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Epic

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Epic

Abstract

Eighteenth-century epic is often said to have declined after Milton's accomplishments in *Paradise Lost*. Because no major eighteenth-century poets wrote sober, "original," formal verse epics, the period is envisioned as an emblematic instance of generic death. This chapter argues for a reappraisal. After noting recent challenges to this understanding of the genre and the period, I propose an alternate vision of the epic's Restoration and eighteenth-century development. The period saw not a "decline" of epic but a consequential shift in how the genre was understood: from a notion of epic based on Virgil (epic as a "heroic" handbook for princes) to an understanding of epic centered on Homer (epics as lofty portraits of primitive, distant cultures). This transition informed translations and imitations, sober-spirited poems and mock-heroics, verse and prose pieces, and critical commentaries. Throughout the period, however, the epic remained closely associated with meditations on British "manners."

Disciplines

English Language and Literature | Literature in English, British Isles

CHAPTER 28

EPIC

ANNA M. FOY

THE history of the eighteenth-century English epic has long been viewed as a sad tale of decline and dispersal. In this traditional understanding, the epic reached its peak in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). After Milton, the dignity of the formal verse epic gradually gave way to the mischief and pleasure of the mock-heroic, which borrowed the genre's lofty style without its lofty substance. The narrative and descriptive energies of the epic were ultimately subsumed into the long poem and the novel, whose "rise" has come to define the age. A primary evidentiary consideration in this history has been the observation that, after Milton, no canonical poets of the long eighteenth century wrote "original" verse epics—that is, topically innovative epics in the sober spirit of a formal verse tradition. John Dryden and Alexander Pope wrote mock-heroics, couplet translations of Virgil and Homer, and important critical commentaries, but nothing to rival *Paradise Lost*. Original epics by the likes of Richard Blackmore have not stood the test of time. In the absence of such writings, and in light of the judgment that other classical genres enjoyed comparative prosperity in the period, the post-Miltonic era has been cast as a "unique, epic depression,"¹ sustained by substantial knowledge of and interest in the epic, but by no real creative energy until the Romantics infused new life into the genre at the end of the century. This has been the standard view of the subject for some 150 years. It has long structured surveys, anthologies, and local studies of the genre, and it has informed scholarship on both the novel and the mock-heroic.²

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM AND ALTERNATIVES

In recent years, however, the commonplace of decline has begun to show its age. Recent scholarship has often resisted expansive literary-historical narratives that privilege canonical giants at the expense of so many other writers. This change brings to light previously

¹ Peter Hägin, *The Epic Hero and the Decline of Heroic Poetry* (Bern: Francke, 1964), p. 8.

² For a recent survey of the commonplace's persistence, see Michael Rex, "The Nature of Epic: Margaret Cavendish's *Poems and Fancies* and the Construction of a 'New' English Epic Ideology," in Sandro Jung (ed.), *Experiments in Genre in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Gent and Lebanon, N.H.: Academia Press, 2011), pp. 11–32, esp. pp. 11–12.

unnoticed aspects of epic history. While there have so far been no wide-ranging attempts to remap the epic's Restoration and eighteenth-century development, recent findings invite us to reflect on the continuing utility of the idea of "decline" as an expression of our critical priorities and a guide for future research.

For one thing, the eighteenth-century epic landscape now looks less barren than it did even thirty years ago, when Dustin Griffin last took up the question of what happened to the epic after Milton.³ Scholarship on translation has encouraged us to understand creative translations such as Dryden's *Virgil* (1697) and Pope's *Homer* (1715–26) as works central, rather than ancillary, to the history of the English epic. The prolific Blackmore is being given a second look, and women writers of epic are being rediscovered. James Macpherson's Ossianic fragments (1760–5) have received a wealth of recent attention. More broadly, the cultural turn in literary scholarship has invited us to mine a vast archive of epic writing—not only original epics but editions, critical commentaries, and translations of the most ordinary kind—as a way of gauging the period's shifting political ideals; conceptions of national and imperial identity (British and otherwise); notions of stadial development and historical change; and concepts of orality, literacy, and authorship. If the long poem, prose epic, and mock-heroic are added to the mix as extensions of, rather than flights from, epic tradition, eighteenth-century Britain does begin to look less like a culture in an "epic depression" than a "culture which . . . produced more epics and poets with epic aspirations than almost any other century in British literary history," as Michael Rex suggests.⁴

A second cluster of noteworthy research involves Milton's writings and reputation. While *Paradise Lost* is under no threat of losing its status as the great English verse epic, scholars have sought increasingly to view Milton less as a transcendent luminary than as a mortal product of his historical context. Recent scholarship on the mid-seventeenth-century epic emphasizes Milton's responsiveness to less-known seventeenth-century English experiments in the genre, and it suggests further that these royalist epics set the norms for the genre beyond the Restoration, over and against Milton's counter-formulations.⁵ Building on Griffin's work, scholars assessing Milton's literary legacies have grown ever more cautious about ascribing to his early reception the reverence that gripped later audiences. "The conventional wisdom of the first half of the eighteenth century was that until Joseph Addison . . . introduced the poet, Milton's artistic genius had simply gone unrecognized," John Rumrich writes, noting Samuel Johnson's description of the "'subterraneous current' by which early appreciation of [*Paradise Lost*] stole its way 'through fear and silence.'"⁶ A movement is also underway in Milton studies to reassess the orthodoxies and certitudes often attributed to Milton's oeuvre—a trend echoing the general sense that we have arrived at a moment of re-evaluation and reflection.⁷ While this evolving picture of the Interregnum and

³ Dustin Griffin, "Milton and the Decline of Epic in the Eighteenth Century," *New Literary History*, 14, no. 1 (Autumn 1982), 143–54. Pushing back against Bloomian ideas of influence, Griffin offers a useful overview of the commonplace of decline and a nuanced analysis of the challenge of assigning causes.

⁴ Rex, "The Nature of Epic," p. 12.

⁵ I discuss Barbara K. Lewalski below, "Paradise Lost and the Contest over the Modern Heroic Poem," *Milton Quarterly*, 43, no. 3 (2009), 153–65.

⁶ John Rumrich, "Critical Responses, Early," in Stephen B. Dobranski (ed.), *Milton in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 119–29, at p. 125.

⁷ Cf. Peter C. Herman and Elizabeth Sauer (eds.), *The New Milton Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012).

Restoration epic may not in itself controvert our impression that the genre endured some kind of subsequent decline, it may alter our sense of *what* declined, and it will surely encourage us to re-examine the mechanisms underlying the change. Although it once seemed feasible to imagine Milton frightening his epic successors into submission, recent scholarship has primed us to view the situation in quite another way: given his iconoclastic mix of Puritanism and republicanism, it is surprising that Milton exercised as much influence as he did on subsequent generations.

Finally, a conceptual shift in genre studies calls into question the very idea of "epic" as a timeless literary form, and therefore implicitly casts doubt on the coherence of the notion of "decline" long associated with the eighteenth century. Barbara Lewalski, for instance, models an approach to Miltonic epic that recognizes *Paradise Lost's* participation in a "mid [seventeenth]-century and post-Restoration contest over the proper norms and models for a modern heroic poem."⁸ In her deference to early modern terminology, her effort to trace a seventeenth-century "contest" over epic norms, and her conclusion that Milton did not necessarily win this contest in the terms of his own era, Lewalski resists the temptation to celebrate *Paradise Lost* as a transcendent pattern of epic perfection. She embraces the instability of "epic" as a poetic category.

This emphasis on viewing local debates as their participants might have seen them cuts against a critical habit dominating much twentieth-century epic scholarship: a tendency to prioritize the ascertainment of universal characteristics of "epic" over the definitions and conceptions asserted by individual authors. The very notion that the epic saw a post-Miltonic "decline" characteristically presumes that there is one sublime form of epic production that all ambitious writers were—or should have been—striving to achieve: the form of "great," sober, topically original poetic expression embodied in *Paradise Lost* and its most revered classical forebears. Other forms of epic composition are rendered inferior by comparison: derivative, formulaic, fragmentary, debased by self-parody and satire. Perhaps there is no need to elaborate the ways that a rigid adherence to these oppositions can occlude a more pluralistic approach. But it is worth observing that these binaries have exerted particular force in studies of the epic, where an adherence to "greatness" as a category of literary evaluation has dovetailed with a definitional association of the genre with magnificence. The epic's length, its daunting mimetic scope, its characteristically dignified style, its deep classical roots, and its theorization as a narrative form distinct from the realist novel have helped to reinforce an idea of a genre ambitious to stand outside of history, conversant above all with its generic forebears, its generic descendants, and the universal condition of humankind.

