

The Butterfly, the Fart and the Dwarf: the Origins of the English Laureate Micro-Epic

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The three poets who can be considered England's first laureates—Edmund Spenser, Ben Jonson, and William Davenant—all wrote miniature mock epics in which they are concerned not with imperial greatness but, in various ways, with human littleness¹; in so doing, they undermined to some degree the heroic, monarchic values their roles were supposed to underpin, and give the first hints of a tradition ambivalently critical of heroic values which would culminate in the great mock epics of Dryden and Pope. Spenser's "Muiopotmos," Jonson's "The Famous Voyage,"² and Davenant's "Jeffereidos" differ from the Ovidian epyllion of the 1590s in their focus on heroic, martial matters, and a more direct use of Virgilian tropes; they all attempt to reduce the heroic mode to an absurd minimum, but they also attempt to find by that reduction what is worth preserving in the mode.

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"Muiopotmos" is part of a larger collection, the volume of *Complaints* which Spenser and his publisher put together to capitalize on the success of *The Faerie Queene*. Though the volume might be seen as a 'collected shorter poems,' it is in fact remarkably coherent, its focus on the vanity of human things. This is a subject Spenser had begun his poetic career with, in his translations for Jan van der Noot's *Theatre for Worldlings*,³ and which was to be a persistent remora of his epic intentions. The volume can also be seen as an extended set of laments and meditations on the death of Philip Sidney, the patron Spenser may have intended to put in the centre of his epic. Although only the

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volume's first poem, "The Ruines of Time," is explicitly dedicated to Sidney's sister, the positioning of that first dedication allows thoughts of Sidney's death to hang over all the poems.⁴

The poem claims to be about "deadly dolorous debate" and "open warre" "[b]etwixt two mightie ones of great estate" (lines 1, 8, 3), yet tells the story of a spider killing a butterfly.⁵ Though it consequently seems to be a mock epic, filled with the bathos later characteristic of the genre, it ends on a note of genuine tragedy. On the other hand, as in *The Rape of the Lock*, there are continual hints of larger philosophical and political meanings which are snatched away as soon as they are offered. This *serio ludere* method is not simply a way of toying with the reader, however, for it reflects the poem's major purpose—that is, a corrective adjustment of perspective which radically questions the rights of supposedly great and powerful people to prey on the small and weak, who are in turn revalued according to new standards of judgement. The method is in some ways Erasmian, but it does not entirely do away with the Virgilian value system that it invokes as its generic structure.

The Virgilian keynote of the poem is the question "is there then/ Such rancour in the harts of mightie men?" (lines 14-15)—Virgil's anger of the *gods* (*Aeneid* I. 11) is invoked and replaced by the malice of the great ones of state, who are regarded as destroying beautiful little ones—these may be identified with the various gods of the poem, as James H. Morey points out, but this is to make the poem a little too self-contained.⁶ It is tempting to hunt allegory here, and roll out the usual suspects of Spenser's detraction: Burghley, Philip II and even James VI of Scotland are possibilities, but all powerful individuals, even including Queen Elizabeth herself, may be invoked (the apparent exclusion of Elizabeth by the reference to "men" is qualified by the fact that Virgil is referring to the female Juno). Given that there are strong hints of topical allusion in Spenser's translation of the pseudo-Virgilian *Culex* as "Virgil's Gnat"—which is clearly his major generic precedent—it is as hard to avoid the temptation as it is to make any particular allegory stick. What we can say is that both

“Virgil’s Gnat” and “Muiopotmos” address the destruction of little men by great, adumbrating a larger critique of the structures of power and their effects on those lower down the social hierarchy. Certainly, part of the effect of the poem’s miniaturization of the heroic is to suggest a general diminution and aestheticizing of heroic values at Elizabeth’s court, as Robert A. Brinkley points out,⁷ but the idea of heroic action being vitiated and entangled by webs of power beyond a hero’s ken allows the heroic code to be both valued and treated as doomed. This kind of mock epic has considerable congruity with the attitude of the truest epics, such as the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*. Richard McCabe argues that “[u]nder certain circumstances mock-epic may be integral to epic, a vital ‘condition’ attached to its discourse.”⁸ In this case, mock epic is ultimately more seriously consequential than epic: Clarion’s death is more tragic than anything in *The Faerie Queene*, where no major heroes die; as Patricia Parker points out, death is out of place in a romance like *The Faerie Queene*,⁹ but it is possible in an epic, even of the mock variety.

“Muiopotmos” is also more focussed on epic masculinity than *The Faerie Queene*’s feminine romance. The emphasis on Clarion’s paternal heritage (lines 22-24) is curious, but gives a strong sense of his masculinity and his near-regal status. In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser tends to blur his heroes’ paternity, emphasizing rather their mothers’ care for them, which is frequently futile,¹⁰ whereas in “Muiopotmos,” a parallel emphasis on the hero’s father’s useless prayers is introduced (lines 237-40). If the poem does invoke the loss of Sidney, the presentation of him as having some inherited royal status is significant: Sidney was lionized by continental protestants on his grand tour and embassies partly because foreigners misunderstood his father’s status as Lord Deputy of Ireland, thinking this viceregency made him somehow a prince.¹¹ Combine this with the knowledge of his position as heir to his wealthy and favoured uncle the Earl of Leicester, rumours that he was a candidate for the throne of Poland, and abortive plans to marry continental princesses, and Sidney’s kingliness starts to seem plausible. The problem for Spenser is how to represent this status, which

was illusory or at best potential, and how to present the scale of the loss when nothing definite had been lost. Rather than allegorizing Sidney, Spenser allegorizes the *idea* of the once-future king, and the fantasies that attach to such a figure.

