

Appendix 5.18: from “Biographical Memoirs of the Late Dr. Darwin,” *Monthly Magazine* 13 (June 1802)

This article gives a sketch of ED’s life and character and an outline of his works. Many aspects of the portrait are negative, spurring ED’s friend Richard Lovell Edgeworth to write a response, published in a later issue (*Monthly Magazine* 14 (September 1802): pp. 115–16). The accusations Edgeworth defended ED against were excessive anger; vanity and susceptibility to flattery; physical clumsiness; and writing for money.

Selections copied from “Biographical Memoirs of the Late Dr. Darwin,” *Monthly Magazine* 13 (June 1802): pp. 457–63.

[p. 461, column 2]

But it is time that we should consider Dr. Darwin in his third character,¹ namely as a POET. Dr. Darwin lately said to a friend, that in his poetical works his great aim was to present an object to meet the eye, and that he was not anxious to touch the heart. A more severe criticism could scarcely have been pronounced: there is, notwithstanding, a justness in the

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remark which is not to be disputed, and we are happy that himself has relieved us from the pain of making it. It must be observed, however, in mitigation of the censure, that a Didactic Poem, and as such we must consider the “Botanic Garden,” is rather addressed to the understanding than the heart: it is not to be expected that we should be fired at the description of an ardent *stamen*, or melt with sympathy at a languishing *pistillum*: where the author’s own feelings were excited, he fails not to touch a corresponding chord. If an imagination of unrivalled richness—a felicity of allusion to whatever can throw lustre on his subject—to ancient mythology and modern discoveries—to the works of nature and of art; if these are some of the essentials of poetry, Dr. Darwin may certainly claim them as his own. No man, perhaps, was ever happier in the selection and composition of his epithets, had a more imperial command of words, or could elucidate with such accuracy and elegance the most complex and intricate machinery.

Who but Dr. Darwin would have thought of describing a porcelain-manufactory in verse;² the enormous powers and curious construction of a steam-engine;³ the delicate mechanism of a watch;⁴ and the infinite complexity of a cotton-mill?⁵ These and many similar descriptions to be found in the “Botanic Garden,” are inimitable in their way; and that they do not “touch the heart,” is attributable to the subject, and not to the poet: the sweet simple music of an old Scotch air is infinitely more affecting than the rapid complex movements of a modern concerto:—but a vagrant minstrel could compose the melody of the one, though it requires the scientific hand of a master to combine the various harmony of the other.

After all, we are quite ready to acknowledge that Dr. Darwin is not a poet who stands very high in our estimation; the ear is fascinated and seduced by the melliflence of his numbers, but there is a harlotry in his embellishments which is to us unchaste. His cadences are not sufficiently varied for a poem of such length as the “Botanic Garden;” indeed there is an evident mechanism

in the construction of his lines which it is by no means pleasant to detect; one half of the verse is frequently a perfect equipoise to the other*⁶

* These and some other peculiarities were admirably imitated in the “Loves of the Triangles,” a parody which appeared in the *Antijacobin*.

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We are even so fastidious and delicate as to be cloyed with the uniform sweetness of his versification: the current of Dr. Darwin's poetry is unruffled and serene; its surface smooth and polished—“Still as the sea ere winds were taught to blow;”⁷ but oftentimes we would gladly transport ourselves to where

“The rich stream of music winds along,
Deep, majestic, smooth, and strong.”⁸

Dr. Darwin is particularly happy in some of his minor effusions: the beautiful little song “to May,”⁹ is exquisitely finished; and it would be difficult to find thirty lines in the “Botanic Garden,” to rival in dignity and pathos the “Address to Swilcar's Oak,” introduced in the *Phytologia*, XVIII. 2. 16.

There is a noble and indignant eloquence poured forth in the translation of a few lines from the eighth satire of Juvenal, (*Stemmata quid faciunt, &c. See Zoon.*¹⁰ *Vol. II. class iii. 1. 2.*) which seems to flow immediately from the heart. These, (particularly the two last), and some detached passages in the “Botanic Garden,” possess a chasteness and simplicity of colouring, the want of which can never be compensated by the temporary lustre of any varnish: it is this artificial gloss, the too lavish use of this deceitful varnish; which displeases us in the poetry of Dr. Darwin.

¹ The first two discussed in the article were “MEDICAL PHILOSOPHER” (p. 459) and “PHILOSOPHICAL AGRICULTOR” (p. 460).

² *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791) II:277–310.

³ *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791) I:253–88.

⁴ *LOTP* II:173–82.

⁵ *LOTP* II:85–104.

⁶ Period missing in original

⁷ Alexander Pope (1688–1744), “Eloisa to Abelard,” line 253.

⁸ Thomas Gray (1716–1771), “The Progress of Poesy, A Pindaric Ode,” lines 7–8.

⁹ *LOTP* II:309–24.

¹⁰ ED's *Zoonomia*.