This construction of "epic" has had limited utility in the investigation of a period of British literary history that did not always construct the genre this way. Creative translators such as Dryden and Pope took for granted not the timelessness of epic discourse, but its cultural and historical boundedness. Theorists such as the influential René Le Bossu defined the genre not by its communion with some heroic or aesthetic ideal, but by its capacity to shape the "manners" of its readers. The modern understanding of epic gives us no sure means of accommodating these points of historical difference, and it tends to obscure important conceptual changes within the earlier period. After all, even points of classificatory congruence

⁸ Lewalski, "*Paradise Lost* and the Contest," p. 153.

over time can reflect divergent ideological underpinnings and generic mandates. For seventeenth-century royalist poets, the epic's connection with awe-inspiring dignity was inseparable from the genre's status as a vehicle for the instruction and celebration of princes; for later poets, epic sublimity took on more narrowly aesthetic connotations, such as in the misty heroic past of Ossianic verse. The classicist Richard Martin, noting the difficulty of arriving at a single definition of "epic" for all ancient periods and civilizations, has recently urged an approach that "begin[s] with the assumption that 'epic' is a contingent and culture-bound category."⁹ Restoration and eighteenth-century scholarship seems to be headed in a similar direction.

NEW APPROACHES

The question that remains is how best to reorient ourselves in the face of these new methods and insights. Much interesting revisionist work has been done at the local level without reference to broad new theories of the epic's eighteenth-century development. In the interest of collating these insights and pointing out new avenues of investigation, I propose an alternative to the story of eighteenth-century epic depression. I suggest that we recognize in the period not a "decline" in the sense that the commonplace has typically assumed, but a paradigm shift in the way practitioners understood the nature and purpose of epic writing: a transition from a conception of the genre centered on Virgil to an understanding centered on Homer. In the simplest terms, writers of the eighteenth century turned away from an understanding of the genre as a handbook for princes (a Virgilian-humanist understanding, dominant through much of the seventeenth century), and they came to envision the epic as a long narrative poem that entertained its readers with a bardic summoning of distant, primitive cultures (an understanding reflective of emergent readings of Homeric epic). While this transition has long been recognized in reception histories and in scholarship on the battles between the ancients and moderns, it has so far not been well integrated into surveys of the English epic's general eighteenth-century development. I therefore outline this transition, which informed a range of epics, from topically original compositions, to fragmentary experiments, to translations, to critical commentaries. My account does not wholly abandon the tendency to focus on the Restoration and early eighteenth-century chapter of the genre's history, a prolific phase that helps to explain the forms of epic writing and refusal that followed. Nonetheless, I hope the story I tell will seem different enough from the familiar Milton-centered narrative to open up new vistas. Among these, I suggest, mapping the decline of a Virgilian epic ideal alongside the rising fascination with Homer can help us to appreciate the eighteenth century's role in the birth of an idea of the genre still with us today: a notion of a lengthy, highly stylized verse narrative that describes an unattainable heroic past, populated with larger-than-life humans, monsters, and divinities.

⁹ Richard P. Martin, "Epic as Genre," in John Miles Foley (ed.), *A Companion to Ancient Epic* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 9–19, at p. 9.

SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY HEROIC POETRY AND THE VIRGILIAN MODEL

It takes some imaginative labor to encounter the epic as seventeenth-century practitioners did. Our modern ideas of epic are conditioned by our familiarity with a variety of masterworks from classical times to the present, Homer foremost among them. But Renaissance practitioners did not always have the same array of epics at their fingertips, and they did not share the same hermeneutic expectations. Their sense of the genre was overwhelmingly dominated by Virgil, whose textual authority was rivaled only by the Bible. The *Aeneid* inspired ongoing interpretive activity, it spawned numerous imitations and translations, and it remained at the center of humanistic educational traditions throughout the period. Among classical attributes, Aeneas's *pietas* was easier to assimilate to Christian ideals of humility than Achilles' petulance, Odysseus's wily ruses, or Ovid's erotic excesses; Virgil's narrative of divinely sanctioned national origins embodied the *translatio studii et imperii*, a movement of imperial power and culture from the eastern Mediterranean to Rome and beyond. Writing at the height of the Augustan Age on the eve of Jesus's birth, Virgil also occupied a critical boundary between Christianity and paganism. His fourth *Eclogue* was taken as a prediction of the coming of Christ; his *Aeneid*, it was thought, by lending support to Augustus had helped to usher in the *Pax Romana* and, as such, presided over the very origins of Christianity.¹⁰

Moreover, whereas upper-class readers were expected to access Virgilian wisdom in the original Latin, Homer's influence was thwarted by comparative linguistic and textual distance. Even among classicists, Renaissance mythology compendia were "considered far more authoritative than Homer's epics."¹¹ George Chapman's *Whole Works of Homer* (1616), the first full English translation of the Homeric epics, helped to advance Homer's vernacular accessibility; however, by then the *Aeneid's* influence on perceptions of what heroic writing should be and do was already deeply entrenched in British culture.

The *Aeneid* and the interpretive traditions associated with it therefore strongly conditioned the seventeenth century's understanding of epic. Foremost among these was the idea of the epic as a handbook for the ruling classes. Commentators saw in Aeneas a series of object lessons in princely behavior, from his hint of self-doubt in a sea storm, to his abandonment of Dido in pursuit of his godly mission, to his prudence and self-possession in his encounters with the Latins. In *The Defence of Poesy* (1595), Philip Sidney encouraged deliberate mimicry of Aeneas's manner of self-government:

Only let Aeneas be worn in the tablet of your memory, how he governeth himself in the ruin of his country: in the preserving his old father, and carrying away his religious ceremonies, in obeying the god's commandment to leave Dido though not only all passionate kindness, but even the human consideration of virtuous gratefulness would have craved other of him.¹²

¹⁰ Cf. David Scott Wilson-Okamura, *Virgil in the Renaissance* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 70–3.

¹¹ Harry Vredeveld, "'Deaf as Ulysses to the Siren's Song': The Story of a Forgotten Topos," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 54, no. 3 (Autumn 2001), 846–82, at pp. 863–4.

¹² Philip Sidney, *The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), pp. 231–2.

The epic's lofty status among Renaissance genres reflected this interpretive history, which honored the *Aeneid* as part of a poetic career (the Virgilian *rota*) in which the role of royal counselor was the culmination of a lifetime of writing.¹³ Even as Augustus and the Augustan age came under increasing scrutiny during the Restoration, Virgilian–Augustan patronage continued to provide a normative example of what the epic could be and do.

This social function literally defined the epic. Whereas modern theorists tend to define the genre by enumerating common stylistic and narrative features, seventeenth-century theorists defined it by its capacity to shape the “manners” (Lat. *mores*, Fr. *moeurs*) of its readers, a civic category that loosely correlates with our modern idea of “culture,” encompassing not only codes of politeness, but also attitudes toward authority, codes of honor, codes of hospitality, gender roles, educational practices, and patterns of belief.¹⁴ The epic was classed as “heroic poetry,” an umbrella term for hero-centered texts that placed “good and exemplary things and actions” before the eyes of teachable audiences.¹⁵ Conceptually, it remained a close neighbor of heroic drama, romance, historical poetry, and the panegyric, which were presumed to serve similar social functions, if not to rely on identical didactic techniques.¹⁶ Among these, “epic” was distinguished by its written medium, its textual precedents, and the manner of its absorption. Dryden, a writer competent in multiple heroic genres, declared that “the Epick Poem is more for the Manners, and Tragedy for the Passions,” a distinction that he then elaborated by outlining the differences in the two genres’ reformatory effects on “Ill Habits of the Mind.” Whereas an experience of tragic drama was necessarily brief and ephemeral, the epic required protracted close reading, over days, months, or even years. Whereas “One puts off a Fit like the Quinquina, and relieves us only for a time; the other roots out the Distemper, and gives a healthful habit.”¹⁷

Recognizing the prominence of this humanist instructional ideal prepares us to appreciate the topical and formal diversity of a genre that was still neither wholly about martial action nor yet given over to escapist fantasies for their own sake. Seventeenth-century English heroic poems traditionally included in surveys of “epic” do not look much like one another. They vary in length, completeness (several are fragmentary), rhyme scheme, tone, and topical focus. Abraham Cowley’s two epics—*The Civil War* (1643) and *Davidis, a Sacred Poem of the Troubles of David* (1656)—differ markedly in topic and technique. The former offers a

¹³ See Robin Sowerby’s apt comment on this issue, “Epic,” in Stuart Gillespie and David Hopkins (eds.), *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English, Volume 3: 1660–1790* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 149–72, at pp. 149–50.