Spenser is able to arrive at true epic seriousness through apparently absurd miniaturization, and this is most notably demonstrated in the arming of his hero Clarion. He *is* an insect, but his clothing is to be valued as much as that of Achilles:

His breastplate first, that was of substance pure,
 Before his noble heart he firmly bound,
 That mought his life from yron death assure,
 And ward his gentle corpes from cruell wound:
 For it by arte was framed, to endure
 The bit of balefull steele and bitter stownd,
 No lesse than that, which *Vulcane* made to sheild
Achilles life from fate of *Troyan* field. (lines 57-64)

Though we might think this ironic, the irony is not present because of the hero's size, but because he like Achilles will die. Of course, Achilles' shield was really decorative rather than protective (his protection coming from being dipped—imperfectly—in the Styx),¹² and the armour likewise does Clarion no good; the point of the reference to Achilles (killed by a heel-wound), along with the fact that Clarion is armed everywhere but his legs, may be to remind us that Philip Sidney died because he wore no leg armour in the skirmish at Zutphen.¹³ It also ironically raises the proverbial defencelessness of the butterfly in its journey to heaven.¹⁴

Decorative and futile though this armour may be, its substance *is* pure, the art that made it *is* at least the equal of Vulcan's—because it is God's. The next stanza's comparison of Clarion's "hairie hide" (line 66) with the pelt of the Nemean lion adorning Hercules is similarly serious: after all, close up the butterfly is fearsome. The end of the arming invokes other issues:

Lastly his shinie wings as siluer bright,
 Painted with thousand colours, passing farre

All Painters skill, he did about him dight:
 Not halfe so manie sundrie colours arre
 In *Iris* bowe, ne heauen doth shine so bright,
 Distinguished with manie a twinckling starre,
 Nor *Iuno*es Bird in her ey-spotted traine
 So manie goodly colours doth containe. (lines 89-96)

Asserting the beauty of the butterfly's wings is simply an aesthetic commonplace, but it raises the question of the philosophical value of beauty. It also radically feminizes such beauty, and looks forward to Pope's valuation of Fancy's "varying Rain-bows" in the *Dunciad in Four Books* (IV.632).¹⁵ Mutability, traditionally feminized and condemned, is transformed into a positive, even heroic value, particularly when set—as it is by both Spenser and Pope—against nothingness.

Spenser takes pains to explore the origins of this feminine beauty. In the *action* of the butterfly's beauty, Astery prompts the jealousy of Venus's other damsels through being more "industrious" in gathering flowers (line 122) than the rest, who suggest that she has been aided by a besotted Cupid; Venus, recalling Cupid's affair with Psyche, credits this slander too easily, but punishes her rather oddly by beautifying her. The implication may be that this mighty one, whilst she may have maliciously jealous intentions ("spight," line 141), cannot actually give an inappropriate punishment: as Astery's only "pretended crime" (line 143) has been excellence in flower-picking, she and all her offspring are given permanent possession of flowers' beauty ("Since when that flie them in her wings doth beare," line 144). This immortalizing metamorphosis suggests the limits of power over the aesthetic realm, for the beautiful wings are a "memorie" as much of Venus's injustice as of the supposed crime (line 142). Industrious artistry thus transcends that of the gods—not only Juno's as in the passage above, but also that of Venus's own son:

Ne (may it be withouten perill spoken)
 The Archer God, the sonne of *Cytheree*,
 That ioyes on wretched louers to be wroken,
 And heaped spoyles of bleeding harts to see,
 Beares in his wings so manie a changefull token.

Ah my liege Lord, forgiue it vnto mee,
 If ought against thine honour I haue tolde;
 Yet sure those wings were fairer manifold. (lines 89-104)

Comparing Clarion to Cupid reminds us of the connection between the butterfly (Greek *psyche*) and the love-god's beloved Psyche: the neoplatonic allegorization of this myth,¹⁶ in which only the love of such soul-beauty can raise one to the heavens, is clearly invoked. Don Cameron Allen argues that Spenser's poem is "an allegory of the wandering of the rational soul into error,"¹⁷ but this may be to take the poem too seriously—it may rather be an allegory of reasonable, but still dangerous wandering into error. Unlike the Redcrosse Knight, Clarion has no Una to warn him of his error. As such, "Muiopotmos" is in the spirit of Apuleius's myth, of which Costas Panayotakis has argued "Psyche's limited vision neither makes her a bad character nor implies that a person whose soul is endowed with penetrating vision is necessarily good."¹⁸

