

More Hot Air: A Large and Serious Response to Tom MacFaul*

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Let Poets feed on aire, or what they will;
Let me feed full, till that I fart, says *Jill*.
(Herrick 216-17)

Literary criticism has long been divided between privileging (and attempting to identify) material causes as the source of (and reason for) the creation of a literary work, as opposed to emphasizing a work's otherworldly and/or moral significance as its main inspiration and reason for being. This critical division continues in MacFaul's lively analysis of three "micro-epics" (or *epyllions*), Edmund Spenser's "Muiopotmos: or The Fate of the Butterflie" (1595), Ben Jonson's *Epigram CXXXIII* ("On the Famous Voyage") (1616) and William Davenant's "*Jeffereidos, on the Captivity of Jeffery*" (1638). MacFaul's light capering between the creative-critical poles of earth and air—material vs. spiritual causation—leaves this reader puzzled, however, and asking for more sustained and consistent analysis.

At stake, furthermore, is what constitutes good art worth analyzing in depth, as opposed to mere hot air. MacFaul calls "[a]ll three poems [...] brilliant and bravura performances in their own distinctive ways" (161) but in this case, we may wish to distinguish between good art and long fart. These three widely varying poems, published over a period of forty-three years, are linked by little other than the laureate

*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>>.

status of their authors and a few “mock-epic” motifs, including the heroic voyage, a confrontation with the bestial and monstrous and—unstressed enough by MacFaul—a preoccupation with Hell and hence the wages of sin. Spenser’s scintillating poem is rich in images, sources and poetic diction, lyrically graceful, nicely plotted (with two Ovidian digressions that greatly increase the poem’s thematic complexity), pleasing, teasing and tasteful, with darkly disturbing elements; Jonson’s poem is verbally brilliant, intellectually complex, playful and bawdy albeit frankly (and effectively) disgusting.¹ Davenant’s emission, however, cannot measure up to the other two in intellectual substance nor quality of sound.² A poem beginning with the clunky rhymed couplets

A Sayle! a sayle! cry’ d they, who did consent
Once more to break the eighth Commandement
For a few Coles, of which by theft so well
Th’are stor’d, they have enow to furnish Hell (Davenant 37, ll. 1-4)³

should have been stopped immediately. When reaching such lines as

[...] Thou Pirat-Dogge
(The wrathfull Captive then reply’ d) not *Ogge*
(The Bashan King) was my Progenitor;
Nor doe I strive to fetch my Ancestor
From *Aneck’s* Sonnes, nor from the Genitals
Of wrastling-*Cacus*, who gave many falls. (39, ll. 63-68)

we feel relieved that the poem is so short. Does a rampaging pirate care who *Ogge* is? This is part of the joke, of course, but the narrative is similarly halting, the whole thing pedantic. MacFaul’s politicized analysis of the poem—a tale of a dwarfish court jester attacked by pirates and a chicken on his way home from France—is intriguing (“Given Charles I’s own diminutive and non-heroic stature, the poem may also glance at the King” [MacFaul 157]), but—like a true mock-epic protagonist—I refuse to go any further with it.⁴

The other two poems, on the other hand, deserve and receive more attention from MacFaul, although I have a similar conclusion regard-

ing his treatment of both: I disagree with MacFaul's opening thesis that the two poems, despite their parodic epic take on human foibles, "attempt to reduce the heroic mode to an absurd minimum" (MacFaul 144). *Davenant's* poem arguably does this (deliberately and inadvertently). Rather, I choose to read "Muiopotmos," about the doomed butterfly Clarion, as containing a sincere moral message as well as a forthright imperial-heroic theme.⁵

As for "On the Famous Voyage," as MacFaul himself writes, "Jonson sees a truer heroism in inspecting the city's drains" than in celebrating an "imperial" and "national heroism" of the kind promoted elsewhere by Spenser (in his "Prothalamion," for example; MacFaul 157). I agree, but wish to further emphasize the moral significance in Jonson's poem as well, so as to make it seem less ironic, or silly and ephemeral, at heart. Publicizing bad sewage is not without moral merit, any more than Swift's "A Modest Proposal" is merely absurd, or John Snow's simple removal of the choleric pump handle was a trivial act. Jonson's "Voyage" is shocking but also cunningly and effectively written, so as to emphasize the infernal and to make the reader wish, like Hercules, or God, or Dante,⁶ to divert a larger flood into London so as to clean it out for good. A similar sentiment operates in Spenser's "Muiopotmos" but only insofar as we fear and comprehend the folly of fair Clarion and condemn the damnable actions of "a wicked wight / The foe of faire things, th'author of confusion" (ll. 243-44), the dark spider Aragnoll.