¹⁴ For instance, compare the definition of “epic” in the *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (2000) with Le Bossu’s notion that “The EPOPEA is a Discourse invented by Art, to form the Manners by such Instructions as are disguis’d under the Allegories of some one important Action, which is related in Verse, after a probable, diverting, and surprizing Manner.” See René Le Bossu, *Treatise of the Epick Poem*, trans. W. J. (London, 1695), reprinted in *Le Bossu and Voltaire on the Epic*, ed. Stuart Curran (Gainesville: Scholars Facsimiles & Reprints, 1970), p. 6.

¹⁵ Alan D. Isler, “Heroic Poetry and Sidney’s Two *Arcadias*,” *PMLA*, 83, no. 2 (May 1968), 368–79, at p. 374. I have benefited from Isler’s discussion of the terminological issue.

¹⁶ See Dryden’s “Account” of *Annus Mirabilis* (1667), in *The Works of John Dryden*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker and H. T. Swedenberg, Jr., 20 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1956–2000), vol. 1, pp. 49–56; also James D. Garrison, *Dryden and the Tradition of Panegyric* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1975).

¹⁷ John Dryden, dedication of the *Aeneis*, in *Works*, vol. v, pp. 271–2.

journalistic account of several contemporary battles, lists noble participants by name, and bemoans the contemporary "rage" that "does *England* from it selfe divide" (book I, line 1); the latter, with an elaborate system of Christian "machinery," imposes a Virgilian "pattern" on its Old Testament material by portraying its hero as "the greatest *Monarch* that ever sat upon the most *famous* Throne of the whole Earth."¹⁸ William Davenant's *Gondibert* (1651), by contrast to other contemporary epics, is wholly fictional; Dryden's *Annus Mirabilis* (1667) reprises the "historical" mode of Cowley's *Civil War* but incorporates baldly fictionalized embellishments. Authors differed in their valuation of verisimilitude and their treatment of "sacred" (i.e., biblical) material. Moreover, although heroic couplets were rapidly becoming the default meter of English epic, the seventeenth century utilized the "Gondibert stanza" (a decasyllabic quatrain reprised in *Annus Mirabilis*) and also blank verse: in *Paradise Lost*, Milton famously rejected the "barbarous" rhymes of royalist epics. What binds these poems together is a conviction that the genre's efficacy hinges on a convincing representation of the central hero. In this understanding, the epic narrative involves the prince in a story of national foundation or political discord that confirms his importance to the polity. The genre's tendency toward idealization renders attractive the prince's embodiment or pursuit of virtue, so that readers' imitation of or meditation upon that ideal might contribute to political stability, as by making aristocrats into good stewards or encouraging commoners to admire the ruling classes as natural, righteous leaders.

AVENUES FOR INVESTIGATION IN THE RESTORATION EPIC

The clearest example of this Virgilian-humanist conception is *Gondibert*, which, though unfinished, was intended as an illustration of the first formal theory of epic in English and, as such, provided a reference point for subsequent authors. Composed during the Interregnum while Davenant awaited trial for treason, *Gondibert* reads as a philosophical treatise on virtuous conduct, rendered as a heroic narrative. The plot pits "*Oswald the great*" against "*greater Gondibert*" as rival claimants to the Lombard throne and rival combatants in the heart of Princess Rhodalind.¹⁹ Duke Gondibert is supremely virtuous; Prince Oswald only slightly less so. The narrative offers a sustained juxtaposition between the two princes' leadership styles, their behavior as lovers, and (even after Oswald's death) the consequences of their respective models of leadership for their subordinates. Pleasures of the reading experience were presumably intended to consist less in the anticipation of suspenseful plot twists (though there are some of these) than in the ongoing contemplation of manifold forms of virtue in action. An early battle displays valor and soldierly obedience on both sides. Oswald's defeat precipitates both a revenge plot and, for Gondibert, a convalescence at the court of Astragon, a philosopher's retreat where he falls in love with the beautiful and virtuous Birtha; darker subplots are introduced relatively late in the story. At the local level, even Davenant's minor characters beg for emulation. For instance, when the aging Lombard monarch hears

¹⁸ *Poems Written by A. Cowley* (London, 1656), sig. (b)2^r.

¹⁹ William Davenant, *Gondibert*, ed. David F. Gladish (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 62.

the news of Gondibert's victory (for which he had secretly hoped), he remains externally composed:

This *Arribert* with outward patience hears,
 Though wounded by the cause for which they fought;
 With mod'rate joy the death of *Oswald* beares;
 Yet justly to extremes it inward wrought. (book II, canto ii, stanza 18)

The lesson offered here, adapted from the *Aeneid* (book I, lines 208–9), relates to the practical matter of how to hold one's face when getting mixed news, or, more abstractly, to the heavy responsibility of maintaining a settled state while reconciling competing public needs. Like many of the poem's details, the passage also serves obliquely to heighten Gondibert's virtuous stature: we see his greatness through the eyes of those around him. In this bifold manner, the poem's narrative arc simultaneously compliments the hero and invites reflection on one of the poem's guiding themes: the temptation of seeking political power for its own sake. Oswald is a little too ambitious; Gondibert's seeming impregnability to such long-ing threatens to detain him from his true public calling—though one suspects, with David Gladish, that if Davenant had completed the story, he might have “allow[ed] for Gondibert to marry BIRTHA and get the throne” (p. xxii), thereby sloughing off the Virgilian precedent that would force the virtuous hero to choose between his Dido and his public duty.

This Virgilian notion of epic carried with it several expectations worthy of attention. One was an idea of intentionality. Seventeenth-century theorists saw the epic as a “designed” form of writing: a poem architected on the basis of prior models to achieve appropriate rhetorical and didactic goals, possibly in accordance with a divine plan. Virgil had imitated Homer with a nationalist political design in view, and writers from classical times forward (e.g., Statius, Lucan) imitated Virgil in turn, even when expressing alternate political ideals.

A corollary of this understanding is that formal imitation need not be perceived as a weakness of seventeenth-century heroic poetry. On the contrary, imitation carried with it the opportunity for a self-aware intertextual dialogue in which each new poet figured forth his own heroic tale as an alternative to the cultural and spiritual lessons of its predecessors. Virgil had been a master of this technique: the *Aeneid* recycles plot points from both the *Odyssey* (*Aen.* books I–VI) and the *Iliad* (*Aen.* VII–XII) in a condensed narrative of wandering and conquest that makes the Homeric heroes foils for Aeneas's *pietas* and circumspection. Viewed intertextually, the *Aeneid* makes an argument about the necessary qualities of Augustan civilization by comparison to the savagery and pursuit of glory (*kleos*) in Homer's Greece. For many medieval and Renaissance epic writers, a crucial intertextual question was how best to Christianize a pagan genre—a challenge affecting the handling of classical allusions, the use of allegory, the deployment of divine machinery, and the hero's defining attributes. For Davenant, however, the crucial intertextual issue was less the line between Christianity and paganism than the problem of religiosity. *Gondibert* famously excludes the supernatural elements traditionally associated with the genre, such as tutelary divinities and invocations of the muse. Although Gondibert is Christian, and although his upright humility satisfies Christian spiritual ideals, he displays no unique status of divine election beyond his obvious fitness for the throne. The agent who arrives to urge Gondibert to pursue his public duty rather than dallying at the court of Astragon is not a divine messenger, as in Virgil's Carthage, but Goltho, one of Gondibert's men. In this textual departure, Davenant

asserts that monarchical authority comes not from divine anointment, but from bloodlines, natural charisma, and character.

A third consideration involves the epic's capacity to speak to seventeenth-century English politico-philosophical dilemmas. This element has received much recent scholarly attention. During the Interregnum, the epic functioned as an activist genre when few other outlets were available for royalist dramaturges. Translations, too, such as the *Aeneid* (for monarchists) and the *Pharsalia* (for republicans) resonated with contemporary struggles to define the proper relationship between leaders and their subjects.²⁰ The epic's representation of a prince in his relation to political subordinates, rivals, divine powers, and nature lent itself to commentaries on good government. It accommodated allusions and *à clef* associations that flew under the radar of censors during moments of political vigilance. Politics informed the "contest over the proper norms and models for a heroic poem" that Barbara Lewalski traces in the period: an intertextual dispute mediated by metrical choices, book divisions (twelve being Virgilian), and the inclusion or exclusion of divine machinery.²¹ In this "contest," entrants like Davenant, with his austere secularism, competed to diagnose the nature and purpose of modern government. To sharpen and extend this line of enquiry, we might look to seventeenth-century epic theory, which, in the language of neo-Aristotelian instrumentalism, reveals the genre's sometimes coded engagements with contemporary politics.