Yet Clarion, being male, is not quite Psyche: he seems to be a fusion of lover and beloved, masculine and feminine, and as such is one of Spenser's most strikingly hermaphroditic figures, blending the best of male and female. Spenser's other hermaphrodites are limited by their dual nature—Error and the Dragon in *The Faerie Queene*, Book I, both being grotesques, the hermaphroditic union of Scudamour and Amoret being only worth "halfe enuying" (III.xii.46.6 [1590]).¹⁹ Clarion's doubleness gives him freedom, but such freedom is also imperilled by its solitary nature. Sidney's *Arcadia* makes solitary "selfness" the prime condition of the individual's danger,²⁰ even if it is sometimes necessary for self-realization; Spenser's poem follows this idea to its logical conclusion, making the freedom of the lone individual its own heroic *aristeia*, doomed and meaningless, but also somehow beautiful.

Spenser is playing with these ideas rather seriously, not least in his apostrophe to Cupid: he is, of course, praising one who resembles that god's own beloved, but the apology also resembles his apologies to

the Queen for praising his own mistress in *Amoretti* 80, and for the praise of Colin Clout's mistress in *The Faerie Queene*:

Sunne of the world, great glory of the sky,
 That all the earth doest lighten with thy rayes,
 Great *Gloriana*, greatest Maiesty,
 Pardon thy shepheard, mongst so many layes,
 As he hath sung of thee in all his dayes,
 To make one minime of thy poore handmayd,
 And vnderneath thy feete to place her prayse,
 That when thy glory shall be farre displayd
 To future age of her this mention may be made. (VI.x.28)

What these passages have in common, with their back-handed compliments to the great, is a desire to bestow some value on private life when faced with the obligation to accord all praise to one's feudal lord or queen. The suggestion is that what is valued in the great may also be found in the small.

Correspondingly, that which is less perfect in the small may also be found in the great. The beauty of Clarion's wings is characterized by "manie a changefull token," but so is the beauty of lordly Love. Indeed, the word "token" may imply that a core integrity underlies the outward changeability. If Clarion is a changeable character, that is only because all life is such: "all that moueth, doth in *Change* delight," as Spenser puts it in the "Mutabilitie Cantos" (VII.viii.2).²¹ Great ones may be no more or less fickle than he, but at least such caprice is appropriate for Clarion:

The woods, the riuers, and the medowes green,
 With his aire-cutting wings he measured wide,
 Ne did he leaue the mountaines bare vnseene,
 Nor the ranke grassie fennes delights vntride,
 But none of these, how euer sweete they beene,
 Mote please his fancie, nor him cause t' abide:
 His choicefull sense with euerie change doth flit.
 No common things may please a wauering wit. (lines 153-60)

Clarion has a comprehensive aesthetic vision, which enables him, in measuring and trying, to value things rightly. The mild moralizing of

the couplet is undermined by the joke about these beauties not being “common,” because in a sense they are: these are things that are not subject to covetous proprietorship; Clarion himself is without jealous, possessive desires; though “all the countrey wide he did possesse” (line 150), this is possession as a non-zero-sum game, in that it is both wide country, and possessed *widely*, with room for generosity. We might wonder if Spenser is tapping here into the Elizabethan prodigal myth, of which Sidney was so fond, and which allowed youthful vagaries to be forgiven.²² Clarion’s youthful sowing of wild oats, full of sweetness and light, is preferable to the self-involved jealousies and vindictiveness of the great. Spenser is as concerned as his friend and patron Raleigh with the jealous “effects of pourfull emperye” (“The 11th: and last booke of the Ocean to Scinthia,” line 200).²³ Spenser affirms that “all change is sweet” (line 178)—at least for Clarion, who has the highest “felicity” of a created being, “delight with libertie” (lines 209-10), which even Calvin might forgive²⁴; his is a truly “kingly ioyounce” (208) of natural pleasure, however short-lived. Monarchs, the poem suggests, cannot enjoy this—and may even be the cause of its destruction.

Clarion’s enemy and nemesis is his opposite: associated with jealousy, vengeance, and possessiveness, the spider Aragnoll is the caricature of a “tyrant” (line 433), who is also “The foe of faire things, th’ author of confusion,/ The shame of Nature, the bondslaue of spight” (lines 244-45); such a tyrant is as unfree as the kingly Clarion is free. The cause of his enmity is aesthetic competitiveness; in this, he anticipates Iago’s resentment of Cassio who has “a daily beauty in his life/ That makes me ugly.”²⁵ The origin of Aragnoll’s resentments was his mother Arachne’s weaving competition with Minerva. In this version of the famous story, Arachne pictures the rape of Europa and Minerva her own competition with Neptune over possession of Athens, clearly alluding to Queen Elizabeth’s supposedly providential victory over Philip II’s Armada. Both stories are images of possessiveness; Minerva even rather vainly depicts herself (lines 321-28). We might wonder if the competition represents in some way the competition between

Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots, whose execution in 1587 partly prompted the Armada. However, it is not Minerva's self-portrayal that wins the day, but the pure beauty of the butterfly the goddess "made" (line 329)—a key Sidneian word,²⁶ signifying divine artistry, and therefore perhaps underlining the way in which the arts, purely considered, underpin the Queen's success. Though Spenser may be suggesting that the arts of court are too simply mimetic,²⁷ they nonetheless are beautiful and worthwhile; it is this triumphal image that has caused Aragnoll to fester in resentment and which makes him kill Clarion. It would be too much to suggest that Aragnoll has to be James VI of Scotland²⁸; he represents rather all those who resent or deface the Elizabethan creative culture at whose centre Spenser wanted to place himself.

