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Ulrich Broich

Excerpt

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## Introduction

A HEROIC POEM . . . is undoubtedly the greatest work which the soul of man is capable to perform.

(John Dryden, *Essays*, II, p. 154)

### Neoclassicism and the quest for the epic

In the novel *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) by the American John Barth, the hero Ebenezer Cooke is about to sail across the Atlantic to Maryland, and he plans to celebrate his new home by means of a great poem. In late seventeenth-century London, where Barth's novel begins, it is natural for Ebenezer Cooke to conceive of such a poem only in terms of the heroic epic. While he waits in London for the day of his departure, he sets to work penning the first verses of his *Marylandiad*, in which he anticipates his journey and his arrival in America, depicting them with all the conventions and clichés into which the heroic epic of his day had degenerated. His efforts lead more and more to involuntary parody of the genre, but it is only after his actual arrival that he realises the total impossibility of writing a heroic poem about Maryland. Instead of the noble people and deeds he had expected, he finds nothing but petty intrigues, dirt and vulgarity in a world dominated by alcohol and drugs, prostitution, and sexual diseases. He then gives up his original plan and replaces the epic with a satirical poem entitled *The Sot-Weed Factor*, whose style and satirical strategy are modelled on Samuel Butler's comic epic *Hudibras* (1663–78). What gives Barth's novel added flavour is the fact that there really was an Ebenezer Cooke, and the quotations from his *Sot-Weed Factor* – unlike those from *Marylandiad* – are not an invention but are taken from an authentic comic epic which was published in 1708.<sup>1</sup>

This central feature of Barth's novel encapsulates a revealing insight into the period it deals with: there was a fundamental split between the heroic ideal and an unheroic reality. In the existing concept of literature, the epic was viewed as the loftiest of all genres, but in the social and literary context of the age, epics could no longer be written and so were replaced by comic and satirical poems in the tradition of Butler's *Hudibras*.

The neoclassicists themselves seemed totally unaware of this development. At the end of the seventeenth century they were still proclaiming the epic as the loftiest of all genres, Dryden for example calling it 'the most noble, the



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expected this great neoclassical epic to glorify the English aristocracy in the same way that ancient epics had glorified the elite of their lands and times.<sup>7</sup>

Underlying such utterances was the conviction that this age was as heroic and as worthy as that of the great classical poets. Accordingly, there were innumerable attempts to endow English victories in the various wars of the period with heroic proportions. There are many examples to be found in Dryden, for example in the 'Essay of Dramatic Poesy' and *Annus Mirabilis*. An even clearer illustration is Addison's lines on Marlborough at the end of his bombastic war poem 'The Campaign':

Fiction may deck the truth with spurious rays,  
And round the Hero cast a borrow'd blaze.  
MARLBOROUGH'S exploits appear divinely bright,  
And proudly shine in their own native light.<sup>8</sup>

Similar attempts to glorify the age are to be seen not only in literature but also in painting and sculpture. They reach their apogee in the name which the era chose for itself: 'The Augustan Age'. The epithet expressed not only the hope of the English that the second Augustan Age would bring forth a second Virgil, but also the overriding conviction that their country had attained similar dominance and embodied similar heroic values to the power and the glory of Rome and Emperor Augustus. It was taken for granted that such an age would find suitable literary representation in an epic comparable to Virgil's.

We now know only too well that this was wishful thinking. The gap between aspiration and reality is evident from Dryden's dedication of his heroic drama *The Conquest of Granada* to the Duke of York, later King James II. In this dedication he emphasises that the noble character of his hero Almanzor is based on that of James himself, and he calls upon James in turn to follow the example of noble heroes such as Almanzor. Little did he know that in less than two decades the very same James would find himself engaged in the Glorious Revolution from which he was to make a most inglorious exit. George II, whom some of his contemporaries also liked to dub a second Augustus, was another less-than-heroic figure. He is the satirical butt of Pope's 'Epistle to Augustus', which imitates a laudatory epistle from Horace to the Emperor, using similar words to address George II and ironically to pull him to pieces.<sup>9</sup> Samuel Butler also recognised the fact that his period, which talked and wrote so much about its heroism, was basically unheroic: 'No Age ever abounded more with Heroical Poetry then [*sic*] the present, and yet there was never any wherein fewer Heroicall Actions were performed.'<sup>10</sup>

The period may be characterised not only by the decline of the heroic, but also by the doubts cast on its heroes. The same Marlborough who for Addison embodied all the heroic norms of his time is denigrated by Swift in his 'Satirical Elegy, on the Death of a Late Famous General'. The veneration

