonis.

“ thro’ so great good eating and drinking he contracted a most terrible gout.” Sorry I am to relate what follows, but that I cannot leave my reader’s curiosity unsatisfied in the catastrophe of this extraordinary man. To use my author’s words, which are remarkable, *mortuo Leone, profligatisque poetis, etc.* “ When Leo died, and “ poets were no more” (for I would not understand *profligatis* literally, as if poets then were *profligate*) this unhappy Laureate was forthwith reduced to return to his country, where, oppressed with *old age* and *want*, he miserably perished in a *common hospital*.

We see from this sad conclusion (which may be of example to the poets of our time) that it were happier to meet with no encouragement at all, to remain at the plough, or other lawful occupation, than to be elevated above their condition, and taken out of the common means of life, without a surer support than the *temporary*, or at best, *mortal* favours of the great. It was doubtless for this consideration, that when the Royal Bounty was lately extended to a *rural genius*, care was taken to *settle it upon him for life*. And it hath been the practice of our Princes, never to remove from the station of Poet Laureate any man who hath once been chosen, tho’ never so much greater Genius’s might arise in his time. A noble instance, how much the *charity* of our monarchs hath exceeded their *love of fame*.

To come now to the intent of this paper. We have here the whole ancient *ceremonial* of the Laureate. In the first place the crown is to be mixed with *vine-leaves*, as the vine is the plant of Bacchus, and full as essential to the honour, as the *butt of sack* to the salary.

Secondly, the *brassica* must be made use of as a qualifier of the former. It seems the *cabbage* was anciently accounted a remedy for *drunkenness*; a power the French now ascribe to the onion, and style a soup made of it, *soupe d'Yvrogne*. I would recommend a large mixture of the *brassica*, if Mr. Dennis be chosen; but if Mr. Tibbald, it is not so necessary, unless the cabbage be supposed to signify the same thing with respect to *poets* as to *taylors*, viz. *stealing*. I should judge it not amiss to add another plant to this garland, to wit, *ivy*: Not only as it anciently belonged to poets in general; but as it is emblematical of the three virtues of a court poet in particular; it is *creeping*, *dirty*, and *dangling*.

In the next place, a *canticle* must be composed and sung in laud and praise of the new Poet. If Mr. CIBBER be laureated, it is my opinion no man can *write* this but himself: And no man, I am sure, can *sing* it so affectingly. But what this canticle should be, either in his or the other candidate's case, I shall not pretend to determine.

Thirdly, there ought to be a *public show*, or *entry* of the poet: To settle the order or proces-

sion of which, Mr. Anstis and Mr. DENNIS ought to have a conference. I apprehend here two difficulties: One, of procuring an *elephant*; the other of teaching the poet to ride him: Therefore I should imagine the next animal in size or dignity would do best; either a *mule* or a large *ass*; particularly if that noble one could be had, whose portraiture makes so great an ornament of the *Dunciad*, and which (unless I am misinformed) is yet in the park of a nobleman near this city: ---Unless Mr. CIBBER be the man; who may, with great propriety and beauty, ride on a *dragon*, if he goes by land; or if he choose the water, upon one of his own *swans* from *Cæsar in Egypt*.

We have spoken sufficiently of the *ceremony*; let us now speak of the *qualifications* and *privileges* of the Laureate. First, we see he must be able to make verses *extempore*, and to pour forth innumerable, if required. In this I doubt Mr. TIBBALD. Secondly, he ought to *sing*, and intrepidly, *patulo ore*: Here, I confess the excellency of Mr. CIBBER. Thirdly, he ought to carry a *lyre* about with him: If a large one be thought too cumbersome, a small one may be contrived to hang about the neck, like an order; and be very much a grace to the person. Fourthly, he ought to have a good *stomach*, to eat and drink whatever his betters think fit; and therefore it is in this high office as in many others, no puny constitution can discharge it. I do not think CIB-

BER or TIBBALD here so happy: but rather a
stanch, vigorous, season'd, and dry *old gentleman*,
whom I have in my eye.

I could also wish at this juncture, such a per-
son as is truly jealous of the *honour* and *dignity* of
poetry; no joker, or trisler; but a bard in *good*
earnest; nay, not amiss if a critic, and the better
if a little *obstinate*. For when we consider what
great privileges have been lost from this office (as
we see from the fore-cited authentick record of
Jovius) namely those of *feeding* from the *prince's*
table, *drinking* out of his *own flaggen*, becoming
even his *domestick* and *companion*; it requires a
man warm and resolute, to be able to claim and
obtain the restoring of these high honours. I
have cause to fear, most of the candidates
would be liable, either through the influence of
ministers, or for rewards or favours, to give up
the glorious rights of the Laureate: Yet I am not
without hopes, there is *one*, from whom a *serious*
and *steddy* assertion of these privileges may be ex-
pected; and, if there be such a one, I must do
him the justice to say, it is Mr. DENNIS the wor-
thy president of our society.