

**Sons of Homer:  
The Genealogy of the Epic Poem**

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## Sons of Homer

My title, “Sons of Homer,” is perhaps slightly misleading, at least to a classicist: the term “sons of Homer,” the *Homeridae* as they were called in Greek, were not themselves poets but rhapsodes, paid reciters of Homer who gave oral performances all over the Mediterranean world. If you are interested, you can get a sense of them through the wonderful historical novel by Mary Renault called *The Praise Singer*. But I am appropriating the term “sons of Homer” to refer to the succeeding epic poets who saw themselves and who were seen by others as continuing the tradition that was inaugurated by the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. This is a vast subject, and even if I had ten mouths, ten tongues and a heart of bronze (as Homer says) I could not in any sense “cover” it. But I can give you a few glimpses and make a few suggestions about what happens to the epic poem between perhaps the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE and our own times. One way of doing that is to look at the beginnings of a number of poems. I’ll be referring to them in a handout, which I hope you have.

Whoever or whatever or however many people “Homer” was, he, she or they did not apparently intend to be writing in a tradition of “epic.” It seems likely that the *Iliad* inaugurated this tradition. If a literary genre such as epic has any reality except for the literary historian after the fact, it must exist only as a set of intentions and expectations—the intentions of the poet, signaled through cues to his audience; and the expectations of that audience. Both are conditioned by their exposure to previous works in the same

generic tradition. So strictly speaking, we could claim that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are not “epics”; after they appear, the notion of “epic” comes into being, and in the first instance what it means is “a poem like the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*.” There was a cycle of poems from the Greek archaic period, probably later ones, about the Trojan expedition; but except for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, none of the others has survived except for a few fragments. Apart from the Hellenistic romancer Apollonius of Rhodes, no other Greek poet produced an epic that has survived. Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, makes a few remarks about epics, although most of his attention is devoted to tragedies. I claim, not very controversially, that the poet who really determined the direction that this literary *genre* or kind would take (for Western literature, at least) was the Roman poet Vergil. If you have not read the *Aeneid*, you should. T.S. Eliot claimed that this poem created European civilization. The poem recounts the story of the Trojan hero Aeneas, a fairly minor character in the *Iliad*. Guided by destiny and the gods, this proverbially “pious” hero escapes from the sack of Troy and sails west, to found what will eventually become the Roman Empire. Thus in its plot alone, the *Aeneid* presents itself as a sequel to the two Homeric poems. But Vergil also announces in many other ways that he is working in the Homeric tradition. Let’s look for a minute at the opening lines of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid* [HANDOUT #1, 2, 3].

The first word of the *Iliad* is “rage”—*mēnin* in Greek, from which we get our word “mania,” so this rage is a crazy, manic one. The first word of the *Odyssey* is *andra*, which means “man.” Now look at the *Aeneid*: *arma virumque cano*, “arms and the man I sing.” “Arms,” or warfare, is an allusion to the *Iliad* (since war and rage are near allied), while “man” is a quotation of the *Odyssey*. Thus in his first two words Vergil

announces that his poem will be a combination of the two Homeric poems. The order of those two words puts the *Iliad* first and the *Odyssey* second. However, as the poem progresses we find that the first six of Vergil's twelve books are an imitation of the *Odyssey*—Aeneas's voyage and wanderings—while Books 7-12 are his *Iliad*—the battles that must be fought before the Trojan exiles can settle in Italy. Thus the order of the first two words, and of the parts of the poem they refer to, form the criss-cross pattern which rhetoricians called chiasmus. There are innumerable places, large and small, in Vergil's poem that signal this imitative relationship with Homer: For example, there are whole episodes—Aeneas visits the underworld in Book VI, Odysseus does it in *Odyssey* XI. Aeneas is detained by an amorous female, Dido, until Jupiter sends Mercury to cause the resumption of his fated voyage; Odysseus is detained by an amorous female, the nymph Calypso, until Zeus sends Hermes to free him. In the *Aeneid* there is an opposing champion, Turnus, who has many admirable qualities but who must be slain by Aeneas for the plan of the gods to be fulfilled. In the *Iliad* there is an opposing champion, Hector, who is even more admirable but who similarly must die at the hands of Achilles. This last parallel is a complex one, for many details in Vergil's portrayal of Turnus make him seem to be not only a Hector figure but also an Achilles figure—since he opposes the Trojans and their historical destiny as Romans-to-be.

So these enumerated episodes are all examples of large-scale imitation, whole episodes or structural features of the plot. But Vergil has innumerable smaller cases, of similes, images, details of character, that allude to or imitate Homeric models. It is no exaggeration to say that you have to read the *Aeneid* with Homer in one hand. Vergil expects his reader to recognize the parallels, and the differences in particular. To put it

epigrammatically, if Homer is an imitation of life, Vergil is an imitation of Homer. This is what Alexander Pope wittily says in his *Essay on Criticism* [HANDOUT #4]: “Nature and Homer were, he found, the same.”