THE ENGLISH EPIC AND THE PROBLEM OF OBEDIENCE

Consider Davenant's seminal theory that heroic poetry encourages "obedience," a theory that subsequent epic writers knew and referred to directly in their own, sometimes contrary formulations of the genre.²² In the "Preface to *Gondibert*" (Paris, 1650), composed in exile and dedicated to Thomas Hobbes (whose response was appended), Davenant envisions heroic poetry as an agent of civic order superior to Religion, Arms, Policy, and the Law. While these other governmental aides rely on physical and rhetorical coercion, "the persuasions of Poesy in stead of menaces, are Harmonious and delightfull insinuations, and never any constraint; unlesse the ravishment of Reason may be call'd Force. And such Force, (contrary to that which *Diuines, Commanders, Statesmen* and *Lawyers* use) begets such obedience as is never weary or griev'd" (p. 38). In Davenant's trickle-down theory of dissemination, society's "Chiefs," having been improved by their poetic reading, serve as living models for their political subordinates. "Princes, and Nobles being reform'd and made Angelicall by

²⁰ Cf. Anthony Welch, "Epic Romance, Royalist Retreat, and the English Civil War," *Modern Philology*, 105, no. 3 (Feb. 2008), 570–602; Colin Burrow, "Virgil in English Translation," in Charles Martindale (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 21–37; and David Norbrook, "Lucan and the Poetry of Civil War," in *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics, 1627–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 23–42.

²¹ Lewalski, "Paradise Lost and the Contest," p. 153.

²² Dryden cited Davenant's preface in the introduction to *Annus Mirabilis*; Milton was said to have assisted Davenant in gaining his freedom while the latter was awaiting trial in the Tower of London; Cowley also had biographical connections with Davenant.

the Heroick, will be predominant lights, which the People cannot chuse but use for direction; as Glowormes take in, and keep the Sunns beames till they shine, and make day to themselves" (p. 38).

In content, Davenant's theory was little more than a variation on the Virgilian-humanist educational ideal. In his formulation, *Gondibert's* virtuous heroes, by improving its (normatively male) ruling-class readers, would influence the entire body politic. But Davenant provided fodder for contemplation in his Hobbesian vision of government and his unabashed desertion of the "common" reader (e.g., pp. 13, 38), which scorned a burgeoning contemporary print culture. Moreover, his vocabulary was timely: "obedience" was a key term in political and religious treatises. In this, Davenant raised a compelling set of questions about the transformative potential of English heroic poetry.

Some of these questions related to the craft of writing. For those who accepted the premise that epic poetry should inspire obedience, was *Gondibert*, with its parade of virtuous heroes, the most effective means of fulfilling that aim? Some questions involved diagnosing the needs of the polity. Most Englanders assumed that the people's obedience to God, king, and country was the basis of a settled body politic. Nonetheless, the tumultuous period from the Civil Wars to the 1688–9 Revolution demonstrated the difficulty of reconciling these loyalties gracefully with one another. In light of these historical circumstances, and in light of England's status as a nation in which the monarch was technically the head of the Anglican Church, which forms of obedience did English epic writers prioritize? What "manners" should their poems inculcate?

Royalist poets tended to prioritize obedience to temporal powers, with all the complexity and contradiction embodied in that choice. They modeled deference to royalty in their prefaces, made secular arguments for respecting monarchical authority, and promoted traditional assumptions that in obeying the monarch one was obeying God. Within this category, political visions ranged from absolutism to mixed monarchy and varied in their religiosity. At one extreme was the writer and printer John Ogilby. Known for his lavish, illustrated "Royal Folio" editions of the classics, Ogilby adopted postures of submission to royal authority so fulsome that he endured ongoing ridicule as "groveling *Ogleby*."²³ He dedicated his *Iliads* (1660) to the newly restored Charles II with the inducement that Homer "*appears a most constant Assertor of the Divine right of Princes and Monarchical Government*"—hardly a foregone conclusion, as Jack Lynch has shown, for the Iliadic conflict between Agamemnon (claimant to divine right) and Achilles (who challenges him) was read with shifting sympathies by English royalists and republicans, Tories and Whigs.²⁴ With a comparatively democratic sensibility, Dryden relished the role of royal propagandist. In heroic poems like *Annus Mirabilis* and the best-selling *Absalom and Achitophel* (1682), rather than trusting the king's virtue to speak for itself, as Davenant had advised, Dryden used the delights of poetry to win the people's obedience. As his laureateship advanced, Dryden playfully absorbed contemporary attacks on the king's person: Paul Hammond notes that, in *Absalom and Achitophel*, Dryden's "astute and even cheeky" portrait of the biblical patriarch David appropriated popular lampoons, recuperating the king's image by rendering Charles II "attractively energetic"

²³ Commendatory poem attached to *Dryden's Virgil*, cited in Dryden, *Works*, vol. v, p. 59. See Ogilby's Dedication to *Africa* (1670) for an instance of prostrate obedience.

²⁴ Jack Lynch, "Political Ideology in Translations of the *Iliad*, 1660–1715," *Translation and Literature*, 7, no. 1 (1998), 23–41.

rather than threatening in his sexual promiscuity.²⁵ Cowley's *Davideis*, which had taken up the same Old Testament story, interlaced it with Christian machinery (Lucifer, Gabriel, etc.) in a manner that threatened to profane the sacred. The *Davideis* has been described as an exercise in "Christian rationalism" that "deliberately downplays the marvelous elements . . . in order to display the [hero's] real virtues"—a tactic that aligns Cowley's approach with his friend Davenant's.²⁶ Although its representational compromises may seem muddy on questions of absolutism or divine right, it can nevertheless be contrasted with its epic successor, Daniel Defoe's *Jure Divino* (1706). *Jure Divino*, also based on the Book of Samuel, attacks ideas of divine right in a twelve-book "Satyr" promoting a Lockean vision of monarchy and government.²⁷

While mapping this contest, distinguishing sharply between sober "epic" and rowdy, silly "mock-heroic" may obscure important dialogic continuities. After all, satire was seen as a reformatory genre, much like panegyric forms; and there is reason to see Restoration satire like Samuel Butler's *Hudibras* (1662, 1663, 1667) participating in the political dialogues that shaped the epic's seventeenth-century development. Ashley Marshall reads *Hudibras* as "a seriously polemical contribution to a contemporary debate about how dissenters of all stripes should be handled in the Restoration period"—a discussant, in other words, within a broad conversation about how best to manage English disobedience.²⁸

But one of the most striking participants in this conversation must have been John Milton. Against the backdrop of contemporary royalist epics, Milton's representation of "man's first disobedience" (book I, line 1) reads as a rebuttal of the very assumption that soliciting long-term obedience to earthly leaders is a reasonable political goal. The drama of *Paradise Lost* (1667), presided over by a monarchic God, revolves around the all-but-inevitable plucking of the forbidden fruit. Expository early books establish Satan's heroic investment in the perversion of mankind; and, from our first sight of Adam and Eve, the principal epic conflict is revealed as the immense psychological challenge of obeying a single paradisiacal rule. In Adam's words,

God hath pronounced it death to taste that tree,
The only sign of our obedience left
Among so many signs of power and rule
Conferred upon us, and dominion given
Over all other creatures that possess
Earth, air, and sea.²⁹

²⁵ Paul Hammond, "The King's Two Bodies: Representations of Charles II," in *The Making of Restoration Poetry* (Cambridge and Rochester, N.Y.: D. S. Brewer, 2006), pp. 107–36, at pp. 133–4.

²⁶ Timothy Dykstal, "The Epic Reticence of Abraham Cowley," *SEL*, 31, no. 1 (Winter 1991), 95–115, at pp. 101, 105.

²⁷ Michael Austin, "Saul and the Social Contract: Constructions of 1 Samuel 8–11 in Cowley's *Davideis* and Defoe's *Jure Divino*," *Papers on Language and Literature*, 32, no. 4 (Fall 1996), 410–36. Austin builds on Paula Backscheider, "The Verse Essay, John Locke, and Defoe's *Jure Divino*," *ELH*, 55, no. 1 (Spring 1988), 99–124.

²⁸ Ashley Marshall, "The Aims of Butler's Satire in *Hudibras*," *Modern Philology*, 105, no. 4 (May 2008), 637–65, at p. 641.

²⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1998), book IV, lines 427–32.