The death of Clarion is the death of beauty and potential. It resembles the death of Turnus at the end of the *Aeneid*, but whereas Turnus goes with a groan down to the shades beneath, Clarion's "deepe groning sprite/ In bloodie streames foorth fled into the aire" (lines 438-39). The butterfly is strikingly humanized here—for an insect would hardly produce such groans or such streams of blood. There is a hint, then, of heaven resuming its own (as Pope would have it with Belinda's lock), but the poem also ends with a humanized focus on "His bodie left the spectacle of care" (line 440): unsouled beauty can only provoke lamentation; as a mere spectacle it is not truly beautiful, having lost its papilionaceous qualities, such as wings. Spenser often attributes "care" to jealous lovers, as when Scudamore meets a blacksmith of that name (*The Faerie Queene*, IV.v). Aragnoll kills Clarion in a way that suggests sexual possessiveness: his web is likened to that used by Vulcan to trap Mars and Venus, an image Spenser also invokes during the capture and ruination of false beauty in the Bower of Bliss (*The Faerie Queene*, II.xii.81-82). Unlike Guyon, Aragnoll proceeds from binding to murderous penetration, striking Clarion in the heart (a penetration that may remind us of Busirane's possession of Amoret—*The Faerie Queene*, III.xii.38). The invocation of such destructive desire in what amounts to a scene of someone catching a butterfly

suggests a serious resonance which is a major part of the epic tradition, reminding us that the heroic impulse to possess beauty tends to destroy it. The sense of loss is as powerful in its way as any death in serious epic, all the more so for the sudden invocation of human categories on the moment of the butterfly's death.

"Muiopotmos" attacks the self-involved jealousies of the great, and shows how valuable, beautiful, even heroic individuals can be crushed by them. Clarion is not a direct representation of Sidney, but if Spenser had that generous patron, beautiful poet, and hopeful hero in mind as he meditated on the waste caused by lordly competition, the miniature epic would then reflect on the failures of his own aspirations in *The Faerie Queene* to fashion a hero who could combine the masculine and the feminine, the poet and the king. The poem's apparent triviality probes deeply at our sense of what really matters. It gently insists on a shift of perspective and valuation so that normative values of greatness and pettiness are fundamentally shifted. Beauty, all this implies, needs to be valued on its own terms, not as part of a quest for power.

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Ben Jonson's Jacobean mock epic engages in a similar kind of assessment of public value systems and the human waste they incur, but in a very different context. The dangers and absurdities inherent in the heroizing of commercial competition are at the heart of "The Famous Voyage." Positioned at the end of his "Epigrams" in the 1616 *Works*, the poem is perhaps meant to stand alone between the "Epigrams" and the higher-style poems of *The Forest*, marked off as an important poetic achievement in its own right.²⁹ As a mock epic of London life, it anticipates Pope's *Dunciads*, but it has its own vision of the heroic which makes it more than an important influence or an enjoyable *jeu d'esprit*.

The miniaturization here is not in the size of the heroes as it is in "Muiopotmos" and "Jeffereidos," but in the size of the heroic task: the voyage is both petty—two men travelling to a bawdy ale-house—and

in a confined space—the Fleet River or Ditch, which was used as a sewer. The poem’s claustrophobic properties give it a genuine frisson, even though we know the journey to be both pointless and undignified. Although it is a world apart from the delicate rural transvaluation of ideals in “Muiopotmos,” “The Famous Voyage” has important things of its own to say about the heroic mode.

The heroes are virtual non-entities, (possibly) Sir Ralph Shelton and an unidentified “Heyden.”³⁰ Jonson says of these heroes, “pitty ’tis, I cannot call ’hem knights” (line 22), though “[o]ne was” (line 23). Some critique of James’s revenue-raising knighting policy seems likely (Shelton had been knighted in 1607), given Jonson’s attitude in *Eastward Ho!* Crisp distinctions between heroic and mock-heroic are not allowed: inflected by reality, the sentiment is along the lines, ‘imagine if these two were knights! that would be fun—but hang on, one of them *is* a knight.’ The poem is about the inability to make the kinds of distinctions that underpin the heroic and mock-heroic attitudes, as the epigram “On the Famous Voyage” announces: “what was there [i.e. in the classical underworld]/ Subtly distinguish’d, was confused here” (lines 9-10). Jonson resists this confusion even as he revels in it, and in doing so creates a mode of heroic irony.