The great Canadian critic Northrop Frye said that epic was an “encyclopedic form” in that it tries to contain the whole world within its boundaries. Thus Homer’s poems were at times regarded, in the ancient world, as literal encyclopedias, compendia of wisdom about all manner of things—the character of the Olympian gods and the best means of worshipping them, how to drive a chariot, treat a wound, lead an army, build a raft, and so forth. Plato, in the *Ion* and in *Republic* III and X, takes issue with this notion that poetry is a source of wisdom or a repository of lore. But if Pope is right, the world that Vergil’s encyclopedic poem contains is partly the world of the Homeric poems. It may seem Derridean to claim that poetry is about other poetry—there is no escape from textuality. But surely some such claim is inherent in the notions of a genre or a tradition. We can see the epic tradition as a snake that goes on swallowing its tail: Each successive poem contains and then surpasses its predecessors. The *Aeneid* claims to go beyond Homer in that it has a fuller and truer picture of history: The Trojans were really the good guys, and their fall is not just the “will of Zeus,” as Homer says; it is part of a providential plan to give Rome to the world. Vergil is the first surviving writer of epic who uses epic to give an account of the destiny of a nation. (His Roman predecessors Naevius and Ennius also seem to have done so—but their work has not survived. We have only about 600 scattered lines of Ennius’ poem, the *Annales*.) For later European writers, it is almost a given that an epic will have a national character; for example, the sixteenth century French poet Pierre Ronsard invents a spurious Trojan escapee, Francus,

to be the ancient founder of the French nation—this in his unfinished and rather unlovable epic called the *Franciade*. (There seem to have been several other cases of miscellaneous Trojans who are alleged to have escaped in order to found all the other nations of Europe. This pattern is referred to at the beginning of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Even as late as the eighteenth century, Alexander Pope was at the time of his death beginning a blank verse epic, the *Brutus*, about the apocryphal Trojan who was supposed to have become the first king of Britain.) Even apart from Trojan origins, the English poet Edmund Spenser, in his epic *The Faerie Queene*, traces the ancestry of Queen Elizabeth back to King Arthur. And John Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, traces the founding not just of a nation but of the human race. If epic invites us to see with a god's-eye view, it includes both future and past, and it asserts that there is a divine or providential order in the events of human history. Not only, as in Homer, do miscellaneous gods and goddesses meddle randomly on one side or another of human conflicts; there is a unified purposiveness that seems to transcend the motley, divided Olympian pantheon. Perhaps it is partly for this reason that many Christian writers in the Middle Ages, including Dante, claimed that Vergil had prophetically anticipated the coming of Christ and the advent of monotheism.

I'm using Vergil here to try to illustrate the trajectory of the epic tradition. Returning to our first lines, we note that Homer asks the muse to recount the story: "Sing, goddess, the rage" and "Tell, Muse, of the man." But Vergil proudly says, "Arms and the man I sing." Though he goes on to invoke the Muse more traditionally, his first emphasis is on the human agency of the poet. In later tradition, a poet is said to be an *alter deus*, a second god who creates his world just as the God of Genesis creates ours.

And within this man-made world, the poet, like Jehovah, is omnipotent. Vergil's poem is far more literary in its tone than Homer's were; the language is more highly-wrought, the word order is more artificial. The narrator even has a personality, you might say—There is a distinctive Vergilian tone, which many have characterized as a gentle melancholy, a sense that there are *lacrimae rerum*, tears in the things that make up human lives. It is even very possible to read the *Aeneid* as an anti-war poem, expressing an ambivalence about the ruthless politics of the Emperor Augustus and a sadness for the casualties of empire. The hero, Aeneas, seems at first glance to be a rather bloodless figure; he does not live with the immense gusto of a Homeric hero, and his characteristic act is not to express huge passions but to restrain them. In a way, this development began even earlier: already in the *Odyssey*, there seems to be celebrated a less physical kind of heroism than in the *Iliad*. Odysseus is a tactician above all, able to plan, to maneuver, to lie and to endure endless tribulations in pursuit of a distant goal. Aeneas continues this process of the sublimation and internalization of heroic virtue. He is certainly a good fighter, but we do not see him fighting very much. Mostly he is passive, an instrument of the divine plan. He shares some of the ambivalence of Vergil about the harsh necessities of political life. His *pietas*, his piety, is not for the gods only; he is duteous in an almost Confucian way, toward his ancestors, his posterity, his nation both past and future. In the poem, the principal antagonist of this virtue of *pietas* is rage—in Latin, *furor*—which animates several of the characters, especially female ones. So much for the Homeric *menin*! The life of the passions—in particular, erotic passion—is represented as an obstacle to the fulfillment of Rome's historical destiny. It is only at the very end of the

poem, as a paradoxical means of safeguarding Rome's future, that Aeneas expresses rage, rather than repressing it.

