

**THE PLEASURES OF  
IMAGINATION. TO WHICH IS  
PREFIXED A CRITICAL ESSAY ON  
THE POEM, BY MRS. BARBAULD**

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The Pleasures of Imagination. To Which Is Prefixed a Critical Essay on the Poem, by Mrs. Barbauld by Mark Akenside

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**MARK AKENSIDE**

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MARK AKENSIDE, M. D.

*A NEW EDITION.*

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ESSAY  
ON  
AKENSIDE'S POEM  
ON THE  
PLEASURES OF IMAGINATION.

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**D**IDACTIC, or preceptive Poetry, seems to include a solecism, for the end of Poetry is to please, and of Didactic precept the object is instruction. It is, however, a species of Poetry which has been cultivated from the earliest stages of society; at first, probably, for the simple purpose of retaining, by means of the regularity of measure, and the charms of harmony, the precepts of agricultural wisdom, and the aphorisms of economical experience. When Poetry came to be cultivated for its



own sake, it was natural to esteem the Didactic, as in that view it certainly is, as a species of inferior merit compared with those which are more peculiarly the work of the imagination; and accordingly in the more splendid era of our own Poetry it has been much less cultivated than many others. Afterwards, when Poetry was become an art, and the more obvious sources of description and adventure were in some measure exhausted, the Didactic was resorted to, as affording that novelty and variety which began to be the great desideratum in works of fancy. This species of writing is likewise favoured by the diffusion of knowledge, by which many subjects become proper for general reading, which in a less informed state of society would have savoured of pedantry and abstruse speculation. For Poetry cannot descend to teach the elements of any art or science, or confine itself to that regular arrangement and clear brevity which suits the communication of unknown truths. In fact, the Muse would

make a very indifferent school-mistress. Whoever therefore reads a Didactic Poem, ought to come to it with a previous knowledge of his subject; and whoever writes one, ought to suppose such a knowledge in his readers. If he is obliged to explain technical terms, to refer continually to critical notes, and to follow a system step by step with the patient exactness of a teacher, his Poem, however laboured, will be a bad Poem. His office is rather to throw a lustre on such prominent parts of his system as are most susceptible of poetical ornament, and to kindle the enthusiasm of those feelings which the truths he is conversant with are fitted to inspire. In that beautiful Poem, the *Essay on Man*, the *system* of the author, if in reality he had any system, is little attended to, but those passages which breathe the love of Virtue are read with delight and fix themselves on the memory. Where the reader has this previous knowledge of the subject, which we have mentioned as necessary, the *art* of the

Poet becomes itself a source of pleasure, and sometimes in proportion to the remoteness of the subject forms the more obvious province of Poetry; we are delighted to find with how much dexterity the artist of verse can avoid a technical term, how neatly he can turn an uncouth word, and with how much grace embellish a scientific idea. Who does not admire the infinite art with which Dr. DARWIN has described the machine of SIR RICHARD ARKWRIGHT? His verse is a piece of mechanism as complete in its kind as that which he describes. Allured perhaps too much by this artificial species of excellence, and by the hopes of novelty, hardly any branch of knowledge has been so abstruse, or so barren of delight as not to have afforded a subject to the Didactic Poet. Even the loathsomeness of disease, and the dry maxims of medical knowledge, have been decorated with the charms of Poetry. Many of these pieces, however, owe all their entertainment to frequent digressions. Where