Einfahrt: Spenser's hellish entry

MacFaul explicates "Muiopotmos" in confusing fashion. In line with his emphasis on the material significance of the micro-epic and its concomitant focus on "human littleness" (144), he reads the poem, on the one hand, as a political allegory whose referents wobble in and out of focus: it alludes to Sir Philip Sidney obliquely in the doomed butterfly Clarion (144-46),⁷ or, at least, "[r]ather than allegorizing

Sidney, Spenser allegorizes the *idea* of the once-future king, and the fantasies that attach to such a figure" (147): this is a good idea. Elsewhere, in the Juno/Arachne episode, the poem also "*clearly* allud[es] to Queen Elizabeth's supposedly providential victory over Philip II's Armada" (151; emphasis added).⁸

On the other hand, the poem reaches aesthetic heights despite the dangers of a politicized world that breeds nihilism: the "meaningless" "doom" of its hero is "somehow beautiful" (149), and "[b]eauty [...] needs to be valued on its own terms, not as part of a quest for power" (153). A century of criticism on the poem has split the interpretive baby down the middle: is it an aesthetically glittering poem about trivial things, i.e., art for art's sake and/or a pleasant diversion,⁹ or is it a morally serious, including political, allegory of the tragic fall of the high and mighty?¹⁰ MacFaul continues this trend by arguing both at the same time.

The interrelation of the two deserves more careful explanation than is found in MacFaul. We should indeed seek a serious moral and political meaning(s) underlying the poem's (and Clarion's) "sweetness and light" (MacFaul 151). To do so is not to trivialize the meaning of the poem, to ignore its lyric grace and beauty or to belittle its stature or that of its allegorical referents; if anything, should the poem be about the fall of the high and mighty (such as Sir Philip Sidney, or my preferred candidate for the butterfly, Lord Deputy of Ireland Sir John Perrot, rumored to be a bastard of Henry VIII) by the high and mighty (such real-life Spenserian villains as Lord Burleigh, James I or Feach MacHugh O'Byrne as Aragnoll), then indeed it has great significance as a satire on court and a critique of bad princes ("and the fantasies that attach to such a figure" [MacFaul 147]). This despite its mock- (or "micro-") epic guise. Indeed, the poem also contains a model of a good prince in it, i.e., Queen Elizabeth I, who as Juno in the second Ovidian digression punishes the transgressive Arachne (progenitor of Aragnoll) and plants peace in her stead. M. Marjorie Crump writes that "[i]n the [classical] epyllion the digression is often as important as the main subject, and sometimes even becomes the more important of

the two, the main subject acting as a framework" (24). In this case the poem's allusion to the defeat of Neptune, a.k.a., Philip II and his imperial minions, could function as the serious, epic-themed heart of the mock-epic poem.¹¹

Should we also understand the poem as alluding in hidden allegorical fashion to political players in Ireland, which was Spenser's immediate political and material context in which he wrote the poem (he was a colonial administrator and planter there from 1580 until his death in 1599 and made many complaints in prose and poetry about the country and its infernal circumstances), then we might understand the poem and its concluding parody of the *Aeneid* (Clarion dies a death akin to Turnus, as MacFaul notes [152]) as concerned with the very large and serious subject of the colonial *translatio imperii* of British power across the Irish sea. Spenser arrived in Ireland in the service of Lord Deputy Grey in August 1580, and within a month of their arrival Grey's troops were savagely ambushed by O'Byrne and the *Gabhall Raghmall* at Glenmalure in the Wicklow hills near Dublin. Read in this light, Spenser intends the spying and ambushing spider Aragnoll to connote that heart of darkness in Ireland. Aragnoll stands for the angry and resilient Catholic Irish native (allied with Philip II), including O'Byrne, who took advantage of overweening English military pride one Lord Deputy after another (including Perrot).¹²

To take it to another level: MacFaul argues that Don Cameron Allen's religious moralizing of the poem (cf. Allen), wherein the poem is "'an allegory of the wandering of the rational soul into error,' [...] may be to take the poem too seriously" (149). A fair response to this is: only if one chooses not to read it seriously. There are more than enough indications that Clarion signifies the soul, in a poem with a Greek title and source material (Greek *psyche* means "soul" and "butterfly"). Clarion flits

aloft unto the Christall skie,
To vew the workmanship of heavens hight:
Whence downe descending he along would flie
Upon the streaming rivers, sport to finde; (ll. 44-47)

Aragnoll is a devil incarnate, “a wicked wight,” “grimme Lyon,” “[t]he shame of Nature,” a “griesly tyrant” trapping Clarion in his “subtill loupes” of a “curséd cobweb” (ll. 243, 434, 245, 433, 429, 423). We are therefore encouraged to plot a Christianized allegory across the poem’s shimmering wings. For “whatso heavens in their secret doome / Ordained have, how can fraile fleshly wight / Forecast, but it must needs to issue come?” (ll. 225-27) How, in turn, do we escape the snares of evil acts? How do we escape a hellish end? “[N]one, except a God, or God him guide, / May them avoyde, or remedie provide” (ll. 223-24). Spenser’s poem is itself a cobweb of moral significance suspended over a rich corner of his Irish (and British) garden: those who skim its superficial surfaces or are blinded by its glints of poetic nectar risk the same downfall and damnation as our butterfly.