Because Vergil is a more polished and artificial writer than Homer, he was for many centuries ranked higher in critical esteem. Of course, many Greek texts were lost to Europe during the medieval period, and even the ability to read classical Greek was somewhat rare. To the great medieval poet Dante, Vergil was the great predecessor, the paradigm of what a poet should be. He even appears as a major character in the *Comedy*, guiding the pilgrim Dante in his journey to the afterlife. Homer was known to Dante only in Latin translations; though he was a formidably learned writer, Dante seems to have known little or no Greek. I don't want to imply however that Dante's *Comedy*, or *The Divine Comedy* as it is sometimes called, is a full-fledged epic. The question of the *genre* of Dante's poem is a very vexed one. At least we can say that just as Vergil imitates many passages in Homer and alludes to others, so Dante does with Vergil. In each case, the later writer is a passionate devotee of the earlier one but also wants to outdo him. (This almost Oedipal interaction between earlier and later writers in a tradition has been characterized by Harold Bloom as "the anxiety of influence.") Even after the recovery of Greek texts by the humanists of the European Renaissance, Vergil was still widely considered to be a greater writer than Homer: he was thought to be not only more polished and self-conscious, but also more moral, while Homer seemed somewhat rude and primitive. It is only in the eighteenth century, for the pre-Romantics and the Romantics, that Homer claimed the place of preeminence, especially because he was the first, the originator, the source of all subsequent Western literature. But this same reverence for what is natural and original kept the Romantic poets from engaging in

the close, formal imitation of their predecessors. We do not really see “epic” poems in the nineteenth century, except for mock epics and parodies, which I will return to later. I am trying to explain, in twenty-five words or less, why Vergil was the great predecessor for most of the full-fledged epics that European literature has produced. These poems were written by and large during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Not coincidentally, this is the precise period of the great flourishing revival of classical learning. Just as the Renaissance came first to Italy among the nations of Europe, so also came the rebirth of the epic.

I claim that the greatest epic written between Vergil’s *Aeneid* and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is a very strange poem you may never have heard of. Its title is *Orlando Furioso*, which we could translate as “Roland gone mad”; and it was written by the Italian poet Lodovico Ariosto during the first few decades of the sixteenth century. It is a huge, sprawling work, longer than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined, and there are hundreds of characters and scores of episodes, polyphonically interwoven into many different lines of plot. The main hero, Orlando, is the Roland of the French medieval *chanson de geste* known as the *Song of Roland*; he is a paladin, a knight serving the Emperor Charlemagne in his conflict with the Moors. The *Song of Roland* recounts the heroic end of his life at the battle of Roncevaux; Ariosto’s poem focuses on an earlier period of Roland’s career. We can infer a few things about the poem by looking at its first couple of lines [HANDOUT #5].

Where Vergil sang of “arms and the man,” Ariosto starts not with men but with “ladies.” In the testosterone-saturated world of epic, this beginning has to seem surprising and ironic, even humorous. Note the chiasmic structure of the first line: men—

“knights”—and “arms” are in the middle, with the Vergilian order reversed, and they are embraced, you might say, by “ladies” and “loves.” While ladies and love are not at all absent from Homer and Vergil, they are not given this kind of top billing. Ariosto is quoting Vergil quoting Homer, and he also is announcing that his poem will include the themes of chivalry and courtly love-service that we find in medieval romances. This poem will be an epic romance. As implied by this subversive opening, it will also be surprising, ironic and funny. Orlando, the *preux chevalier* who is the greatest champion of the Christian side, has run mad because he has been jilted by his lady-love Angelica. As a result he has left the battlefield in a truancy that owes something to the precedent of Achilles, and a large part of the poem will be devoted to trying to get him back. Unlike the rage of Achilles, that of Orlando does not involve sulking in his tent; instead he roams the countryside naked and raving, uprooting trees and attacking friend and foe alike. (In *Don Quixote*, Cervantes gives a very funny imitation of this behavior.) Like the *furor* of the *Aeneid*, Orlando’s madness, his *furore*, threatens the happy ending of the poem—the destined defeat of the forces of Islamic paganism that threaten Europe and Christendom.