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of Homer and Virgil could not prevent increasing scepticism towards the heroic world views incorporated in their epics. Pope, for instance, in the preface to his translation of *The Iliad*, poses the question:

Who can be so prejudiced in their Favour as to magnify the Felicity of those [heroic] Ages, when no Mercy was shown but for the sake of Lucre, when a Spirit of Revenge and Cruelty reign'd thro' the world, when the greatest Princes were put to the Sword, and their Wives and Daughters made Slaves and Concubines?<sup>11</sup>

Hand in hand with this scepticism towards heroic norms as embodied in the classical epic goes the attempt to redefine the heroic, which now became a virtue that could find expression in Christian love for one's neighbour and in suffering, and could be practised by ordinary people in their private lives. Richard Steele was one whose concept of the hero, as expressed in *The Spectator*, accorded with this view, and one might even go so far as to see in Sterne's Uncle Toby 'a veritable embodiment of the new kind of heroism'.<sup>12</sup>

It would not, however, be correct to say that the age of neoclassicism was one that no longer accepted or practised heroic norms. One should rather say that acceptance and rejection existed side by side, sometimes even within the work of a single author. Things had not changed much by the nineteenth century, when works such as Carlyle's *On Heroes and Hero-Worship* and Thackeray's *Henry Esmond* appeared at virtually the same time. Nevertheless, the neoclassical age did mark a significant stage in a process whereby over the centuries the heroic gradually fell into decline until, in our own time, it may be said to have disappeared almost without trace.<sup>13</sup>

A second precondition for the epic became increasingly problematical during the neoclassical age. The epic flourished only in times which gave credence to their own mythology, and the great poets – not only those of classical antiquity – always incorporated their gods into their epics. Even the neoclassical poets recognised this fact and insisted that the epic of their own day should incorporate 'machines'. There was also great controversy as to whether the neoclassical epic should take over the gods of antiquity or, like Milton's *Paradise Lost*, be based on Christianity. Both positions were upheld, but both were also called into question. Of course, the Greek gods were viewed only as a convention and not as a creed by the eighteenth-century classicists, but Christianity too was being increasingly subverted by rationalism, deism, and atheism. Georg Lukács rightly observed that this was the age in which the novel replaced the epic as 'the epic of the God-forsaken world'.<sup>14</sup>

The neoclassical age itself, however, did not recognise the way the world was going, and so it is only rarely that we find a direct disowning of the epic, which by general consensus remained the highest literary form, while Homer and Virgil remained the noblest of poets. The trends that we have noted are to be discerned by way of more subtle modes of detachment: for instance,

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modern critics have pointed out that Dryden and Pope, in their translations of Homer and Virgil, occasionally insinuate a mock-heroic perspective which is unlikely to have been intended by the original authors, and indeed through their translations frequently transform the heroic into the mock-heroic.<sup>15</sup>

Despite this ambivalence towards the genre, epics were still being written during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Some of them, such as Sir Richard Blackmore's *Prince Arthur* (1695) and *King Arthur* (1697), Glover's *Leonidas*, and William Falconer's *Shipwreck* (1762), were initially quite successful, and far from being purely derivative, they actually tried to bring a degree of innovation to the troubled genre. They are, however, quite unreadable today, as a result of which the author of this present study very soon abandoned an earlier project to write a study of the neoclassical English epic. A study of the unreadable seemed best left unwritten.

Even the great poets of the neoclassical age tried to take up the challenge of the epic, but in contrast to the Blackmores, Glovers, and Falconers, their finer feelings prevailed and they gave up. Dryden, for instance, is known to have planned epics on the Black Prince and on King Arthur, but evidently never went beyond the planning stage – a state of affairs which he attributed ostensibly to lack of financial support from the king. The young Pope planned an epic on Alcander, but on the advice – obviously sound – of some friends, burnt it. Towards the end of his life he also planned one on Brutus, but significantly devoted himself instead to *The New Dunciad* of 1742.<sup>16</sup>

Scarcely any of their contemporaries, however, realised explicitly that the venerated epic was no longer possible. One of the very few who did was Thomas Blackwell in his *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735). It was not until the period of romanticism, which briefly ushered in a new form of verse narrative independent of classical tradition, that there arose a gradual recognition of the demise of the epic.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, the vain quest of the English neoclassicists was not totally unproductive. The energies which it released were subsequently channelled in different directions, to enrich other literary genres which until then had remained distant from the epic tradition.