Robert Filmer had seen in this biblical episode the origins of a divinely instated patriarchal order. Milton similarly traces his readers' origins from "our general ancestor[s]" (book IV, lines 659, 492); he emphasizes the transgression, however, rather than the delegation of dominion, and he showcases the disenfranchised political subordinate. In Milton's richly detailed reimagining, a reader can sympathize with Eve's compulsion to taste the forbidden fruit. She is frequently silent or absent during the Archangel Raphael's tutorials on obedience. Even if these exchanges help to allay Adam's "thirst . . . of knowledge" (book VIII, line 8), Eve's goes unsatisfied. Adam, for his part, has been at pains to wrap his mind around a principle out of the realm of his experience. Given this epistemological staging, can we really blame him for choosing love over duty, in defiance of the Virgilian heroic model? Although Milton labels the fateful transgression a "tragic" moment and an expression of free will (book IX, line 6), the psychological complexity of the presentation lends itself to an understanding of the poem as an argument that the inclination to disobey is written into human nature, or at least into human history.

This exposition of human frailty departs sharply from Davenant's virtue-laden epic model. If a reader of *Paradise Lost* learns to "obey," she does so neither by imitating the formal hero (Satan) nor by repeating Adam and Eve's transgressions, but by resisting that temptation. Stanley Fish has written of the forms of wariness and awareness that "these encounters with demonic attraction" make us feel.³⁰ In this respect, Milton models his epic on Homer rather than Virgil (as they were commonly read): the *Iliad* rewards readerly skepticism rather than unthinking imitation by presenting Achilles' wrath and Agamemnon's bullying tyranny as monitory examples. By extension, *Paradise Lost* appeals to a nation of self-assertive individuals, made virtuous by testing their faith against contrary persuasions. It also prioritizes spiritual commitment over temporal placidity. David Quint observes that, by the end of the poem's concluding educational sequence, "Adam has learned the good of obedience, but only to God, not to the worldly powers he still may subvert."³¹ Rather than insisting on obedience to earthly monarchs (who are fallible, in Adam's image), Milton envisions a commonwealth animated by a *concordia discors* of disagreement and debate.

Nor did Milton have the last word. The flurry of epics that appeared after *Paradise Lost* (including his own *Paradise Regained*, 1671) suggested that the jury was still out on how the English heroic poem could best inspire "obedience." One of these texts was *Order and Disorder; or, The World Made and Undone* (books I–V, 1679; books I–XX, 2001), whose couplet recasting of the Creation and the Fall has long been viewed as a "veiled rebuke of Milton."³² David Norbrook's recent attribution of the poem to Lucy Hutchinson, a "fiercely Puritan" writer and a committed republican (pp. xii–xiii), has cultivated fresh interest in the poem, which has been mined for its complex use of scriptural material and its feminist responsiveness to patriarchy.³³ The counterpoint to Hutchinson's political subversiveness

³⁰ Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in "Paradise Lost"* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1967), p. 22.

³¹ David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), p. 268.

³² C. A. Moore, "Miltoniana (1679–1741)," *Modern Philology*, 24 (1927), 321–39, at p. 321.

³³ Cf. "Order and Disorder: The Poem and Its Contexts," in David Norbrook (ed.), *Order and Disorder* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), pp. xii–lii; and Shannon Miller, "Maternity, Marriage, and Contract: Lucy Hutchinson's Response to Patriarchal Theory in *Order and Disorder*," reprinted

is her determined Christian faithfulness, which arguably even outdoes Milton's. In this, *Order and Disorder* stands in contrast to both her own earlier Lucretianism and the secularism of her female predecessor, Margaret Cavendish, whose mid-century links to epic have received recent attention.³⁴

LE BOSSU, THE REVOLUTION, AND THE FINAL FLOURISHING OF THE VIRGILIAN MODEL

A second spurt of epic activity came with the 1688–9 Revolution, which was widely perceived as a happy conclusion to the problems of obedience that had been plaguing the country for so long. Many onlookers rejoiced that England had finally recovered the proper alignment of church and state: it had banished the threat of temporal and spiritual tyranny embodied in James while avoiding the bloodshed of a monarchical execution or a long civil war. Epics by Samuel Wesley, Richard Blackmore, and John Dryden—all modeled explicitly on Virgil—honored the Revolution as a defining moment in English history.

A catalyst for these compositions was René Le Bossu's neo-Aristotelian *Traité du Poëme Épique* (Paris, 1675), which was translated into English in 1695 with a dedication to Blackmore and quoted approvingly by every epic commentator of the 1690s. Le Bossu's analysis, although focused on classical epic, supplied a vocabulary and focus for modern epic writing. It delineated a procedure for epic composition: poets first determined a "Moral" and then designed their poems to inculcate that lesson³⁵—a conception that may well have echoed seventeenth-century practice. In addition, it provided influential readings of Homeric and Virgilian epic. With a historicist bent, it codified and elaborated the idea that the *Aeneid* was designed to inspire "obedience." It also offered fresh readings of Homer. (A contemporary praised Le Bossu for unmasking Homer's "sacred Mysteries.")³⁶

As proof of the lingering potency of the Virgilian epic model, both Wesley, in *Life of Our Blessed Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, An Heroic Poem. In Ten Books* (1693), and Blackmore, in *Prince Arthur: an Heroick Poem in Ten Books* (1695), explicitly reprise Virgil's "Moral" and "Design" as explained by Le Bossu. Both authors arrange their plots to resemble the narrative arc of the *Aeneid*; both apparently imagined their epics inspiring "obedience" to God and monarch(s) alike. Wesley's epic, while dedicated to Queen Mary, transmutes Davenant's secular vision of epic influence into a spiritual project with Jesus Christ at its head. Blackmore, adopting a comparatively earthly focus, revives Arthurian legend in a tale of national foundation and liberation. His virtuous prince is a modern Aeneas, seeking to "enlarge the Christian Empire."³⁷

In *Ashgate Critical Essays on Women Writers in England, 1550–1700: Volume 5, Anne Clifford and Lucy Hutchinson*, ed. Mihoko Suzuki (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 295–332.

³⁴ Rex, "The Nature of Epic," pp. 11–32.

³⁵ See A. F. B. Clark, *Boileau and the French Classical Critics in England (1660–1830)* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Édouard, 1925; N.Y.: Russell & Russell, 1965), esp. pp. 243–8, 256–9. Clark shows that commentators on Le Bossu emphasized this point. For further background see H. T. Swedenberg, Jr., *The Theory of the Epic in England, 1650–1800* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1944).

³⁶ John Sheffield, Duke of Buckingham, *An Essay upon Poetry* (London, 1682), pp. 20–1.

³⁷ Richard Blackmore, *Prince Arthur: An Heroick Poem in Ten Books*, 2nd ed. (London, 1695), p. 13.

Although *Prince Arthur* picks up where *Paradise Lost* left off (with the recently vanquished Satan "tortur'd with Despair," "plot[ting] Revenge," and "meditat[ing] new War," p. 1), Blackmore conducts the conflict toward a glorification of the "Pious British Prince" (p. 14), who has God on his side and deserves to be obeyed. Blackmore also incorporates a synopsis of Christian biblical history from the Creation to the Resurrection that normalizes habitual "obedience" rather than disobedience, thereby smoothing out the wrinkles in Milton's earlier account.

A contrary impulse was stirring, however, in an unlikely place: Dryden's verse translation of the *Works of Virgil* (1697), which was published as part of a historic subscription venture. Dryden's *Aeneis* is in many respects a serviceable, artful rendering of the letter of his Latin original: eighteenth-century scholars justifiably quote it as a representation of the period's "Virgil." Moreover, like Wesley and Blackmore, Dryden discusses Le Bossu's analysis approvingly and at great length in his critical preface. But as modern studies demonstrate, this translation neither embodies nor seems likely to initiate a wholly "obedient" posture toward royal authority. Dryden dedicated it to a trio of oppositional figures, and scholars have repeatedly noted in Dryden's Aeneas shadings of character that suggest a skeptical, anti-Williamite stance.³⁸ It has been easy to view these peculiarities as disillusioned, partisan expressions of despair at William II's enthronement and Dryden's attendant loss of the laureateship; however, John Barnard's recent bibliographical work on Dryden's subscription list suggests otherwise. Dryden's supporters included an even balance of Whigs and Tories, an unprecedented array of high-ranking members of British government and leaders of British culture, and a selection of commoners and female readers whose presence in such a venture would have seemed anathema to Davenant.³⁹ Dryden and others viewed the project as a monumental event, inclusive in its representation of Britain (minus the king). I would therefore posit a theory: that Dryden crafted this translation as a response to the longstanding dialogue about how the epic cultivated obedience to gods and monarchs. His revision of Virgil was authorized by the Revolution, which was seen by many onlookers as a manifestation of Britain's peculiarly "limited" monarchy, a form of government that required a culture of skepticism to sustain itself. Dryden therefore reimagined the Virgilian hermeneutic experience as a meditation on princely untrustworthiness from the people's perspective. In neoclassical terms, he renovated Virgil in accordance with a new "moral."⁴⁰

MAPPING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY EPIC

Thus, far from stifling creativity, Le Bossu's treatise provided a stimulus and a sense of purpose for epic writing. It remains to be determined how long, and in what forms, this

³⁸ Cf. Steven N. Zwicker, "Politics and Translation," in *Politics and Language in Dryden's Poetry: The Arts of Disguise* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984); and Tanya Caldwell, *Time to Begin Anew: Dryden's Georgics and Aeneis* (Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 2000).