It is hard to convey the brilliant mixture of tones that Ariosto uses. Love and chivalry are a large part of his subject; yet he treats them, as he treats everything, with an ironic detachment that verges on mockery. Much of the plot is wildly fantastical. For example, Orlando’s sanity is eventually restored only after another hero, Astolfo, flies to the moon on a hippogriff, a mythical beast, to retrieve Orlando’s wits. Guided by St. John the Evangelist, Astolfo finds them there in an oil-jar, and the narrator explains gravely that everything that is lost or perished on earth is warehoused on the moon: lovers’ vows, deathbed alms, the flattery of princes, great palaces and empires of bygone

days, even many hours of Astolfo's own wasted time. (This satirical passage was later imitated by Milton in *Paradise Lost*.) Ariosto seems to go out of his way to remind us that in his fictional world, the author or narrator is omnipotent, and we are at his mercy. He may leave one of his scantily-clad heroines hanging by one hand from a cliff, with a monster snapping at her rear end; at this point the narrator brutally shifts us to another of the many interwoven lines of plot, and we may not see that unfortunate damsel again for thirty or forty pages. At that point the narrator will exclaim with mock dismay that alas! he is a churl for having left the fair Isabella in this predicament for so long. The effect is a kind of detachment, almost a miniaturization of the cavalcade of knights, magicians, villainous infidels, armed female warriors, dwarfs, archangels, ships and horses. There is a certain amount of bawdy material too. The tale runs that Sir John Harington, the young scapegrace who was a cousin of Queen Elizabeth I, translated one of the more risqué cantos and circulated it among the ladies-in-waiting. The irate queen punished him by commanding that he not return to court until he had translated the other forty-five cantos, a work that must have taken several years. The English translation that resulted is still perhaps the best, though the language is somewhat old-fashioned.

Ariosto's poem, like Vergil's, was a sequel. A previous poet at the court of Ferrara, Matteo Boiardo, had written an unfinished poem entitled *Orlando Innamorato*, "Roland in love." Ariosto takes up the plot where Boiardo leaves off. The joke is that epics are traditionally supposed to begin in the middle, *in medias res*, according to the prescriptions of Horace in his *Ars Poetica*. Ariosto literalizes this requirement by completing Boiardo's project, though his poem has its own internal economy and structure. The humor of Ariosto reminds us that epic is a form that almost invites us to

parody by seeming to take itself too seriously. Even in archaic Greece, there was a short mock epic called *The Battle of the Frogs and Mice* that was attributed to Homer; and Aristotle tells us of a comic Homeric poem called the *Margites*, which no longer survives. Ovid's great Latin poem *Metamorphoses*, while not itself exactly an epic, contains several sections that poke fun at Vergil and his imperial patron, Augustus. In the years after Ariosto, mock-epic often found its home in prose fictions, including several of the greatest of the early European novels. I have already mentioned that *Don Quixote* owes some of its inspiration to *Orlando Furioso*, which is repeatedly referred to in Cervantes' novel. (Oddly, the *Quixote* does not seem to acknowledge that the *Furioso* is also a spoof of knightly romance; instead, the addled knight treats it with the same literalism that he applies to the very chivalric pot-boilers which Ariosto too is parodying.) A century and a half later, the eighteenth century novelist Henry Fielding characterizes his *Tom Jones* as "a comic epic in prose." Both *Tom Jones* and *Joseph Andrews*, Fielding's two best novels, allude frequently to *Don Quixote*; but their roots go further back. Fielding even has fun with the Homeric formula: "He fell thunderously, and his armor clanged upon him." In one of Fielding's tavern brawl scenes, this appears as "He fell with a lumpish noise, and his half-pence rattled in his pocket." In the nineteenth century, Stendhal uses Ariosto repeatedly in his *Charterhouse of Parma*. There are certainly serious novels that have what we might call "epic" aspirations—Tolstoy comes to mind among others. But the novel which gestures most explicitly toward the epic tradition, Joyce's *Ulysses*, seems to be primarily an ironic mock-epic.

Getting back to the thread of my main narrative, I come to a poem that appeared in the 1560's, *Jerusalem Delivered* by Torquato Tasso. This epic romance, shorter and

less diffuse than Ariosto's but obviously inspired by it, is set against the backdrop of the First Crusade to recapture Jerusalem, led by Godfrey of Bouillon. He is the *capitano* mentioned in the first line of the poem [HANDOUT #6]. Though Tasso will have plenty of knights and ladies, he departs from Ariosto and purges them from his introduction, in favor of the Vergilian duo of "arms and the man." Here the arms are "pious arms," which should make us think of Aeneas's virtue of *pietas*. But the piety is a specifically Christian one, and Tasso's poem is far more didactic and religiose than the *Furioso*. Both of them depict what is now sometimes called, in neoconservative circles, the "clash of civilizations," the violent encounter of the Christian West and the Islamic East. In Ariosto's poem the Christians were on the defensive; here, in true Counter-Reformation style, they are aggressive and militant. Tasso chose the First Crusade because it was the only successful one; but he tactfully fails to mention that after the capture of Jerusalem the Christian brutally massacred their prisoners, including women and children. (Saladīn, when he recaptured the city, did not reciprocate.) However, both Ariosto's and Tasso's poems do portray virtuous and sympathetic pagans, both male and female; and both embarrassingly use God and the Angels, Satan and the Devils as a divine machinery in the manner of the ancient Olympic pantheon. But Ariosto's tongue-in-cheek introduction of the divine into human affairs seemed to call attention to its own inadequacy. Tasso is more in earnest, and his use of God as a character points out a continuing problem in the humanist revival of classical epic. How can the Christian poet make use of Homeric and Vergilian episodes that mingle gods and mortals? The problem persists, I claim, until it is drastically solved a century later by Milton. As I hope to show later, the "solution" Milton adopts is to deal a death-blow to the directly imitative tradition of the epic poem.