In Jonson’s modesty formula which ends the introductory epigram—“let the former age, with this content her,/ Shee brought the Poets forth, but ours th’ aduenter” (lines 19-20)—the irony is complex: on the one hand Jonson could be operating by simple inversion, suggesting that though there is no heroism, there is at least the possibility of heroic writing; on the other, he may be saying that his mode, though low, is at least *appropriate* to the kind of adventure he has to celebrate. The word “aduenter” is loaded: full of its due heroic weight, it is ironized not only by its direct referent (the narrative poem that follows), but by the wider contemporary cultural significance of the idea of adventuring—capitalistic and colonial projects of the kind Jonson mocks in his plays (notably *Eastward Ho!*, *The Alchemist* and *The Devil Is an Ass*). Such activities are both faintly despicable and worthy of a reluctant kind of admiration. The heroes here feel

worthy scorne

Of those, that put out moneyes, on returne
From *Venice, Paris*, or some in-land passage
Of sixe times to, and fro, without embassage,
Or him that backward went to *Berwicke*, or which
Did dance the famous *Morrisse*, vnto *Norwich*. (lines 31-36)

To put all adventuring, whether commercial or populist (such as Kemp's jig) to Norwich, on the same basis suggests a refusal of hierarchical values, yet *this* voyage, however ironically, is put above these: it is not undertaken for gain, but for the sheer bravery of it; however absurd it may be, it really does partake of the heroic value-system. David Riggs has adduced psychosexual and biographical reasons for Jonson's cloacal obsessions,³¹ but the main point seems to be the audacity in entering the "wombe" (line 66) of the Fleet Ditch, an alternative model of urban space, as Andrew Macrae conceives it.³² The feminine mystery is fearlessly penetrated, but pointlessly; in the end, the brothel they seek is closed. The heroes' scorn is, in some senses, worthy, for they adventure for adventuring's sake, like Clarion. In doing so, they create their own system of value.

The poem is based on the *nekuias* of the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, episodes that provide their heroes with validation and the strength to continue, founded on what has been lost in their lives.³³ Whereas Odysseus and Aeneas encounter the likes of Achilles and Dido, seeing the waste of human potential that has been part of the cost of their own success, the only waste Jonson's heroes meet is the city's waste-products. If one of Virgil's key themes is the human price of founding the city of Rome, Jonson's is the mess created by London's civilization, right in its midst. The city's digestive entropy is punningly emphasized: "All was to them the same, they were to passe" (line 140). Turds, urine, dead cats and "plaisters" (line 170) strew the heroes' way, and the mock-heroic method tries to make something of all these. The farting they hear overhead is compared to the voice of Mercury, with a digression on quacks' misuse of this "god of eloquence" (line 99); as in *The Alchemist* (probably written in the same year as "The Famous Voyage"), verbal skills are recognized as the true

core of the arts, and their abuse attacked, yet not without an ironic sense that the poet himself is at this moment misusing his skill. The “loud/ Crack” (lines 93-94) is also compared to “the graue fart, late let in parliament” (line 108), referring to story of Henry Ludlow answering the Sergeant of the House of Commons with such a preposterous report. The story’s humour works because we assume the dignity of parliament, and therefore there is something heroic about this—the fart is made grave by its context. However, it also plays on Jonson’s great fear, that discriminating language might give way to mere noise, an excessive assumption of inherited dignity when real dignity is absent in the present. The danger of the heroic mode is that it also rests excessively on the past; the true poet must engage it with the present, farts and all.

Just as *The Alchemist’s* bravura farce (which begins with a fart) is deepened by a recognition of surrounding death from the plague, which may in itself motivate the characters’ desperate grasping for supernatural structures of meaning, the sense of blight in “The Famous Voyage” is genuine. When Jonson describes “famine, wants, and sorrowes many a dosen,/ The least of which was to the plague a cosen” (lines 71-72), he needs no irony. Far from the orderly world of “To Penshurst,” which commences on the page after “The Famous Voyage,” this grim place and its implicit sufferings are as much a part of Jonson’s vision of England as Robert Sidney’s estate. Jonson’s laureate project is to speak of the nation as a whole.

Jonson’s “braue worke” (line 57) is inspired by Hercules, heroic stable-cleaner, proves the “vn-vsued valour of a nose” (line 132) and ends by allying his work to “his, that sung A-IAX” (line 176).³⁴ The poet thereby creates cloacal precedents, yet demonstrates that he is trying something unattempted in prose or rhyme. He even gains a sense of decorum for his work, in the sense that it is appropriate to its subject. We may still have doubts about Jonson’s attitude to his heroes’ *acte gratuit*: they simply make their way up river, get witnesses of their action, and go (“brauely” [line 92]) back. There was, in fact, no need for them to go by river: as Katherine Duncan-Jones points out “Even

quite drunk young men could stagger to Holborn from the Mermaid [...] in about twenty minutes.”³⁵ Nonetheless, along the way we have encountered images so monstrous that they rather transcend the heroic tropes to which they are compared than pale next to them. Nothing may have been accomplished, but the act of representation is itself of value. Poets like Spenser may have valorized the Thames as nationally unifying river, but Jonson can make the Fleet more representative. Whereas, at the end of *Prothalamion*, Spenser could come to the house of the Earl of Essex, hinting at future national heroism, Jonson sees a truer heroism in inspecting the city’s drains. He turns to Harington, perhaps in the belief that what the nation needs is plumbers, not imperial promoters. In searching for the sources of disease within—both the sewer and the brothel—one may be more public-spirited than in finding out new lands.