Soon after 1660, the heroic play began to flourish – a form which developed not only as a conscious alternative to tragedy but also, as frequently indicated by Dryden, as a closely related offshoot of the epic and of contemporary epic theory. The heroic opera was another form to benefit from the quest, and it is no coincidence that Dryden, who had to give up his *King Arthur* epic, wrote a libretto for an opera on the same subject, as well as another based on Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Other genres that were fertilised by the vain quest included heroic epistles, pastorals, biographies, dialogues of the dead, panegyrics,<sup>18</sup> and didactic poems.<sup>19</sup>

A far more important product, however, was Dryden's translation of *The*

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*Aeneid* and Pope's translation of Homer. These poets were not content merely to translate word for word from the original, but they imbued these great epics with the spirit of their own time. In this respect they are to be seen as independent works of art, and indeed one might even go so far as to say that they are the true epic poems of English neoclassicism.<sup>20</sup>

An even more forward-looking product of the neoclassical quest for the epic can be seen in Fielding. Unlike other novelists of his period, Fielding deliberately linked his work – from *Joseph Andrews* through to *Amelia* – with the epic tradition; he proclaimed his novels to be the long-sought-after (though comic) epic, and in doing so he was seeking not only to legitimise the new form by invoking the established tradition, but also to give new life to that tradition in a manner suited to the times.

It is at this point that we come to another of the forms that replaced the traditional epic, and it is this form that is to constitute the subject of our study: the comic epic. English neoclassicists were faithful adherents of Aristotle, and so it was fortunate that in his *Poetics* the great Greek philosopher had talked not only of the heroic epic but also – referring to the pseudo-Homeric *Margites* – of the comic epic, thereby sanctioning it with his blessing: 'as are the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to our tragedies, so is the *Margites* to our comedies'.<sup>21</sup> These all-important words became the commonplace of neoclassical poetics, and were for ever being quoted by Pope, Fielding, and others.<sup>22</sup> This constant invocation of Aristotle denotes two convictions: first, that the comic epic is as legitimate through its antiquity as the heroic, serious epic, and secondly that it constitutes an independent form in itself.

Accordingly Dryden abandoned his epics on the Black Prince and King Arthur, and instead wrote not only his translation of *The Aeneid* but also his short comic epic *Mac Flecknoe*, while Pope abandoned his Brutus and Alcander epics and instead wrote his Homer translation and *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Dunciad*. Similarly in Germany, the quest led Wieland away from his initial plans for serious epics, and on to the comic epic and the epyllion.<sup>23</sup>

What the neoclassical age still had to do was to find its own particular brand of comic epic. There were already several forms in existence, but these did not correspond to the poetics of the time – the hudibrastic, for instance, as chosen by John Barth's Ebenezer Cooke after he had abandoned his heroic epic. We shall now take a brief look at how neoclassicism dealt with some of these forms, so that from their rejection we may gain some idea of the norms that were to govern the neoclassical comic epic.

### The neoclassical approach to the comic epic

English neoclassicism sought the heroic epic, and found the comic. The quest for the former ultimately entailed a quest for the latter, and the resultant

mock-heroic poem, to a far greater extent than any of the other genres derived from ancient literature and poetics, is an essentially independent creation of English neoclassicism.

Traditional forms of the comic epic were available, and in an age dedicated to the imitation of ancient poetry, it was natural that the quest should begin with Greek and Roman models. But of these there were only two to call on: the *Batrachomyomachia* and the *Culex*. The latter was less than suitable, since it bore very few epic traits, while the *Batrachomyomachia* was, in terms of plot, subject-matter, and style, much closer to the heroic epic than *Culex*. Nevertheless, they could scarcely be considered as models, for they depict events in a fabulous, fairy-tale world where animals can speak, whereas the neoclassical poets saw their main aim as being to depict the people and society of their time. It is true that the mock-heroic poets do repeatedly refer to the *Batrachomyomachia* (and very occasionally also to the *Culex*) as their literary ancestors, but this was simply a means of legitimising their work; in terms of poetic practice, the acknowledgement means next to nothing (for further details, see pp. 77–80).