In *Jerusalem Delivered*, Godfrey of Bouillon is nominally the hero; but much of the narrative interest centers on Rinaldo, the Christians' best fighter and indispensable man. Like Achilles and Orlando, he is out of the fighting for much of the poem, and the energies of several other characters are devoted either to getting him back or to keeping him out. It is not wounded pride or madness that sidelines Rinaldo; rather he has been seduced by the beautiful pagan Armida, who, Delilah-like, keeps him in her bower, weakened and unmanned by love's bewitchment, in order to aid the Saracen cause. So here too, as in the *Aeneid*, duty and piety are at odds with passion, especially erotic passion. Tasso is more of a moralist than the playfully anarchic Ariosto. His poem is more Vergilian in its crafted, compressed use of language, its tight structure and its melancholic tone, verging occasionally on sentimentality. Because of its Christian moralism it was more highly thought of than the *Furioso* in its own day, and in the succeeding two centuries. My sense is that Ariosto now ranks higher in the canon of Italian literature; he appeals more to the postmodern sensibility.

Inspired by both Ariosto and Tasso, the English poet Edmund Spenser writes the first true English epic, *The Faerie Queene*, in the last years of the sixteenth century and the first few years of the seventeenth. He is thus roughly a contemporary of Shakespeare, which may surprise you when you look at his orthography, diction and syntax. [SKIP TO HANDOUT #8.] The difference from Shakespeare's language is partly illusory— Because of Shakespeare's cultural prestige we tend to update him constantly, to insure that he remains a writer "not of an age but for all time," as Ben Jonson said. Thus it's difficult to find a Shakespeare text on the library shelf that is not at least partly modernized. But even allowing for this, it's clear that Spenser is deliberately making his

language more archaic, in order to confer upon it a kind of epic dignity. To quote Ben Jonson again: "Spenser in affecting the ancients writ no language." Despite Jonson's sneer (which may partly stem from his envy of Spenser's prestige), it is clear that Spenser is trying to evoke the memory of Chaucer in his spelling and some of his word choices. By this time in English linguistic history, Middle English was only a faint memory, and its different pronunciation was unknown for centuries. (We can see this in the metrical ineptitude of an attempted parody of Chaucer by Pope, at the age of thirteen.) But Spenser still refers to Chaucer as the "well of English undefiled." There is ample precedent for this antiquarian use of language. For example, the choruses of Attic tragedy are often not written in the Athenian dialect, but in an older one, or a combination. Some Latinists think that Vergil's Latin is similarly self-consciously archaic. Both Ariosto and Tasso often sound like Petrarch, or other poets of a century earlier. If so, then part of the tradition of epic seems to be a use of language that attains grandeur and prestige by appealing to past diction and usage. The space occupied by the poem is set apart and privileged by its linguistic particularity; we are reminded that this is supposed to be an inspired utterance whose speaker stands outside of human history to see past, present and future.

Yet in another way, Spenser's personal voice is very much in evidence. The beginning of the *Faerie Queene* alludes not only to the other beginnings we have been looking at, but to the lines deleted from the *Aeneid* by most editors starting from right after Vergil's death. [HANDOUT #7] These lines, which are probably not by Vergil, refer to the progress of his poetic career, from the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* to the *Aeneid*. In alluding to them, Spenser takes his place in the tradition of the *gradus ad*

*Parnassum*—the “steps to Parnassus.” Since an epic is the high point of a poet’s career, it must be approached slowly, through the apprentice work of writing pastoral poems. Tasso had already followed this pattern, writing his pastoral play *Aminta* before moving on to *Jerusalem Delivered*. Spenser’s own pastoral work, *The Shepheardes Calender*, imitates Vergil’s *Eclogues* rather closely in some places, which suggests that even at the outset he was charting his path as a poetic professional. We’ll see this cancelled beginning of the *Aeneid* referred to again by Milton. After ceremonially discarding his oaten reed, the shepherd’s pipe, Spenser alludes to Ariosto with his mention of “Knights and Ladies”—but reversing the ironic order that we saw in the *Furioso*. “Fierce warres and faithfull loues,” however, appear in parallel, rather than chiasmatically, as in Ariosto’s poem.