³⁹ John Barnard, "Dryden, Tonson, and the Patrons of *The Works of Virgil* (1697)," in Paul Hammond and David Hopkins (eds.), *John Dryden: Tercentenary Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 174–239.

⁴⁰ I elaborate this theory in chapter two of "Poetry and the Common Weal: Conceiving Civic Utility in British Poetics of the Long Eighteenth Century," PhD dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 2010, pp. 126–226.

influence persisted.⁴¹ John Dennis and Joseph Addison adapted Le Bossu's critical methods in their comments on Blackmore and Milton. Pope called upon Le Bossu while translating Homer. One wonders whether Pope's friend Jonathan Swift also had in mind the *Treatise's* gloss on the *Odyssey* while writing *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). Le Bossu represents the *Odyssey* as an equivocal argument for princely travel abroad: although exposure to foreign courts may offer "Political Instruction," the prince's physical absence can create "disorders" within "his own Kingdom, . . . which end not till his return" (pp. 23–4). Does *Gulliver's Travels* not offer a cheeky variation on this concept—a final twist in which Gulliver's sovereign "disorders," fostered during his sojourn with the Houyhnhnms, follow him home? In a striking departure from his Homeric model, rather than concluding his tale with a romantic union and the restoration of civilized life, Swift presents a well-traveled hero so transformed by his final voyage that he is disgusted at the thought of copulating with his wife and consoled only by his daily dose of equine conversation.

Henry Fielding almost certainly kept Le Bossu in his sightlines. Neo-Aristotelian terminology shapes his prefatory assertion in *Joseph Andrews* (1742) that, "when any kind of Writing contains all its other Parts, such as Fable, Action, Characters, Sentiment, and Diction, and is deficient in Metre only; it seems, I think, reasonable to refer it to the Epic."⁴² Fielding has therefore long been seen as a "comic-epic" writer steeped in the classical tradition and in theories of epic based on that tradition. But to what end? Robert Hume, noting an attenuation of scholarly interest in Fielding in recent years, has pointed out the vexing matter of Fielding's didacticism as a possible avenue for further exploration.⁴³ Fielding developed a reputation as a Christian moralist, and yet this twentieth-century view is at odds with contemporary eighteenth-century worries that Fielding's works would "entertain none but porters or watermen," or that his supposedly positive exempla "perhaps invite to vice more than the contrast figures alarm us into virtue" (quoted pp. 226–7). Locating Fielding's writings within a longer history of English epic production may help us to make sense of this early reception, and it may help us to achieve a more nuanced appreciation of the didactic aims shaping his works.

After all, epic "morals," in the technical neoclassical sense of the term, had not typically been concerned narrowly with Christian ideals, but had occupied a contested space between what we would now describe as separate forms of civic authority: religion and politics. Fielding's prose epics, with their comically flawed characters and their exposé of "Affectation," attempt to negotiate a compromise between competing didactic ideals: the spiritual humility deemed necessary for Christian salvation and the political self-assertion deemed necessary for a happy British state—a compromise so difficult to achieve in epic writing that Dryden, in 1693, had predicted the impossibility of writing a successful modern epic on foundations laid by the ancients. The subversiveness of Fielding's contribution

⁴¹ The groundwork has been laid by Loyd Douglas, "A Severe Animadversion on Bossu," *PMLA*, 62, no. 3 (Sept. 1947), 690–706. Also see Clark, *Boileau and the French Classical Critics in England*, esp. pp. 243–61; Frederick M. Keener, "Pope, *The Dunciad*, Virgil, and the New Historicism of Le Bossu," *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 15, no. 3 (Nov. 1991), 35–57; and Jennifer Snead, "Epic for an Information Age: Pope's 1743 *Dunciad* in Four Books and the Theater Licensing Act," *ELH*, 77, no. 1 (Spring 2010), 195–216.

⁴² Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, ed. Martin C. Battestin (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1967), p. 3.

⁴³ Robert D. Hume, "Fielding at 300: Elusive, Confusing, Misappropriated, or (Perhaps) Obvious?," *Modern Philology*, 108, no. 2 (Nov. 2010), 224–62.

to English epic history, as it was then seen, surely reflected his notion that “the best Men are but little known,” and therefore in need of a “Writer” to “spread their History farther” (*Joseph Andrews*, p. 17). In justifying an epic that invests its readers in the exploits of a chaste rustic (a lover, not a fighter) and an ale-drinking, impecunious parson, Fielding has moved so far from Davenant’s century-old notion of princes as “predominant lights, which the People cannot chuse but use for direction” that it can be easy to miss the political substitution enacted in his didactic concept. Davenant’s heroic poem addressed and supported the highly visible ruling class; Fielding’s comic prose epic makes the unseen commoner the basis of British virtue and prosperity—a noteworthy development in just a century’s time, even if Fielding’s conciliatory endings appear staid and conservative today.

One of the most striking features of eighteenth-century epic writing was its normative dismissal of the Virgilian–Augustan paradigm as an appropriate model for British government, culture, and poetic composition. Uneasiness with the Virgilian model arguably began in the Restoration with Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and the parodies of Virgil that proliferated alongside it.⁴⁴ But, after the Revolution, the watershed rejection of the Virgilian model came from Dryden, England’s former laureate, whose *Virgil* resolutely summoned the idea of the epic as a princely handbook only to dismiss it. After Dryden, epic writers repeatedly reenacted this dismissal. Samuel Garth’s mock-heroic, *The Dispensary* (1699), took Blackmore as its target, the physician-poet who still clung to royalist ideals approaching absolutism. Pope’s *Rape of the Lock* (1712–17) engaged with the English epic tradition not by championing aristocrats as models for the rest of the population, but by mocking their pretensions to forms of cultural sophistication that denied their human origins. Nicholas Rowe, the poet laureate under George I, translated not Virgil but Lucan (1718), whose rousing defenses of “liberty” accorded with an emergent Whig ideology even if Rowe did not wholly embrace Lucan’s “anti-Augustan” message.⁴⁵ Then there was *The Dunciad* (1728–43), a work that, for all its strangeness, occupied within Pope’s vocational trajectory the place of a capstone epic performance. Although it is hard to say what positive values *The Dunciad* asserts, the poem positions itself repeatedly, in multiple versions, as an affront to royal power and authority. *The Dunciad Variorum* (1729) contained an announcement that on behalf of the poet, Robert Walpole had presented the poem to George II, who had approved it in turn, apparently without reading past the fifth line: “Say from what cause, in vain decry’d and curst, | Still Dunce the second reigns like Dunce the first” (book 1, lines 5–6). In this sense, Pope was himself “the first who brings | The Smithfield Muses to the ears of kings” (book 1, lines 1–2)—a passage that smacks of impertinence, as does the eventual rewriting of the poem with the then-poet laureate, Colley Cibber, as its debased protagonist. Jennifer Snead dubs *The Dunciad* a poem for an “Information Age,” and it was surely this, both in its posture of defiance against the Theater Licensing Act of 1737 and in its printed textuality.⁴⁶ An alternative conception of the epic poet as an oral performer was just around the corner; *The Dunciad*, however,

⁴⁴ Tanya Caldwell, “Restoration Parodies of Virgil and English Literary Values,” *HLQ*, 69, no. 3 (Sept. 2006), 383–402.

⁴⁵ Robin Sowerby, “The Augustan Lucan,” *Translation and Literature*, 14, no. 2 (Autumn 2005), 148–78, at p. 165.

⁴⁶ See Snead, “Epic for an Information Age.”

follows a Virgilian schema, both in its plot and in its status as written epic. Pope replaces the *Aeneid's* traditional hermeneutic of inspiring obedience with a relentlessly enigmatic, text-based experience that, as Snead observes, encourages readers "to make their own decisions as to literary value" (p. 203).

