Appendix 5.22: from "On the Life and Writings of Erasmus Darwin," *London Magazine* (December 1822)

This piece gives a biography of ED, followed by a description of his medical methods, and a disapproving discussion of his evolutionary and religious ideas (though with an acknowledgement of his practicing Christian virtues), and ending with a discussion of his poetry. The article is anonymous, but "the writer of these pages, who was then his patient" refers to discussing *Zoonomia* with ED after its publication in 1795–1796 (objecting to "the sensuality of one part" of the book). The author also observes about *Zoonomia*, "What profit a physician may derive from this book I am unable to determine; but I fear that the general reader will too often discover in it a hazardous ingenuity, to which good sense and reason have been sacrificed" (pp. 522–23).

Text copied from "On the Life and Writings of Erasmus Darwin: In Continuation of Dr. Johnson's Lives of the Poets." *The London Magazine*, Vol. 6 (July to December 1822, London: Taylor and Hessey, 1822): pp. 520–28.

[p. 526, column 2]

This poem [*The Botanic Garden*] ought not to be considered more than as a capriccio, or sport of the fancy, on which he has expended much labour to little purpose. It does not pretend to any thing like correctness of design, or continuity of action. It is like a picture of Breughel's,[1] where every thing is highly coloured, and every thing out of order. In the first part, called the Economy of Vegetation, the Goddess of Botany appears with her attendants, the Powers of the Four Elements, for no other purpose than to describe to them their several functions in carrying on the operations of nature. In the second, which has no necessary connexion with the first, the Botanic Muse describes the Loves of the Plants. Here the fiction is puerile, and built on a system which is itself in danger of vanishing into air. At the end of the second canto, the Muse takes a dish of tea, which I think is the only thing of any consequence that is done throughout. This second part has been charged with an immoral tendency; but Miss Seward has observed, with much truth, that it is a burlesque

[p. 527, column 1]

upon morality to make the amours of the plants responsible at its tribunal; and that the impurity is in the imagination of the reader, not in the pages of the poet.[2] For these amours, he might have found a better motto than that which he has prefixed from Claudian,[3] in the following stanza of Marini.[4]

> Ne' fior ne' fiori istessi Amor ha loco,
> Ama il giglio il ligustro e l'amaranto,
> E Narciso e Giacinto, Ajace e Croco,
> E con la bella Clitia il vago Acanto;
> Arde la Rosa di vermiglio foco,

L'odor sospiro e la rugiada è pianto:
Ride la Calta, e pallida e essangue
Vinta d'amor la violetta langue.
Adone, Canto 6.

He was apt to confound the odd with the grotesque, and to mistake the absurd for the fanciful. By an excellent landscape-painter now living, I was told that Darwin proposed as a subject for his pencil a shower, in which there should be represented a red-breast holding up an expanded umbrella in its claws.

An Italian critic, following a division made by Plotinus,[5] has distributed the poets into three classes, which he calls the musical, the amatorial, and the philosophic. In the first, he places those who are studious of softness and harmony in their numbers; in the second, such as content themselves with describing accurately the outward appearances of real or fancied objects; and in the third, those who penetrate to the qualities of things, draw out their hidden beauties, and separate what is really and truly fair from that which has only its exterior semblance. Among the second of these, Darwin might claim for himself no mean station. It was, indeed, a notion he had taken up, that as the ideas derived from visible objects (to use his own words) are more distinct than those derived from any other source, the words expressive of those ideas belonging to vision make up the principal part of poetic language. So entirely was he engrossed by this persuasion, as too frequently to forget that the admirers of poetry have not only eyes but ears and hearts also; and that therefore harmony and pathos are required of the poet, no less than a faithful delineation of visible objects.

Yet there is something in his versification also that may be considered

[p. 527, column 2]

as his own. His numbers have less resemblance to Pope's, than Pope's to those of Dryden.[6] Whether the novelty be such as to reflect much credit on the inventor, is another question. His secret was, I think, to take those lines in Pope which seemed to him the most diligently elaborated, and to model his own upon them. But with those forms of verse which he borrowed more particularly from Pope, in which one part is equally balanced by the other, and of which each is complete in itself without reference to those which precede or follow it, he has mingled one or two others that had been used by our elder poets, but almost entirely rejected by the refiners of the couplet measure till the time of Langhorne [...]

[A metrical and grammatical analysis follows, with examples from ED's *The Economy of Vegetation* and *The Temple of Nature*, alongside Shakespeare, Milton, and Pindar.]

[p. 528, column 2]

As the singularity of his poems caused them to be too much admired at first, so are they now more neglected than they deserve. There is about as much variety in them as in a bed of tulips, of which the shape is the same in all, except that some are a little more rounded at the points than others; yet they are diversely streaked and freckled, with a profusion of gay tints, in which the bizarre (as it is called by the fanciers of that flower) prevails. They are a sight for one half hour in the spring, and no more; and are utterly devoid of odour.

[1] Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c. 1525/30–1569), Netherlandish painter and printmaker.
[2] Anna Seward, *Memoirs of the Life of Dr. Darwin* (1804), pp. 217–18 (See Appendix 4.1).
[3] See *LOTP* Title Page.
[4] Giambattista Marino (1569–1625), *L'Adone* [*Adonis*] (1623), Canto 6, Stanza 132. "Love has a place in the flowers, in these very flowers: the lovely privet and the amaranth, the narcissus and the hyacinth, the Ajax flower and the crocus, and the sweet acanthus and the fair sunflower. The rose burns with vermilion fire. Its fragrance is a sigh, and its dew tears. The kingcup laughs, and the pale and wan violet languishes, tinged with love" (Giambattista Marino, *Adonis*, trans. Thomas E. Mussio (2019), p. 205).
[5] Plotinus (204/5–270 CE), founder of Neoplatonism.
[6] Alexander Pope (1688–1744) and John Dryden (1631–1700), neoclassical poets.