When we move ahead into Spenser’s narrative, we find some significant departures. Instead of one story or a number of interwoven plots, the poem seems to give a separate hero and a new story in each of its books. Each hero or heroine is an allegorical personification of a single virtue—holiness in Book I, temperance in Book II, and so forth. Virtually all of the other characters are allegorical as well, and many are significantly named, in English or some other language: There are such villains as Dispeyre, Orgoglio (Italian for “pride”), Acrasia (Greek for “intemperance,”) and so forth. Spenser thus continues and extends Tasso’s Christian and moralistic appropriation of the epic romance, although his fervor springs from puritanical Protestantism rather than from the Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation. Both Spenser and Tasso exemplify a tradition, many centuries old, of reading the ancient epics didactically, taking each hero as an image of moral virtues to be emulated by the reader. This sounds pretty

stodgy, and in Spenser's case it often is. But in uneasy coexistence with allegorical didacticism, the *Faerie Queene* also gives us the enchantment of medieval romance—elves, wizards, dwarves and dragons enough to satisfy such dreamers as John Keats or C.S. Lewis. Even if some of these beings are saddled with allegorical names, we can nonetheless put up with them, ignoring the medicine in favor of the honey smeared upon the lip of the cup. As in Ariosto's poem, the realm of magic and fairies serves another purpose besides delighting us: it gives an alternative source of supernatural machinery. Instead of using the Christian god and his angels to intervene in human affairs as the Olympians do, Spenser can summon a wizard or an enchanter. Unlike Ariosto, however, he invests the wizard with an allegorical identity that corresponds to some true moral or theological entity within the Christian cosmos. The project of a Christian epic remains problematic; it seems that the poet must choose between being a truth-teller and being a story teller.

Spenser is an ostentatiously learned poet with many philosophical interests. He has studied the Neoplatonism of fifteenth century Florence, for example, and some of his murkier passages seem to encode some of its doctrines. His allusions range from the Bible (Greek and Hebrew), the Apocrypha and the Greek and Latin Church Fathers to previous poems written in Greek, Latin, French, Italian and Spanish. He refers frequently to all of the epics we have been discussing, as well as several others; and he introduces the native English tradition not only with Chaucer but with the Arthurian legends—indeed, the young King Arthur is a character in the poem. Like Vergil, Spenser also refers in a not-so-veiled way to the politics of his own time. Here we can see fully the ambition of the epic poet to include all previous epics as part of the project of mirroring the whole

world. I can think of three very different modern writers in English who are comprehensively allusive and encyclopedic in this way. The first is J.R.R. Tolkien, a massively learned Oxford don who studded his tales of Middle Earth with references to Dante, Beowulf, the Norse sagas and Eddas, the Bible, Homer, Vergil, Spenser and Ariosto, just for starters. It is fascinating to me that so many of his modern fans read the stories in a complete literary-historical vacuum; for them, Tolkien is the great originator, spawning a host of inferior fantasy-clones on the shelves of Barnes & Noble. Perhaps it was Tolkien's private academic joke to conceal so much of his learnedness from the casual reader; of course his university-based friends like C.S. Lewis and Neville Coghill were not deceived. The naïve and popular reading of Tolkien might suggest to us that in former times, most readers of Spenser, Milton and other learned writers were ignoring the allusions and merely following the plot. But I said there were three modern writers in English who allude so playfully and promiscuously to a huge variety of sources. The other two are James Joyce and Ezra Pound.

None too soon, we have arrived at the last stop on our itinerary of writers of epics after Homer. The seventeenth century poet, puritan and controversialist John Milton takes a radically different approach to the problem of how to combine his Christian faith with his use of a pagan literary *genre*. The result, *Paradise Lost*, is paradoxically both the purest and most "classical" of all the post-Vergilian epics and also the poem that puts an end to the epic tradition. Milton's radical project is to rewrite, not just the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, but also the book of Genesis. The heroic enterprise of writing an epic has always required the greatest boldness; but here audacity seems to pass over into sheer *chutzpah*. In revising and amplifying the Scriptural record written by God

with Moses as his instrument, Milton lays claim to the role of prophet or even to the literal position of *alter deus*, a second God. To make matters worse, he echoes Ariosto in claiming to set forth “things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.” Let’s look at his opening [HANDOUT #9]. The “man” of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid* has here become all mankind, but represented by the first man, Adam. Is he then to be the hero, like Odysseus or Aeneas? But almost immediately we are told of a “greater man,” that is Christ, who is both a man and not a man, both all men and no man. Christ seems a more plausible epic hero than Adam in some ways. But unfortunately we find as the poem progresses that epithets and episodes involving Odysseus and Aeneas, the heroic sources, are applied not to Adam or to Christ, but usually to Satan, the great adversary. Things get even worse when God the Father and Christ the Son enter the poem as characters in Book III and incur the instant dislike of any sensitive reader. Is Milton then, as William Blake provocatively claimed, “of the devil’s party without knowing it”?