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If Spenser and Jonson, in very different ways, offer wider perspectives which undermine the heroic tradition, their laureate successor Davenant is more straightforwardly ironic in his unfinished “Epick Ode” “Jeffereidos, Or the Captivitie of Jeffery.” Celebrating the escape of Queen Henrietta Maria’s dwarf Jeffery Hudson from captivity by pirates is a sufficiently amusing subject-matter to require only adequate treatment from the poet, and the fact of Jeffery’s size is the centre of most of the poem’s jokes, but the poem has its serious implications. Given Charles I’s own diminutive and non-heroic stature, the poem may also glance at the King. Charles saw himself as a rather grand and chivalric figure—and this would be a major component of the nation’s difficulties in the 1640s. The poem reflects on such values as essentially small-minded.

Jeffery is described as “[t]he truest Servant to a state that cou’d/ Be giv’n to a Nation out of flesh and bloud” (Canto I.17-18).³⁶ The irony here is quite subtle, as Hudson was clearly only a court-servant to the Queen, having no value to the state at large. Such courtly entertainers

were increasingly an anachronism, as perhaps was the heroic attitude displayed in this poem. Christopher Hill associates the possession of court fools with an outdated element in Stuart kingship, observing that “[t]he Stuarts were the last English kings to employ a court fool; the last fool known to have been kept by an English landed family died in Durham in 1746, the year when the last attempt to restore the Stuart line was defeated.”³⁷ Yet Davenant cannot be unambivalent about this relic of traditional court life: the possession of a pet poet like himself was part of the same system. Though Jeffery Hudson was captured by pirates in 1630, and some form of the poem seems to have existed at this time, it may have been revised later, when Davenant came to be a servant of the Queen. In any case, it was published in *Madagascar* (1638), the collection which celebrates Davenant’s new status as laureate, and it is therefore presented as part of a new vision of what laureate poetry should be. It is the comic counterpart to the projected imperialism of the title poem (which urges Prince Rupert of Bohemia to colonize the island). The concern of “Jeffereidos” with public matters is therefore not entirely comical.

Davenant is modest about his poem (with some reason), saying that any third part he was to write would be produced with “[a] little help from Nature, lesse from Art” (II.107). In the “Author’s Preface” to *Gondibert*, he would repudiate “all those hasty digestions of thought which were publish’d in my youth,” presumably including “Jeffereidos.”³⁸ Both statements imply that the very truth of his subject puts constraints on the poem, reality being too little transformed by art. A half-hearted effort is made to provide ironic underpinning to his tale by appeals to a fictional Dutch “Originall” he claims to be translating (II.104). Nonetheless, a certain ironic force and political interest is imbued by the poem’s apparent truthfulness.

The most straightforward joke of the poem is Jeffery’s size, allowing an ironic and punning use of chivalric language: “hee tall *Jeff’ry* height!” (I.19). The Spenserian archaism “hight” (385) is mocked as much as Jeffery in the pun, and the detachment of chivalric language (“tall” meaning something like “brave”) from real standards is called

into question. We might wonder if there is anything less absurd in this phraseology than in grand heroic portraiture of the diminutive Charles I such as van Dyck's.³⁹ Davenant pushes his point to absurd lengths, however, having Jeffery hide "behind a spick/ And almost span-new-pewter-Candlestick" (I.27-28), trip over a beard-hair, and fight with a turkey. It does, however, seem that Hudson was an irascible man (he fought a duel with an English courtier in exile in 1644, and killed his man). The mock-epic tropes are therefore not as fanciful as they at first appear.

Similarly, the pirates' suggestion that Jeffery "May prove the gen'rall Spie of Christendome" (I.36) is not so ludicrous as it may seem. In a world of international intrigue, trusted intimates such as Hudson might well be used for espionage purposes: that Hudson was only eleven years old in 1630 may make the idea of him as a spy seem unlikely, but such intimations may have had more force a few years later when the poem was published. Hudson was in fact, many years later, paid a total of £70 from Charles II's secret service fund,⁴⁰ which gives a certain plausibility to the idea of him as a spy. In the poem, the pirates ask him if he knows of Cardinal Richelieu's intentions regarding a potential invasion of Italy, but Jeffery is discreet:

(Most noble *Jeff'ry* still!) hee seemes to know
 Nought of that point; though divers think, when there,
 The Cardinall did whisper in his eare
 The Scheame of all his plots. (I.82-85)

This may be ironic, but it may also be a kind of kidding on the level; after all, it is possible that he did know "[s]ome secrets that concern the English State," though he would "not one word/ Reveale, that he had heard at Councell-bord" (I.72-74). Davenant taps into a certain paranoia about favourites and their access to secrets of state.⁴¹ When he is tied up by the pirates (who are Spanish), Jeffery wishes "[h]e had long since contriv'd a truce with Spaine" (I.40), and such contrivances of courtiers were exactly what the opposition to Charles I feared, particularly from the pro-Spanish party of Thomas Wentworth.

