

## ... To Say Nothing of Frogs and Angels: A Response to Tom MacFaul\*

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Tom MacFaul offers a persuasive account of the English mock-epic tradition's emergence out of Spenser's, Jonson's, and Davenant's early experiments with the form. Rather than contesting this narrative, I should like to continue a bit in the same vein by broadening the field of reference.

English mock epic derives its inspiration from earlier continental practice reaching back to Graeco-Roman times, and MacFaul has already explored much of the classical background to "Muiopotmos," "The Famous Voyage," and the "Jeffereidos." But in doing so he has concentrated on what we might call high or elite sources: classical epic proper and a few related genres such as the ode. As it happens, the principal surviving example of Graeco-Roman mock-heroic verse, the Homeric *Battle of Frogs and Mice*, made its formal entrance into English literary history twelve years after Jonson had assembled his Epigrams, and six years before Davenant would compose his "Jeffereidos." When George Chapman's *The Crowne of all Homers Workes* appeared in 1624 as the final installment of the poet's monumental Homeric labors, it provided readers with the first-ever English translation of the *Batrachomyomachia*, done in a handsome folio format that placed the poem ahead of the Homeric Hymns and Epigrams, in a transitional position between the great epics and the minor Homerica. In 2008 Princeton University Press reissued Allardyce Nicoll's 1956 Bollingen

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\*Reference: Tom MacFaul, "The Butterfly, the Fart and the Dwarf: The Origins of the English Laureate Micro-Epic," *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/2008): 144-64.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debmacfaul01723.htm>>.

edition of *The Crowne*, now with a new introduction by Stephen Scully, so the time seems right to reconsider the volume's impact on English letters.

MacFaul has noted how Spenser's, Jonson's, and Davenant's experiments with the mock-heroic form contributed to their broader efforts at laureate self-fashioning. For his part, Chapman never earned the royal favor that distinguished these three of his contemporaries, but it was surely not for want of trying. Chapman's self-identification with Homer remains perhaps the most distinctive feature of his literary persona, needing no documentation here. By translating the *locus classicus* of mock epic in a context that attributes it to Homer, the English poet enlisted this genre to his vision of the laureate's calling, assigning it a status similar to that of the *Culex* in the traditional *cursus Virgilianus*. Likewise, in recovering the past both for and to the present, *The Crowne* also assimilates Homer's reputation to that of his English translator.

By presenting the *Battle of Frogs and Mice* as an integral part of the Homeric corpus, Chapman was simply following received wisdom. While some doubts regarding the poem's authorship can be traced back to classical times,<sup>1</sup> Chapman's base-text for all his Homeric translations, Spondanus's *Homeri Quae Extant Omnia* (1583; reprinted 1606), included the work's original Greek text together with a Latin translation by Aldus Manutius. That translation, which appears without attribution in Spondanus's *Homer*, had already turned up alongside Latin versions of the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and Homeric Hymns in the *Homeri opera Latine ad verbum translata* of 1537. So when Chapman conscripted the Hellenistic mock epic to his vision of laureate achievement, he attached his project as translator not only to the authority of Homer himself but also to the collective body of continental scholarship on Homer's work.

As a result, by the Interregnum there existed a prominent English translation of a mock epic ostensibly by Homer himself, together with various efforts at mock-heroic verse by the most successful royal poets of the late Tudor and early Stuart dynasties. It was already an impos-

ing lineage, and it implied a close connection between the parodic and the heroic, at least on the level of literary achievement. Thus it seems—in retrospect at least—inevitable that Milton would seek an accommodation with mock-epic form as part of his own bid for laureate distinction. *Paradise Lost* famously operates not just as an epic but as a compendium of lesser genres as well, encompassing within itself versions of pastoral, epithalamium, *sacra rappresentazione*, meditative verse, and more. Amidst all this, the poem's investment in mock epic first emerges at the end of Book 1, as Satan and his followers enter an under-sized Pandemonium by reducing themselves to the stature of "that Pigmæan Race / Beyond the *Indian* Mount" (1.780-81). Here the image participates in the same "absurd miniaturization" that MacFaul observes in "Moiopotmos" and the "Jeffereidos," and with much the same aim that MacFaul identifies in the former of these poems: "to arrive at true epic seriousness" (147).

But of course the real proving-ground for mock epic in *Paradise Lost* is Book 6's account of the War in Heaven. Located at the heart of the poem in both its ten- and twelve-book versions, this narrative effectively assimilates the entire western tradition of martial heroism to Milton's investment in "the better fortitude / Of Patience and heroic Martyrdom" (9.31-32), all with a delicacy of touch that seems to have completely escaped the poet's earliest readers.<sup>2</sup> Even Dr. Johnson and Voltaire's Count Pococurente were apparently immune to the irony of a battle-sequence in which all physical injuries heal as soon as they are inflicted, in which both weapons and physical courage are thus rendered comically meaningless, and in which the outcome is finally decided by a single hero who puts forth not even "half his strength" (*Paradise Lost* 6.853).<sup>3</sup> But the episode is a momentous one from the standpoint of English literary history, for it witnesses the conquest of high epic by mock epic, as the martial tradition of Homer, Virgil, et al. is subjected to corrective belittlement from the standpoint of a prevenient Christian inspiration.

The foregoing comments of course make no pretense to dealing exhaustively either with Chapman's translation of the *Batrachomyoma-*

*chia* or the mock-heroic elements of *Paradise Lost*—let alone the tradition of English mock epic which both these poems in their different ways exemplify. I wish simply to point, by way of a brief response to Tom MacFaul's work, to the broader narrative within which that work participates and which it helps to elucidate in some detail. I suspect MacFaul has already considered the importance of both Chapman and Milton to the story he tells, and I would not be surprised to see him deal with these poets in other, related publications.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Scully 39.

<sup>2</sup>For the early reaction to *Paradise Lost* 5-6, see Hughes 201-02.

<sup>3</sup>For Voltaire's view of Milton as a "barbarian [...] who, imitating in all seriousness the comic invention of firearms in Ariosto, has the devils fire cannon in Heaven," see *Candide* (84); for Johnson's objections to "the confusion of spirit and matter which pervades the whole narrative of the war in heaven" in *Paradise Lost*, see the *Lives of the Poets* (439-40).

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