We get a clue in the way the Father and the Son begin speaking to each other:

Only begotten Son, seest thou what rage  
Transports our adversary, whom no bounds  
Prescribed, no bars of hell, nor all the chains  
Heaped on him there, nor yet the main abyss  
Wide interrupt can hold; so bent he seems  
On desperate revenge, that shall redound  
Upon his own rebellious head.

(III.80-86)

The clunky opening apostrophe— “Only begotten son”—deliberately calls our attention to the strange awkwardness of the whole speech. What is the purpose of this communication? Are we to assume that one person of the Trinity is conveying information to another? Both Father and Son are fully cognizant of all events, past,

present and future. Further, as the speech goes on, the omnipotence of God is dwelt upon and problematized in a way that tends to remove all freedom from human action and all suspense from the conflict with the forces of evil. Milton's God is Augustinian—an incorporeal spiritual substance—but he is crudely anthropomorphized here. In other words, the story is told in order to remind us, to rub our noses in the hard teaching that this story is not really a “story.” It cannot be told in the ordinary narrative form; whatever God, Christ and Satan may actually be like, they cannot be like this. Why then tell it in this way? Because this is the only way in which we, the human audience, can conceive of these events. Our fallen imaginations find appeal in the false heroism of Satan; perhaps all human heroism is Satanic? Our human minds can only conceive of a tale that unfolds in time and space. But the most important, defining realities are not confined to a time and a place; God the Almighty cannot have, in Shakespeare's phrase, “a local habitation and a name.” Thus, as Stanley Fish and others have shown, Milton's strategy is to write a poem that works against itself: It seduces us into an imaginative involvement with the plot, but it keeps telling us in large ways and small that we are wrong, that this is not what happened.

Milton makes some of his strategy explicit in his invocation to Book IX (handout #10). Let me quote a little more of it than I have put in the handout:

I now must change  
These notes to tragic; foul distrust and breach  
Disloyal on the part of man, revolt,  
And disobedience; on the part of heaven  
Now alienated, distance and distaste,  
Anger and just rebuke, and judgment given  
That brought into this world a world of woe,  
Sin and her shadow Death, and Misery  
Death's harbinger: Sad task, yet argument  
Not less but more heroic than the wrath

Of stern Achilles on his foe pursued  
 Thrice fugitive about Troy wall; or rage  
 Of Turnus for Lavinia disespoused,  
 Or Neptune's ire or Juno's, that so long  
 Perplexed the Greek and Cytherea's son;  
 If answerable style I can obtain  
 Of my celestial patroness, who deigns  
 Her nightly visitation unimplored,  
 And dictates to me slumbering, or inspires  
 Easy my unpremeditated verse:  
 Since first this subject for heroic song  
 Pleas'd me long choosing, and beginning late;  
 Not sedulous by nature to indite  
 Wars, hitherto the only argument  
 Heroic deemed, chief mastery to dissect  
 With long and tedious havoc fabled knights  
 In battles feigned; the better fortitude  
 Of patience and heroic martyrdom  
 Unsung; or to describe races and games,  
 Or tilting furniture, emblazoned shields,  
 Impreses quaint, caparisons and steeds;  
 Bases and tinsel trappings, gorgeous knights  
 At joust and tournament; then marshalled feast  
 Served up in hall with sewers, and seneschals;  
 The skill of artifice or office mean,  
 Not that which justly gives heroic name  
 To person or to poem.

(IX. 5-41)

Here Milton seems to claim that there is a truer heroism, in whose favor the entire epic tradition is to be discarded. But of what could such a heroism consist? Is it consistent with human virtue, or only exemplified by Christ himself? And what kind of poem could celebrate it? The problem is aggravated in the shorter and inferior sequel, *Paradise Regained*, which narrates Satan's temptation of Christ in the wilderness. [refer to handout # 11) At the beginning we see another use of the cancelled opening of the *Aeneid*. But why is it used here? The implication seems to be that *Paradise Lost* was not an epic but only a pastoral, the first step in Milton's *gradus ad Parnassum*. But in every

other way *Paradise Lost* seems to be the more epic of the two poems; for example, it has twelve books like the *Aeneid* (*Paradise Regained* only has four.). The portrayal of Christ in *Paradise Regained* is pretty lifeless, almost purely negative; his heroic act is refraining, not acting. Heroic virtue here has been internalized and sublimated almost out of existence.