Ausfahrt: Jonson’s infernal exit

Jonson’s poem, rather than being a trap, functions as a diabolic purgative of the kind he himself describes: “potions, / Suppositories, cataplasmes, and lotions” (ll. 101-02).¹³ With this noxious medicine he grotesquely albeit humorously damns the city he lives in. The poem makes one squirm and leaves a bad taste in the mouth. But what is Jonson’s main target of satire? MacFaul writes sensibly that “[t]he dangers and absurdities inherent in the heroizing of commercial competition are at the heart of ‘The Famous Voyage’” (153). MacFaul thus brings the poem down to earth as a satire of rotten civility, including mercantile trade (and prostitution), and so (presumably) the poem “reduce[s] the heroic mode to an absurd minimum” (144) and makes a mockery of the epic genre.

Katherine Duncan-Jones is not so sure about the poem’s meaning:

It’s not clear whether Jonson’s chief target was the misgovernment of London, the ‘hot air’ of many recent philosophical and scientific writings [cf. the mockery of Paracelsians and atomists in the poem] or the amusing folly of

arrogant young blades who, like so many gulls in his stage comedies, try to master the congested city which will always end up mastering them. (262)

This last statement sounds like cosmic irony, a large and serious topic. In the spirit of Allen's reading of "Muiopotmos," I would suggest that we further emphasize the infernal circumstances in which our protagonists find themselves, so as to demonstrate the serious Christian moralizing underlying the playful and overly ripe parodic surface of civic, commercial and bodily satire. Underworld traces are omnipresent in the poem, both in its many references to fire (real and venereal) and hell, and in its sources, particularly Virgil. The poem even borrows from a classical source (i.e., Horace) that is itself a pastiche/parody of classical sources describing the underworld (cf. Boehrer). In doing so, Jonson's poem parodies moralistic poetry and associated parodies, but also, conversely, draws attention to the same diabolical subject matter. The discourse of Hell *is* often parodic, beginning with its main occupant, the anti-Christ. I would suggest that the poem is so grotesque and *nasty* in order to maintain the moral force of infernal condemnation. It sticks us, the readers, into a living hell and thus makes its satiric knife-edge that much keener. The epigram's prefatory lines make explicit and repeated references to "hell" (l. 2) and the classical underworld, before the narrative action begins in the section labeled "The Voyage Itself." Hence the reader must him/herself cross an infernal threshold to get into the poem.

Recent critics, by focusing on Virgilian and Horatian precedents (see Boehrer; McRae), have also ignored Jonson's potential allusions to Dante's *Inferno* in the poem. Not simply their shared use of multiple rivers and angry boatmen (ll. 12, 68, 87-88; cf. Dante's Charon, also based on Virgil, of course), "cries of ghosts, women, and men, / Laden with plague-sores" (ll. 16-17; cf. Dante's many ghosts and the plague victims in *Inferno* XXIX), erroneous philosophers (cf. Dante's Limbo and especially the alchemists in *Inferno* XXIX), prostitutes, "Arses" that "were heard to croak, instead of frogs" (l. 13; cf. the tremendous fart by a Malebranche demon that concludes *Inferno* Canto XXI; the Malebranche also jig at sinners who crouch like

frogs¹⁴), devouring beasts (including “Cerberus,” l. 14) and overwhelming fecal matter, but also the unusual fact that *two* men take the voyage up the Fleet Ditch: Jonson could be alluding to Dante’s pairing of himself and Virgil on their voyage into the underworld.¹⁵

For these reasons also, perhaps, “On the Famous Voyage” is the last poem in the book of epigrams: the book thereby ends on a dire note, a vision of damnation. As MacFaul points out, the poem is followed on the next page in Jonson’s *Collected Works* by the “orderly” “Ode: To Penshurst” (156). “On the Famous Voyage” is thus a vision of doom that concludes the one section, *Epigrams*, before a more pleasant vision (of paradise?) begins the next, *The Forest* (albeit the short and bitter-sweet lyric on cupid and poetry, “Why I Write Not of Love,” comes in between, as the first item in *The Forest*).