The longstanding epic dialogue about English "obedience" that had begun with Davenant and was later mediated by Le Bossu would not die an immediate death after 1700; it does, however, appear to have been shunted into other genres. Toni Bowers situates the novels of Samuel Richardson within an ongoing "tory" debate over the possibility of virtuous resistance—a problem of English political philosophy expressed in an emergent novelistic concern for representing the experience of victimized women and female agents. In the simplest terms, "Both *Pamela* and *Clarissa* recount the struggle of virtuous Christian protagonists to practice passive obedience and non-resistance toward authority figures who misuse or abdicate their prerogative."⁴⁷ There is more work to do to determine how far, and in what forms, this discourse proliferated in eighteenth-century letters, and also to what extent it retained purposeful links with the formal verse epic. Concerns with English "obedience" and the maintenance of English "liberty" were not limited to the Tories. Christine Gerrard reads James Thomson's *Liberty* (1735–6) as a sober Whig counterpart to Pope's *Dunciad*, with its presiding Goddess Liberty as the guiding spirit behind the historical progress of public virtue, and Richard Glover's *Leonidas* (1737), a formal verse epic with a Spartan topic, also the-matized liberty and resistance.⁴⁸

THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY EPIC AND THE HOMERIC MODEL

The changes in epic activity that characterized the eighteenth century therefore echoed the growing distrust of Augustus Caesar and Augustan Rome that Howard Weinbrot has documented in the period.⁴⁹ A second shaping influence—one that sometimes worked in tandem with the decline of the Virgilian–Augustan ideal to discourage sober epic-writing and sometimes worked against it—was the period's rising fascination with Homer. Latin and vernacular translations of Homer had enhanced his textual availability through the seventeenth century. In addition, Homer's centrality in the *querelles* (first in France, then in England) made him a subject of vigorous attention and won him important new advocates. Dueling translations enacted competing theories of classical accommodation: Madame Dacier (1711) vs. La Motte (1714), and Pope (1715–16) vs. Tickell (1715). Debates over Homer's authority incorporated a compelling array of topics—not only the question of the relative qualities of Homer, Virgil, and their modern counterparts, but also the question of what cultures had

⁴⁷ Toni Bowers, *Force or Fraud: British Seduction Stories and the Problem of Resistance, 1660–1760* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), p. 248.

⁴⁸ Christine Gerrard, *The Patriot Opposition to Walpole: Politics, Poetry, and National Myth, 1725–1742* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 74–5, 80–1.

⁴⁹ Howard D. Weinbrot, *Augustus Caesar in "Augustan" England: The Decline of a Classical Norm* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978).

produced them, and whether the cultures enshrined in ancient epics could be trusted to shape the manners and morals of modern readers.⁵⁰

This was an important intellectual development. Homer's emergence as the defining epic author was inseparable from what Donald Foerster called the "historical approach" to the classics: an approach that recognizes Homer's bucolic landscapes and bloody warfare as representations of a primitive, distant culture. Earlier authors and translators took a presentist approach to the classics. They "cared little whether the *Iliad* was an ancient or recent poem, or was an adequate or inadequate expression of the Homeric age," for they remained focused on the epic's currency as a vehicle for time-tested lessons to readers through the ages.⁵¹ By the late seventeenth century, though, the emerging "historical approach" was gaining traction (see chapter 40, "Scholarship"). It was reflected in Richard Bentley's philological scholarship on the classics, and it infiltrated arguments on both sides of the *querelles*. Even Le Bossu, whose neo-Aristotelian treatise followed the instrumentalist logic typical of the humanistic educational traditions, actually offered a carefully historicist analysis of Homer and Virgil as poets whose respective "designs" for influencing the polity reflected the needs and predispositions of their contemporary audiences.⁵² On both sides of the Channel, epic commentators moved away from what Foerster calls the "neoclassical" understanding of the genre—an understanding that celebrated the *Aeneid* as a universal handbook for princes—in favor of an approach that affirmed the historical and cultural distance of the classical authors.

The effects of this trend on the once-dominant Virgilian epic model have already been mentioned. Precisely because Virgil had previously seemed so relevant to debates about English government, he endured increasing scrutiny as a servile flatterer whose celebration of Roman imperial authority was at odds with British ideals of liberty. But Homer inspired interest and excitement for his cultural foreignness. Longinus had associated him with the "sublime." Eighteenth-century readers praised him for his bold genius and his perceived connection with an unadorned stage of human society otherwise difficult of access for polished modern readers.

Consider the preface to Pope's *Homer* (1715), where Pope locates the pleasure of the modern reading experience in the self-satisfied contemplation of primitiveness and barbarity:

It must be a strange Partiality to Antiquity to think with Madam *Dacier*, "that those Times and Manners are so much the more excellent, as they are more contrary to ours." Who can be so prejudiced in their Favour as to magnify the Felicity of those Ages, when a Spirit of Revenge and Cruelty, join'd with the practice of Rapine and Robbery, reign'd thro' the World, when no Mercy was shown but for the sake of Lucre, when the greatest Princes were put to the Sword, and their Wives and Daughters made Slaves and Concubines? . . . When we read *Homer*, we ought to reflect that we are reading the most ancient Author in the Heathen World; and those who consider him in this Light, will double their Pleasure in the Perusal of him. Let them think they are growing acquainted with Nations and People that are now no more; that they

⁵⁰ Cf. Kirsti Simonsuuri, *Homer's Original Genius: Eighteenth-Century Notions of the Early Greek Epic (1688–1798)* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979); and Joseph M. Levine, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991).

⁵¹ Donald M. Foerster, *Homer in English Criticism: The Historical Approach in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1947), p. 1.

⁵² Frederick M. Keener, "Pope, *The Dunciad*, Virgil, and the New Historicism of Le Bossu," *Eighteenth-Century Life*, 15, no. 3 (Nov. 1991), 35–57.

are stepping almost three thousand Years back into remotest Antiquity, and entertaining themselves with a clear and surprizing Vision of Things no where else to be found, the only true mirror of that ancient World. By this means alone their greatest Obstacles will vanish; and what usually creates their Dislike, will become a Satisfaction.⁵³

Reading Homer therefore cultivates modern manners because it flatters modern readers in their contemplation of an earlier, inferior stage of civilization. This perception of historical difference may be illusory, Pope hints, but it nevertheless buttresses a contemporary "Satisfaction" in modernity, progress, and relative freedom from physical brutality. Stuart Gillespie notes that Pope's Homeric project, like Dryden's Virgil, conceives English translations not as "utilitarian cribs to revered ancient classics," but as distinctively British masterworks that "allo[w] readers to feel that they can dispense with those classics."⁵⁴ Enhancing this sense of modernity, Pope provides voluminous annotations on ancient Greek "manners."

Appropriately, this approach to epic translation differs from that of even a century before, when Chapman recommended the *Iliad* to its dedicatee, Prince Henry (then heir apparent), for its capacity to teach princes how to govern "All traitrous passions."⁵⁵ Pope (like Dryden) addresses his work directly to the British public. Moreover, far from insisting that his translation be understood as instruction in stoic emotional self-governance, Pope represents the passions permissively. Morgan Strawn has shown that despite Pope's twentieth-century reputation for neoclassical formality and emotional detachment, his Homeric translation invites its readers to invest themselves in passionate characters. Pope's gods regard mortal foibles forgivingly, and even when his Homeric heroes display unseemly passions such as anger, Pope portrays these emotions complexly tinged with pity, motivated by friendship, or stirred up by public spirit—a departure from the moral-didactic priorities of earlier translations in its valuation of what Strawn calls "sentimentalism" as a basis for community.⁵⁶

Thus, as the age of sensibility arrived, Homer eclipsed Virgil as Britain's preferred epic poet. Virgil had once been prized for his civility and his artful didacticism; Homer now gained notice for the opposite characteristics: his perceived proximity to the origins of Western civilization and his trustworthiness as a bardic historian. Shaftesbury (1711) dubbed Homer the "great mimographer."⁵⁷ Robert Wood (1767) called him "the most original of all poets," invoking the sense of "original" as first, and described him as "the most constant and faithful copier after nature" (quoted in Simonsuuri, p. 133). Samuel Johnson in his *Life of Milton* (1779) wrote of the epic as a narrative that "relates some great event in the most affecting manner"—a definition that reflects his admiration for Homer as a painter of passions and a poet of "original invention" (*Lives*, vol. i, p. 282). In due time, seventeenth-century critiques of Homer's authorial prowess gave way to a mid-eighteenth-century fascination with

⁵³ Pope, *The Iliad of Homer*, in *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt et al., 11 vols. in 12 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1939–69), vol. vii, p. 14.

⁵⁴ Stuart Gillespie, "Translation and Canon Formation," in Stuart Gillespie and David Hopkins (eds.), *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English, Vol. 3: 1660–1790* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), p. 7.

⁵⁵ George Chapman, *Homer Prince of Poets . . . in Twelue Bookes of His Iliads* (London, 1609), sig. π2^r.