Milton's indictment of the heroic tradition resembles in some ways the criticism of poetry leveled by Plato in the *Republic*. By its nature, poetry is imitative, hence false; and its purpose is to inflame in us our least worthy passions. And yet *Paradise Lost* is a vast, beautiful, powerful, passionate poem, rich in its allusions to previous poetic tradition, which nonetheless levels these criticisms at poetry itself. Not only does it swallow up all of its predecessors; it also preempts any possible successors. After such knowledge, what forgiveness? We can see how Milton's poem would be an impossible act to follow for any aspiring writer of epic. Henceforth, the sons of Homer will seek other genres in which to write. One strand of development will be self-reflexively ironic: the mock epic. Another is more naturalistic. If there still remains the epic impulse, the desire for a grand scale, a panoptic, God's eye view, with a corresponding dignity of human action,— we must look for it elsewhere: not in vast, heroic poems, but in novels, in films, and perhaps even in video games.

**Sons of Homer**

(All underlined emphasis is mine.)

1. Mhnin aeide, qea, Phlhiadew Acilhoj  
oulomenhn, h muri'Acaioij alge' eqhke... Sing the rage, Goddess, of Achilles, son of Peleus,  
The destructive rage that brought ten thousand  
pains upon the Achaeans...

2. Andra moi ennepe, Mousa, polutropon,  
oj mala polla Tell me of the man of many turns, Muse,  
who was driven to much  
plagcqh, epei Troihj ieron ptolieqron Wandering, after he sacked the holy city of  
epersen... Troy...

3. Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus  
ab oris Arms and the man I sing, who first from the  
coast of Troy  
Italiam fato profugus Laviniaque venit Fled because of fate to Italy and came to Lavinian  
litora... Shores....  
(Vergil, *Aeneid* I.1-3)

4. When first young *Maro* in his boundless Mind  
A Work t'outlast Immortal Rome design'd,  
Perhaps he seem'd *above* the Critick's Law,  
And but from *Nature's Fountains* scorn'd to draw:  
But when t'examine ev'ry Part he came,  
*Nature* and *Homer* were, he found, the *same*...

(Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*, 130-135)

5. Le donne, i cavalier, l'arme, gli amori  
le cortesie, l'audaci imprese io canto.... Of ladies, of knights, of arms, of loves,  
of chivalry, of bold enterprises I sing...

(Lodovico Ariosto, *Orlando Furioso*, I.i.1-2)

6. Canto l'arme pietose e' l' capitano  
che'l gran sepolcro liberò di Cristo. I sing of pious arms and the captain  
Who liberated the great sepulcher of Christ.  
Molto egli oprò co'l senno e con la mano, Much he achieved with his mind and hand,  
molto soffrì nel glorioso acquisto... Much suffered in the glorious acquisition....

(Torquato Tasso, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, I.i.1-4)

7. Ille ego, qui quondam gracili modulatus avena  
 carmen, et egressus silvis vicina coegi  
 ut quamvis avido parerent arva colono,  
 gratum opus agricolis, at nunc horrentia  
 Martis  
 arma virumque cano... &c.
- I am he who once tuned on a slender reed  
 My song, and leaving the woods made the nearby  
 Fields obey the cultivator no matter how greedy,  
 A work to win favor with farmers, but now Mars's  
 bristling  
Arms and the man I sing...&c.

(cancelled opening of the *Aeneid*)

8. Lo I the man, whose Muse whylome did maske,  
 As time her taught, in lowly Shepeards weeds,  
 Am now enforst a farre vnfitter taske,  
 For trumpets sterne to chaunge mine Oaten reeds,  
 And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds;  
 Whose prayes hauing slept in silence long,  
 Me, all too meane, the sacred Muse areeds  
 To blazon broade emongst her learned throng:  
 Fierce warres and faithfull loues shall moralize my song.

(Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, I, Proem, i.1-9)

9. Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit  
 Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste  
 Brought death into the world, and all our woe,  
 With loss of Eden, till one greater man  
 Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,  
 Sing heavenly Muse...

(John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I.1-6)

10. ... sad task, yet argument  
 Not less but more heroic than the wrath  
 Of stern Achilles on his foe pursued  
 Thrice fugitive about Troy wall; or rage  
 Of Turnus for Lavinia disespoused,  
 Or Neptune's ire or Juno's, that so long  
 Perplexed the Greek and Cytherea's son....

(John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IX. 13-19)

11. I who erewhile the happy garden sung,  
 By one man's disobedience lost, now sing  
 Recovered Paradise to all mankind,  
 By one man's firm obedience fully tried  
 Through all temptation....

(John Milton, *Paradise Regained*, I.1-5)