In short, size does not matter: no matter how superficially attractive or lacking in heroics a “micro-epic” may be, it can also teach us “that none knows well / To shun the heav’n that leads men to this hell” (Shakespeare, *Sonnet* 129). It is fitting that this journal should choose as an emblem two dwarves squatting in bubbles of air, pointing and thumbing their noses at each other. It is hoped that the above critique of Tom MacFaul’s engaging essay will encourage further spirited debate without clearing the room.

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NOTES

¹Critics have traditionally turned their nose up at the poem but MacFaul, like others recently, is right to call attention to its merits. See also McRae; Boehrer; Duncan-Jones.

²Wilson-Okamura, for example, characterizes Spenser’s later style as a “big, fat sound” (362).

³Note the opening emphasis on the hellish character of the voyage, which aligns it with similar symbolism in “Muiopotmos” and “On the Famous Voyage.”

⁴I am the proverbial pot calling the kettle black: I have no compunction against analyzing bad poetry at length if it suits the overall critical argument: cf. my

analysis of works by Parr Lane and Ralph Birkenshaw in Herron, *Spenser's Irish Work*, ch. 4.

⁵See also Herron, "Plucking the Perrot: *Muiopotmos* and Irish Politics" for this argument. MacFaul, wisely or no, does not cite my work among the range of potential political readings he offers.

⁶"Ahi Genovesi, uomini diversi / d'ogne costume e pien d'ogne magagna, / perché non siete voi del mondo spersi?" "Ah Genoese!—to every accustomed good, / Strangers; with every corruption, amply crowned: / Why hasn't the world expunged you as it should?" (Dante, *Inferno* XXXIII.151-53). MacFaul (162n14) cites Dante in relation to the frailty of butterflies on their way to heaven.

⁷MacFaul (147) argues with negative evidence here: because the arming of Clarion does not mention greaves, perhaps this alludes to Sidney's foolish lack of greaves on the battlefield, which was the cause of his death. Weakening his argument beyond this speculation is the fact that Clarion is stabbed in the "heart" (l. 438), which makes him even less like Sidney. For another identification of Clarion as Sidney, see Lemmi; Mazzola. For a refutation, see Herron, "Plucking the Perrot" 81n6.

⁸For a similar argument, see Orwen; Herron, "Plucking the Perrot" 101-05.

⁹For such a reading, see (for example) Renwick 249; Dundas; Heninger 363; Brown ch. 6. In his dedication to the poem, Spenser himself asks his noble reader to "make a milde construction" of it: Spenser, "To the right worthy and virtuous Ladie; the La: *Carey*" 412. All references to the poem here are taken from the Yale edition.

¹⁰For this reading, with or without politics involved, see (for example) Herron, "Plucking the Perrot"; Weiner; Lemmi; Orwen; Allen ch. 2.

¹¹The same theme appears repeatedly in *The Faerie Queene*. See, for example, Book I, canto xi, stanza 7, glossed in Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* 138n.

¹²Herron, "Plucking the Perrot" *passim*. For a similar argument regarding the political allegory of the Den of Error in *The Faerie Queene*, see McCabe 63.

¹³References to the poem here are cited from Parfitt's edition.

¹⁴"ranocchi" (*Inferno* XXII.26, 222-23).

¹⁵As Duncan-Jones notes, a primary source for Jonson's poem, Nashe's "Choise of Valentines," contains only one main protagonist; another, Horace's *Satire* I.5 (discussed at length by Boehrer) contains multiple companions en route to Brindisium, one of whom is Virgil. Furthermore, Jonson's numbering of the epigram as "CXXXIII" in the series has a certain finality to it, insofar as the reader remembers Dante's numerology in *The Divine Comedy*: one hundred cantos, with thirty-three each belonging to *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*; *Inferno* consists of thirty-four but the first canto is prefatory (and hence counts as the thirty-fourth, or extra, that makes the hundred). As is well known, Dante's choice of 33, like his three-line *terza rima*, has Christian resonances both in the Holy Trinity and Christ's age at crucifixion (i.e., 33). In "CXXXIII" Jonson combines the numbers 100 and 33, perhaps as an oblique reference to the *Divine Comedy's* own number totals and

hence another allusion to both the Christian and hellish contexts he borrows from [for a parodic reference to the Trinity, see Jonson's play on the "three for one" return expected by the men (l. 28)]. For Jonson's use of holy numerology elsewhere, including "100," see Severance, "'To Shine in Union'" 197-98; for use of the number 33 as an underlying structural device in the poetic collection *Flowres of Sion*, by Jonson's friend William Drummond, see Severance, "'Some Other Figure.'"

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