⁵⁶ Morgan Strawn, "Homer, Sentimentalism, and Pope's Translation of the *Iliad*," *SEL*, 52, no. 3 (Summer 2012), 585–608; and Steven Shankman, *Pope's "Iliad": Homer in the Age of Passion* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983).

⁵⁷ Simonsuuri, *Homer's Original Genius*, p. 105.

the idea of Homer as a "Blind strolling Bard" (pp. 107–8) or even a collection of rhapsodists (p. 42) who had preserved for posterity verbal pictures of ancient Greek culture. Enquiries into the scarce data surrounding the historical Homer led to what Maureen McLane and Laura Slatkin have called the "oralization" of the Greek epics: a tendency to conceive them as folk poetry produced by primitive communication technologies—pre-print, perhaps even pre-literacy.

The development of the mid-century English epic reflected the growing potency of "Homer" as an idea and a poetic ideal. Writers of new epics were likely to evoke a Homeric rather than a Virgilian model: William Wilkie's *Epigoniad* (1757), Macpherson's *Ossian*, Fielding's sprawling novels. Of course, the period has often been defined by its lack of epic writing. If mid-eighteenth-century Britons did, in fact, produce fewer new epics than their predecessors had a hundred years before, this non-writing reflected a growing tendency to envision "epic" as the genre of a bygone era. Certainly, along with the rise of epic translation, essays on the origins of epic came into their own during the period. McLane and Slatkin observe that "the image of that inescapable Ur-bard, Homer," is "Lurking behind" a great deal of mid-century thought about poetry's origins and progress: mid-century antiquarian revivals of ballads and other folk arts, the "bardic nationalism" (in Katie Trumpener's terms) realized in poems such as Thomas Gray's *Bard* (1757), and the conjectural histories of the Scottish Enlightenment that supplied an anthropological consciousness for such endeavors.⁵⁸ Enlightenment stadial theories imagined a progressive development of society from hunter-gatherers to a commercial civilization; Homeric epic expressed a primitive stage. In the mid-eighteenth century, critical commentaries on Homer's person, poetry, and culture were so predictably informed by contemporary explorations of "the history of our species" that "it is hard to escape the suspicion that inquiries into the former are quite often stalking horses for the latter" (p. 690). In this sense, even amid the paradigm shift from the dominance of the Virgilian to the dominance of the Homeric model, the realm of cultural activity constituted by the epic remained constant. Whether constituted primarily by "original" epics or epic commentaries, it never ceased to be about British and European "manners," old and new.

The folklorist project undertaken by James Macpherson in the Scottish Highlands reflected this emergent notion of epic (see chapter 14, "The Poet as Fraud"). The very idea of assembling a lost Gaelic epic through the collection of fragmentary manuscripts and interviews with a closed mountain society drew its conceptual focus from primitivist enquiries into Homer. Macpherson had translated Homer, and Hugh Blair dwelled upon Homer in a lengthy "parallel" in his *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763), which understood Macpherson's Celtic tales as the residue of a "rude" stage of British society that, while postdating Homer by a millennium, represented a less advanced culture than its Greek counterpart. The Virgilian epic model is not irrelevant here: the Ossianic epics have been read as partisan compositions whose methods of tracing obscure British origins are tied to Scottish patriotism and the patronage of the Scottish Earl of Bute (then prime minister).⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Maureen N. McLane and Laura M. Slatkin, "British Romantic Homer: Oral Tradition, 'Primitive Poetry' and the Emergence of Comparative Poetics in Britain, 1760–1830," *ELH*, 78 (2011), 687–714, at p. 690.

⁵⁹ Philip Connell, "British Identities and the Politics of Ancient Poetry in Later Eighteenth-Century England," *The Historical Journal*, 49, no. 1 (March 2006), 161–92.

Moreover, the poetry incorporates representations of princely authority and bardic loyalism reminiscent of seventeenth-century royalist readings of both Virgil and Homer: "Fingal, like a beam from heaven, shone in the midst of his people. His heroes gather around him, and he sends forth the voice of his power. Raise my standards on high."⁶⁰ But there is no sense here that modern audiences should emulate this attitude toward royal authority. Blair, distancing his interpretation of Fingal from Le Bossu's conception of didactic "design," muses that, "if a general moral be insisted on, Fingal [furnishes the lesson] That Wisdom and Bravery always triumph over brutal force; or . . . That the most compleat victory over an enemy is obtained by that moderation and generosity which convert him into a friend" (p. 359). We are a long way from Ogilby's obeisance to the Virgilian-Augustan model and the divine right of kings. Macpherson's Ossianic epics—like the debates over authenticity that surrounded them—revel in the possibility that a pure moral sensibility can be recovered prior to the corruptions of civilized society. In the Virgilian-humanist model, civilization supported poetic art and was enhanced by it. Ossian's readers, by contrast, suspected that the "refinements of society" merely "disguise[d]" the benevolent "manners of mankind" (p. 345).⁶¹

TOWARD THE ROMANTIC EPIC

As Donald Foerster has observed, the "joint dictatorship of Homer and Virgil" in epic theory and practice did not endure into the Romantic period.⁶² Authors from Wordsworth to Blake to Byron proceeded with as strong a sense of modernity as British letters had ever witnessed. Critics showed a growing tendency to distrust the moral-didactic arguments made for the classical authors. In an era nourished by a growing suspicion that culture was itself a source of oppression and coercion, it was difficult to countenance an idea of epic as a genre whose *raison d'être* rested in its capacity to shape the "manners." For these writers, the genre was defined by its status as narrative poetry, distinct as such from the prose novel.

They may also have been motivated by a late eighteenth-century impression that modern epic energies had reached a low ebb. In *An Essay on Epic Poetry* (1782), William Hayley announced his "Design" to "remove prejudices which obstruct the cultivation of Epic writing" in contemporary letters. His four-book poem sketched a method of reinvigorating the genre. He meditated on the potency of Homer's example and the tendency of criticism to dampen the creative spirit, and he provided a generous bibliography to remind his contemporary readers of the many possible sources of epic influence: in addition to the ancient Greek and Roman poets, an array of epic examples from Provence, Italy, Spain, Portugal, modern France, and England. Hayley also decried the "braggart, Prejudice" for "Forbidding

⁶⁰ James Macpherson, *The Poems of Ossian and Related Works*, ed. Howard Gaskill and Fiona Stafford (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1996), p. 86.

⁶¹ See Juliet Shields's discussion of the Enlightenment-era discourses about societal progress into which *Ossian* intervened: "The Ossian Controversy and the Racial Beginnings of Britain," in *Sentimental Literature and Anglo-Scottish Identity, 1745-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 24-54.

⁶² Donald M. Foerster, "The Critical Attack upon the Epic in the English Romantic Movement," *PMLA*, 69, no. 3 (June 1954), 432-47, at p. 432.

Female hands to touch the lyre” and praised Anna Seward, author of the *Elegy on Captain Cook* (1780) and the *Monody on the Death of Major Andre* (1781), as the “leader of the lovely train” of women poets who threatened to “spread | Poetic jealousy and envious dread” to male poets of the day (pp. 74–5). That Seward soon produced a poetic novel, *Louisa* (1784) and a translation of Fénelon’s *Télémaque*, eventually mirrored by Lady Sophia Burrell’s *Thymbriad* and *Telemachus* (1794), suggests a new era of epic-writing had arrived.⁶³

Moreover, in answer to Hayley’s call, the Romantic era would see a plentitude of new epics, from stories of the evolution of the poet’s mind to pious long poems inspired by Milton to narratives of national identity, including centennial meditations on the Glorious Revolution. Stuart Curran notes that, in the Romantic period, “Every major poet planned an epic (though not all were executed)” and many minor poets wrote them as well.⁶⁴ Influenced by long poems such as Cowper’s *Task* (1785), buoyed by an array of new translations and epic examples from Dante to *Beowulf*, and further stimulated by revolutionary political events on the Continent and in the colonies, the epic was reborn at the end of the eighteenth century. It revealed unprecedented diversity in its influences, civic aims, and textual precedents, and yet it remained identifiable by its characteristic formal features and its narrative staging of humanity in its relation to nature, society, and the divine.

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⁶³ Adeline Johns-Putra, “Gendering Telemachus: Anna Seward and the Epic Rewriting of Fénelon’s *Télémaque*,” in Bernard Schweizer (ed.), *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621–1982* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006). Seward’s previously unpublished *Telemachus* is now available in Lisa Moore (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Anna Seward*, vol. 1 (London and New York: Routledge, 2016).

⁶⁴ See also Curran’s ample bibliography, “The Epic,” in *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 158–79, at p. 158.