The opposition to Charles's personal rule may also be reflected absurdly in Jeffery's fight with the turkey:

this Foule (halfe blinde)
 At *Jeff'ry* pecks, and with intent to eat
 Him up, in stead of a large graine of Wheat:
Jeff'ry (in duell nice) ne're thinks upon't
 As the Turkeys hunger, but an affront. (II.56-60)

This could be an allegory of Charles's blindness to the genuine hungers and grievances of the people, seeing their resistance as only an affront to his kingly honour.⁴² The poem ends with the dwarf crying for help from the midwife (Hudson had gone to France to get a midwife for Henrietta Maria). As he wittily puts it "Thou that deliver'd hast so many, be/ So kinde of nature to deliver me!" (II.97-98). The idea of rescue by a midwife suggests optimism about an heir to the throne (who would be a reliable focus for opposition to the monarch). In addition, the whole story of a hero being pecked at by a bird may hint at the hen-pecked condition of the King.

Jeffery is associated with the King insofar as he is influenced by the Queen. In fact, the Queen's own provocations to Charles's honour may have been the final spark that kindled the powder-keg of the first Civil War: she is supposed to have prompted him to arrest Pym, Hampden, Mandeville and others by saying "Go, you coward, and pull these rogues out by the ears, or never see my face more."⁴³ Whatever the truth of this, it is clear that the French Queen's active encouragement of Charles's heroic self-image brought a dangerous element into English court politics. Davenant's poem may be reflecting in advance on the perils of this, even as he produces a light piece for courtly amusement. Although he was dependent on her favour, Davenant may well be suggesting that the lack of proportion her values brought to the Court and nation could create their own problems. Davenant would later end his serious "Heroick Poem," *Gondibert*, with the warning that

They look but wrong on Courts who can derive
 No great Effects from outward Littleness;

Thro Foolish Scorn they turn the Prospective,
And so contract Courts little things to less.

Man's little Heart in narrow space does hide
Great Thoughts, such as have spacious Empire sway'd
The little Needle does vast Carricks guide,
And of small Atoms were the Mountains made. (III.vii.106-07)

The potentially great effect of little things is central to all three laureate micro-epics; the correct perspective is everything.

All three poems, then, are brilliant and bravura performances in their own distinctive ways, but they also served serious purposes. They allowed poets whose laureate status associated them with the court and its values to engage in a serious (but safely ignorable) critique of the heroic visions associated with their monarchs. The little poem, like the little person, may be amusing and can be easily overlooked, but it may also know more than it lets on.

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NOTES

¹For Spenser's claims on the laureateship, see Richard Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983)—the official title, of course, (as opposed to a pension or royal grant) was first conferred on Dryden. Skelton might also claim to have been the first laureate.

²I refer to this poem as "The Famous Voyage" as it is only the epigram prefaced to it that is called "On the Famous Voyage" (*Epigrams CXXXIII*), the narrative being titled "The Voyage It Selfe"; references to Ben Jonson, *Works*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1925-52).

³For the continuity between the *Theatre* and *Complaints*, see Carl J. Rasmussen, "'Quietnesse of Minde': A *Theatre* for *Worldlings* as a Protestant Poetics," *Spenser Studies* 1 (1980): 3-27.

⁴For Spenser's belated response to Sidney's death, and its difficulties see Gavin Alexander, *Writing After Sidney: The Literary Response to Sir Philip Sidney 1586-1640* (Oxford: OUP, 2006) 68-70.

⁵References to Edmund Spenser, *The Shorter Poems*, ed. Richard A. McCabe (London: Penguin, 1999).

⁶See James H. Morey, "Spenser's Mythic Adaptations in *Muiopotmos*," *Spenser Studies* 9 (1988): 49-59.

⁷Robert A. Brinkley, "Spenser's *Muiopotmos* and the Politics of Metamorphosis," *ELH* 48 (1981): 668-76.

⁸Richard A. McCabe, "Parody, Sympathy and Self: A Response to Donald Cheney," *Connotations* 13.1 (2003/2004): 5-22, 7.

⁹Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977) 35.

¹⁰See my discussion in *Poetry and Paternity in Renaissance England: Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne and Jonson*, forthcoming, chapter four.

¹¹See Alan Stewart, *Philip Sidney: A Double Life* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2000) 185-87.

¹²This is a post-Homeric tradition, the first extant mention being by Statius—see *Achilleid*, I. 134, 269. References to Statius, *Thebais* 8-12; *Achilleid*, ed. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003).

¹³See Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Sir Philip Sidney: Courtier Poet* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1991).

¹⁴See Dante, *Purgatorio*, X.124-26:

non v' accorgete voi che noi siam vermi
nati a formar l' angelica farfalla,
che vola alla giustizia senza schermi?

(do you not perceive that we are worms born to form the angelic butterfly that soars to judgement without defence?). References to *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, trans. John D. Sinclair, 3 vols. (New York: OUP, 1939).

¹⁵References to *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Longman, 1989).