The remaining fragments of the *Margites*, however, are much closer to the mock-heroic poem, especially to the more satirical ones, though so little was known of its form and content that the influence can only have been in very general terms. Nevertheless, the *Margites* is often named as a model, particularly for such satirical mock-heroic poems as *The Dunciad*. Timon's *Silloi*, another fragment of Greek satire and parody, have quite a lot in common with the English mock-heroic poem, but were too little known to take their place in the genealogical table. Lucian's satires, on the other hand, were known to most educated people, but had little influence, and were mostly classified as travesty.<sup>24</sup>

Despite the major differences between the mock-heroic poem and *Batrachomyomachia* and *Culex*, the early years of the new genre reveal next to no critical distinction between ancient and neoclassical forms. It was precisely because the mock-heroic poem was so new that it needed its antique antecedent, in much the same way as an English family newly promoted to the aristocracy would hunt for ancestors dating back to the Norman Conquest. It was only after 1750, with the gradual break-up of neoclassicism and its literary norms, that critics began to discuss how far the neoclassical mock-heroic poems diverged from their ancient predecessors.

No such caution was necessary, however, with regard to the comic epics of the Renaissance and the Restoration, for these periods had none of the hallowed authority of antiquity. Thus there are many contemporary discussions of comic epics stemming from the previous 250 years, and here it is not the common ground that is emphasised but the differences. One can even say that the creation of the mock-heroic poem was accompanied by a process of rigorous detachment from the comic epics of previous generations.

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There are three main forms that are constantly referred to in these discussions: (1) epic poems from the Italian Renaissance – not the uniformly heroic ones like Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*, but those that combined the comic and the serious and were later sometimes called ‘medley epics’ or ‘serio-comic romances’. Examples of these are Pulci’s *Morgante Maggiore* (1460–83), Boiardo’s *Orlando Innamorato* (1472–95), and Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* (1516–32). The neoclassicists devoted a good deal of attention to Tassoni’s *La Secchia Rapita* (1622), which has much in common with the other works but also contains certain basic features that anticipate the neoclassical mock-heroic poem. (2) The epic travesty, which reached its zenith in France between c. 1640 and 1660, and in England from c. 1660 to 1680. The best known of these are Scarron’s *Virgile Travesti* (1648–52) and Cotton’s *Scarronides* (1664). (3) The hudibrastic, a specifically English form which originated with Samuel Butler’s *Hudibras* (1663–78) and lived on well into the eighteenth century.

At the turn of the century the hudibrastic poem lost its dominance to the mock-heroic poem, which flourished until the 1740s, when in turn it gave way to the new form of the comic epic which consisted in the comic novel. It was Fielding who, at a time when the artistic decline of the mock-heroic had already begun, laid claim with his novels *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *Tom Jones* (1749) to having created genuine comic epics in accordance with the Aristotelian definition (quoted on p. 6). He actually called them ‘comic epic poems in prose’ – a term taken over by many literary critics in the late eighteenth century, or replaced by the concept of the ‘comic epopee’.

We shall now briefly reconstruct the neoclassical discussion of the three above-mentioned forms in order to ascertain the norms that led to the mock-heroic poem as neoclassicism’s alternative form of the comic epic.

### *The serio-comic epic of the Italian Renaissance*

This category of verse narrative is extraordinarily diverse, but a differentiated account is not within the scope of our study. It must suffice here to draw specific attention to one characteristic feature of these works which the neoclassical critics focused on above all others: the mixture of serious and comic.

This mixture is particularly striking in Pulci’s *Il Morgante Maggiore*, and the fact that it is quite intentional is made clear in one of his letters to Lorenzo il Magnifico, where he characterises the world view underlying his work as follows: ‘Tutte le nostre cose sono così fatte; uno zibaldone mescolato di dolcie et amaro et mille sapori varij.’<sup>25</sup>

Although very different from Pulci’s work, Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* also combines the comic with the serious, as well as containing purely heroic scenes in the manner of the classical epic. At the same time, however, its



presentation of love would have been unthinkable for the neoclassicists. Their discussions on this form focus in particular on one love scene, later often referred to as the Giocondo episode, which shows the two most handsome men in Italy discovering that they have been betrayed by their wives. They therefore take the following decision:

So ben ch'in tutto il gran femmineo stuolo  
Una non è che stia contenta a un solo.

Una (senza sforzar nostro potere,  
Ma quando il natural bisogno inviti)  
In festa goderemoci e in piacere;  
Chè mai contese non avrem, nè liti.  
Nè credo che si debba ella dolere,  
Chè s'anco ogni altra avesse duo mariti,  
Più ch'ad un solo, a duo saria fedele;  
Nè forse s'udirian tante querele.<sup>26</sup>

In other words, they procure themselves a common mistress. But they soon have to face the fact that she is betraying them with a third man while the two of them are sleeping in the same bed with her.

