


THE MOCK-EPIC AND SATIRE



Comedy of Manners


“LATE 17TH & EARLY 18TH C. REACTIONARY DISCOURSE”: THE MOCK-EPIC

- “High style over low matter ...to diminish society’s “unheroic” reality (result of cultural modernization – dominance of Whig polity)
 - Primary purpose to comment on society’s upstarts;
 - Poetic tension – dwindling faith in the abilities of an absolutist monarchy; ambivalence toward the “dissolution of traditional values and the ascendant hegemony of the new”
 - Generally considered an “aesthetic pastime for conservative poets of leisure ...to put society’s marginalia on display”
 - Politics of the day: Whig power and Tory survival – Queen Anne and Marlborough
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MOCK-EPIC

- *Rape of the Locke*, 1712 – two canto edition
- *The Rape of the Lock*, 1714 – five-canto edition

MOCK-EPIC:

- A “part of historical becoming”; a “contemporary alternative to the epic”
 - Pope, *The Art of Sinking in Poetry*, Ch. 5 - “A Receipt to Make an Epic Poem”: Epic writers like Homer (*Iliad*, *Odyssey*) and Virgil (*Aeneid*) considered flatterers
 - The age did not seem to provide characters or events for epic treatment, hence the need for parody of the epic form and content
 - Epic writers slip from the pantheon to become the object of critical investigation
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ENGAGEMENTS WITH THE CLASSICAL EPICS:

Translations and Mock-epics

- From the “most accomplished kind of Poetry” (Sidney, *An Apologie for Poetrie*), epic form now used to “denounce the death of an ancient world (*The Dunciad*) and announce the emergence of the modern world (*Don Juan*)”
- Prior epic attempts – Spenser’s *The Fairie Queene* (1590, 1596), Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667; 1674) – “first modern epic”, stylistically
- Translations of Homer and Virgil: 15th c. William Caxton translates *Aeneid*, 16th c. Gavin Douglas translates it as *Eneados*; 17th c. George Chapman translates translates Homer’s *Iliad* as *Iliads*, John Dryden translates *Aeneid* as *Aenis*; 18th c. Pope translates *Iliad* and *Odyssey*

- 18th c. – Virgilian model; 19th c. – Homeric model
- 18th c. scholarship (Thomas Greene): No more absolute faith in the intervention of supernatural forces in human affairs---no admiration---no epic poem possible
- ‘False sublime’ – “contracting of the neo-classic imagination” – root of the decline of the epic (Greene)
- No place for Rituals and ceremonies; epithets and repetitions (as in Homer) become anachronistic
- “It may be that the capacity to perpetuate authentic epic poetry was threatened in Europe as early as the introduction of Christianity, which is imperfectly compatible with heroic awe. But the impulse to epic weakened only when man found himself overawed by the world around him, when his assurance dwindled before an unknown and ever-expanding heaven.” (Greene)

SATIRE – 18TH C. ENGLAND

- Satire a quasi-legal form of literature “as a supplement to the laws of the nation, as an effective weapon to terrorize sinners who have no fear of the laws of the land or of religion.”
- Contradictory view: Satirists disturb rather than reinforce the social order
- Law a model for the satirist: satire could imitate law in indicting offenders, or, the law could mold literary tradition like moving from personal indictments to more general reflections on the ways of the world

(Ref: Thomas Maresca, *Pope's Horatian Poems*, Chapter 1)

Read in this light: Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*, *Mac Flecknoe*, Pope's *Dunciad*, Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of the Tub*, *A Modest Proposal*, Addison and Steele's essays in *The Spectator*

DRYDEN: *DISCOURSE CONCERNING THE ORIGIN AND PROGRESS OF SATIRE* (1693)

“Satire is a kind of poetry, without a series of action, invented for the purging of our minds; in which human vices, ignorance, and error...are severely reprehended, partly dramatical, partly simple, and sometimes in both kinds of speaking; but for the most part, figuratively and occultly; consisting in a low familiar way, chiefly in a sharp and pungent manner of speech; but partly also, in a facetious and civil way of jesting; by which either hatred, or laughter, or indignation is moved.”



THE TACTIC

- Horatian (Horace) and Juvenalian (Juvenal) satires
- “an attack by means of a manifest fiction [indirect, heightened rhetoric] upon discernible historical particulars.” Edward Rosenheim
- The Scriblerus Group (Pope, Swift) versus the Grub Street crowd – The Scriblerians were conservatives who claimed moderation, but it was mere rhetoric