¹⁶See Apuleius, *Cupid and Psyche*, ed. E. J. Kenney (Cambridge: CUP, 1990).

¹⁷See Don Cameron Allen, *Image and Meaning: Metaphoric Traditions in Renaissance Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1960) 31.

¹⁸Costas Panayotakis, "Vision and Light in Apuleius's Tale of Psyche and her Mysterious Husband," *Classical Quarterly* 51 (2001): 576-83, 580.

¹⁹See MacFaul, *Poetry and Paternity*, chapter four. References to Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton; text ed. Hiroshi Yamashita and Toshiyuki Suzuki (London: Longman, 2001).

²⁰See Tom MacFaul, "Friendship in Sidney's *Arcadias*," *SEL* 49 (2009): 17-33.

²¹Spenser elsewhere signals a sense of integrity beneath outward changeability in making Proteus, who is "ambiguum" for Ovid (*Metamorphoses* II.9), into a compassionate (if somewhat ambivalent) "aged sire" (*The Faerie Queene* III.viii.30.3).

²²For the myth, see Richard Helgerson, *The Elizabethan Prodigals* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1976); for Sidney's presentation of himself as childish, see Tom

MacFaul, "The Childish Love of Philip Sidney and Fulke Greville," *Sidney Journal* 24 (2006): 37-65. The chief prodigality in his works is of course the main narrative of the *Old Arcadia*.

²³*The Poems of Sir Walter Raleigh*, ed. Agnes M. C. Latham (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951).

²⁴See Andrew D. Weiner, "Spenser's *Muiopotmos* and the Fates of Butterflies and Men," *JEGP* 84 (1985): 203-20; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Library of Christian Classics, 1960) Book I.5.5.

²⁵*Othello* V.i.19-20. References to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

²⁶See *The Defence of Poesy*: "The Greeks called him a 'poet which name hath, as the most excellent, gone through other languages. It cometh of this word ποιέιν, which is, to make: wherein, I know not whether by luck or wisdom, we Englishmen have met with the Greeks in calling him a maker: which name, how high and incomparable a title it is, I had rather were known by marking the scope of other sciences than by any partial allegation'"—references to *The Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan van Dorsten (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1973) 77.

²⁷See Craig Rustici, "Muiopotmos: Spenser's 'Complaint' against Aesthetics," *Spenser Studies* 13 (1999): 165-77.

²⁸For Spenser's problems with James, which would come later, after the 1596 *Faerie Queene*, see Jonathan Goldberg, *James I and the Politics of Literature: Jonson, Shakespeare, Donne, and Their Contemporaries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1983) chapter 1.

²⁹Sara J. van den Berg, *The Action of Ben Jonson's Poetry* (Newark: U of Delaware P, 1987) 104, calls it a "palinode" to the *Epigrams*; it may be, but I think it is also something more.

³⁰Peter E. Medine, "Object and Intent in Jonson's 'Famous Voyage,'" *SEL* 15 (1975): 97-110, argues that Shelton is Thomas Shelton, translator of Cervantes, mainly on the grounds that Jonson would not praise and blame Sir Ralph Shelton in the same volume; he also identifies Heyden as Sir Christopher Heydon. Neither case seems proved.

³¹David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989).

³²See Andrew McRae, "'On the Famous Voyage': Ben Jonson and Civic Space," *Early Modern Literary Studies* Special Issue 3 (September 1998): 8.1-31. 26 Oct. 2009. <<http://purl.oclc.org/emls/04-2/mcraonth.htm>>.

³³Bruce Boehrer, "Horatian Satire in Jonson's 'On the Famous Voyage,'" *Criticism* 44 (2002): 9-26 also valuably points out Jonson's use of Horace's *Satires* 1.5 in the poem.

³⁴The reference is to Sir John Harington (1560-1612), godson of Queen Elizabeth, translator of Ariosto, and author of *New Discourse of a Stale Subject, called the Metamorphosis of Ajax* (1596).

³⁵Katherine Duncan-Jones, "City Limits: Nashe's 'Choise of Valentines' and Jonson's 'Famous Voyage,'" *RES* 56 (2005): 246-62, 258.

³⁶References to Sir William Davenant, *The Shorter Poems, and Songs from the Plays and Masques*, ed. A. M. Gibbs (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1972).

³⁷Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution* (London: Pelican, 1975) 277.

³⁸References to Sir William Davenant, *Gondibert*, ed. David F. Gladish (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1971) 20, lines 686-87.

³⁹Anthony van Dyck, *Equestrian Portrait of Charles I., 1637-38*, The National Gallery London.

⁴⁰For this, and other details of Hudson's life, see R. Malcolm Smuts, "Jeffery Hudson" in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, and John Southworth, *Fools and Jesters at the English Court* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2003). The event of 1630 to which the poem refers was not the last time Hudson would be captured by pirates (on the second occasion, he grew taller; cf. Smuts).

⁴¹On this paranoia, see Curtis Perry, *Literature and Favoritism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006).

⁴²See e.g. Hill 24.

⁴³See John Adamson, *The Noble Revolt: The Overthrow of Charles I* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007) 496.