Here the ideal of Christian chivalry, which still prevails in other cantos of *Orlando Furioso*, finds itself confronted by an all too human reality. As a result, the chivalric ideal is turned on its head for both characters. They can no longer worship woman as the deity on a pedestal, and so they take pleasure in sensual love with a lower-class girl as soon as they feel like doing so; this 'natural bisogno' is worlds apart from the idealistic and ascetic adoration of the gallant knight. No longer do they wish to win battles and do heroic deeds in order to honour the beloved; instead they look for sexual satisfaction without any of the courtly 'contese', 'liti', and 'querele'. Even the faithfulness that bound the knight until his death has been perverted, since the girl is now supposed to be true to two knights at the same time ('a duo saria fedele').

Because of such scenes later critics called epics like *Orlando Furioso* 'medley epics' or 'serio-comic romances',<sup>27</sup> and the neoclassicists dubbed them 'mixed epics', in contrast to the 'pure Epopee' of Homer, Virgil, and Milton.<sup>28</sup> Right from the start, the neoclassicists were hostile to this mixture of serious and comic, high and low.

A.F.B. Clark has shown<sup>29</sup> that it was above all the influence of Boileau that led to this almost total rejection of the Italian serio-comic epic – and particularly of the mixed tone – which had hitherto been so popular in France and England. In his *Dissertation sur la Joconde* (1665) Boileau follows up a highly critical analysis of the Giocondo episode with a stinging attack on the serio-comic epic of the Italian Renaissance. He bases his attack on a particular quotation from Horace's poetics which in England became one of the commonplaces of Renaissance literary theory (for instance, Puttenham's) as well as of neoclassicism. Poets and painters, he said, were not allowed

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de confondre les choses, de renfermer dans un même corps mille espèces différentes, aussi confuses que les rêveries d'un malade; de mêler ensemble des choses incompatibles; d'accoupler les Oiseaux avec les Serpens, les Tigres avec les Agneaux.

He continues by saying that in his poetics Horace

fait le procès à Arioste, plus de mille ans avant qu'Arioste eût écrit. En effet, ce corps composé, de mille espèces différentes, n'est-ce pas proprement l'image du Poème de Roland le furieux?<sup>30</sup>

In England this judgement was confirmed above all by Addison, though Dryden had already rejected Ariosto's mixture.<sup>31</sup>

This hostility was reflected in the neoclassical approach to drama: the juxtaposition of comic and serious scenes in Shakespeare's tragedies and in contemporary tragi-comedies was condemned, and a clear distinction was demanded between comedy and tragedy. Thus Addison wrote in the *Spectator*:

The Tragi-Comedy, which is the Product of the *English* Theatre, is one of the most monstrous Inventions that ever entered into a Poet's Thoughts. An Author might as well think of weaving the Adventures of *Aeneas* and *Hudibras* into one Poem, as of writing such a motly Piece of Mirth and Sorrow.<sup>32</sup>

If neoclassicism was indeed searching for a form of the comic epic that would suit the time, then clearly *Orlando Furioso* was not the one to follow.

Another feature of the Italian serio-comic epic that met with the neoclassicists' disapproval was its distance from the real world, and this factor is equally important to our understanding of the mock-heroic poem. In 1591 Sir John Harington had still been able to maintain that Ariosto 'neither in his enchantments exceedeth credit (for who knowes not how strong the illusions of the devill are?) neither in the miracles' and that he had not departed from the realms of probability as advocated by Aristotle.<sup>33</sup> The neoclassicists, however, could no longer agree. Characteristically Boileau, in the very first sentence of his preface to *Le Lutrin*, attacks Ariosto for having presented unrealistic fictions as true, while invoking Archbishop Turpin.<sup>34</sup>

In similar vein Boileau also accuses the Italians of going against *bon sens*, another vital principle for the neoclassicists. In his *Dissertation sur la Joconde*, for instance, he says that the 'extravagances Italiennes'<sup>35</sup> contradict common sense, and in his poetics he demands:

Evitons ces excès; laissons à l'Italie  
De tous ces faux brillans l'éclatante folie.  
Tout doit tendre au bon sens.<sup>36</sup>

Boileau's negative judgement of *Orlando Furioso* and other Italian epics was echoed by most English critics right up until the middle of the eighteenth century. Dryden also condemned *Orlando Furioso* because it did not conform to neoclassical norms: