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OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Source: *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, Vol. 3, No. 12 (Oct., 1952), pp. 325-340

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/510847>

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DEFOE AND RICHARDSON ON HOMER: A STUDY OF THE RELATION OF NOVEL AND EPIC IN THE EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

By IAN WATT

THE early eighteenth-century novel developed at a time when the dominant system of critical values still took for granted the permanence of the established literary forms, and among them the pre-eminence of epic. A novelist trained in the orthodox critical tradition was bound to assume that any imitation of life in narrative form ought to be assimilated as far as possible to the rules of the epic which had proliferated since the Renaissance. But it is doubtful if this epic filiation was or could have been of much importance in the development of the novel. The novel is no doubt in some sense 'an epic in prose'. But the analogies are surely of too general and abstract a nature to have had any concrete effect upon the development of what is substantially a new literary genre.

This is certainly true of the rise of the novel in England. Defoe and Richardson do not concern themselves with the epic genealogy, and their work strongly suggests the novel's independence of epic theory and practice. Their unconcern is even supplemented by occasional references to the epic writers, especially Homer, which, although they do not amount to an overt rejection of the epic analogy, at least enable us to discover some of their reasons for an evident fact.

It is these *obiter dicta* on Homer with which we are here concerned; not so much for their inherent interest, as for their use in clarifying the general relationship of the early English novel to epic.

That Defoe and Richardson make no explicit repudiation of the epic model for their novels is not surprising. Defoe's classical and literary training was not thorough, and Richardson's non-existent. Any systematic dissent from traditional literary tenets, if they had wished to attempt it, which is unlikely, would have been discouraged by their inadequate knowledge. This very inadequacy is significant. André Le Breton¹ and Paul Van Tieghem² have pointed out how the novel's freedom of development in France was helped by its isolation from the *litterati* and their standards. In England, Defoe and Richardson are even more striking examples of the amateur status of the new literary form. Indeed it is surprising that they cast as much light as they do on the antipathy of novel and epic.

¹ *Le Roman français au dix-huitième siècle* (Paris, 1898), p. 3.

² 'La Sensibilité et la passion dans le roman européen du XVIII^e siècle', *Revue de littérature comparée*, vi (1926), 428.

Only their references to Homer are considered here, for two reasons. First, that these happen to be more significant than those to other epic writers. Secondly, that Homer is a more significant figure in the present context because his works were then considered to be, and are in fact, the archetypes of epic.

The topic has a further interest. It so happens that the views of Defoe and Richardson have not been noted in recent studies of eighteenth-century attitudes towards Homer and epic generally. The stated purposes of H. T. Swedenberg's *The Theory of the Epic in England, 1650-1800*¹ and D. M. Foerster's *Homer in English Criticism*² preclude them from dealing with the literary attitudes current among the less-educated strata of the reading public. But some attention to their views is easily justified, for it was precisely in this milieu that the new literary form began, and indeed it is likely that it could only have been there.

I

Defoe received a broad education at a dissenting academy,³ and his own writings, as well as the fact that he left a considerable library,⁴ suggest extensive and varied reading.⁵ This reading was mainly used, not for literary or critical purposes, but to provide facts for his arguments, and especially to fill out his treatises to book length when invention or memory failed. Classical authors figure mainly as sources of evidence in history, theology, and thaumaturgy. Latin poetry is not very largely represented: a few passing allusions to Horace, Ovid, and Virgil, a perfunctory eulogy of that last 'immortal',⁶ a shudder at the 'long ago exploded . . . latin bawdy Authors Tibullus, Propertius and others',⁷ a small stock of moral tags—these almost exhaust his repertoire. Of the Greek poets, only Homer

¹ Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1944.

² New Haven, 1947.

³ J. R. Sutherland, *Defoe* (London, 1937), pp. 18-22.

⁴ See George A. Aitken, 'Defoe's Library', *Athenaeum*, 1 June 1895.

⁵ Much of the evidence is presented in W. Gückel and E. Günther, 'D. Defoes und J. Swifts Belesenheit und Literarische Kritik', *Palaestra*, cxlix (Leipzig, 1925), 23-39; W. L. Payne, *Mr. Review* (New York, 1947), pp. 5-9; and Rudolph Stamm, *Der Aufgeklärte Puritanismus Daniel Defoes* (Zürich and Leipzig, 1936), which gives the best account of Defoe's intellectual outlook.

⁶ In *The Life of Mr. Duncan Campbell* Defoe compares him to Homer. But his purpose is to enhance the value of Tasso as trustworthy historical evidence for spirit manifestations: 'The famous Torquatus Tasso, prince of Italian Poets, and scarce inferior to the immortal Virgil himself, and who seems to enjoy the intermingled gifts of the most accurate judgement of this Latin poet, and the more fertile and copious invention and fancy of the Greek one, Homer, strongly asserted his own experience in this kind . . .' (Oxford, 1841, p. 86). This praise, with its conventional comparison of the two great epic writers, should not be taken as representative of Defoe's main attitude.

⁷ *Mist's Journal*, 5 April 1719; cited by William Lee, *Daniel Defoe* (London, 1869), ii. 31.

is mentioned, and all but one¹ of Defoe's references to him savour of a somewhat casual depreciation, casual because Homer's literary qualities are not specifically in question.

Defoe's earliest reference occurs in the *Review* of 2 June 1705. He is preaching political concord, and remarks that: 'It is easy to tell you the Consequences of Popular Confusions, Private Quarrels, and Party Feuds, without reading Virgil, Horace, or Homer.' This dig at the habit of using classical parallels to ornament political argument suggests a good deal of Defoe's attitude. Tradition, however hallowed, must never usurp the place of 'those two Sovereigns of Argument . . . Reason and Truth'.

Defoe's next reference is equally brief. In *The Felonious Treaty* . . . (1711), a pamphlet on the Spanish Succession, he cites a classical parallel himself to illustrate the frivolous and immoral pretexts which are so often the occasion of wars. The ten years' siege of Troy in the *Iliad* was all for 'the Rescue of a Whore'.² The view of Helen is common; but the note of impatient contempt is typical of Defoe.

Defoe's lengthy allusions to Homer occur much later, in four works of his last years.

The most extended and amusing diatribe occurs in a letter signed 'Anti-Pope' published in *Applebee's Journal*, 31 July 1725. This popular weekly—Defoe's main journalistic outlet at the time—was not normally concerned with literary matters.³ So it is not surprising that Defoe intervened in the controversy about Pope's unacknowledged collaboration with Broome and Fenton on the *Odyssey*,⁴ only to use it as an occasion for attacking his own *bêtes noires*. He begins with a coolly outrageous parallel between the ethics of literature and trade:⁵

Writing, you know, Mr. Applebee, is become a very considerable Branch of the English Commerce; Composing, Inventing, Translating, Versifying, &c., are the several Manufacturers or Employers. The several Writers, Authors, Copyers, Sub-Writers, and all other Operators with Pen and Ink, are the Workmen employed by the said Master Manufacturers, in the forming, dressing and finishing the said Manufactures; as the Combers, Spinners, Weavers, Fullers, Dressers, &c., are, in our Clothing Manufactures, by the Master Clothiers, &c. . . .

In the clothing trade, the master manufacturer obviously sells 'a medley of goods' under his own name. They come from the master weaver, who, like Pope, sells these goods 'under the Mark, and in the Name of the Master Weaver', although many of them are made by less skilful journeymen and

¹ Cited above, p. 326, n. 6.

² p. 17.

³ Sutherland, *Defoe*, pp. 242, 255.

⁴ See George Sherburn, *The Early Life of Alexander Pope* (Oxford, 1934), pp. 259–69.

⁵ Cited by Lee, *Defoe*, iii. 410.

apprentices. Both master clothier and master weaver, publisher and pretended author, are deluding the public, and it is impossible to say 'who is the greatest Cheat'.

Before applying his analogy to Homer, Defoe cannot resist the opportunity for a ramifying series of *tu quoques*. His main target is Hoadley and the *London Journal*.¹ What hypocrisy it is for Hoadley to complain of Pope's passing off other people's work as his own when he does exactly the same thing himself:

Nay, has not the Right Reverend Author Himself, who made this very complaint, his Deputy Journalist, and his supply of Operators, as Occasion requires, tho' the Labourers receive their Esteem from his own illustrious Character, and are all called his Own.

Then Defoe passes on to Steele. Even the 'late celebrated *Tatlers*' passed under his name, although it 'came out at last, *when he could conceal it no longer*, that he had abundance of *Aid de Plumes* under him'. Finally, as his crowning stroke, he turns to Homer himself:

But to carry this Complaint higher, a Merry Fellow of my Acquaintance assures me, that our cousin *Homer* himself was guilty of the same *Plagiarism*. Cousin *Homer* you must note was an old blind Ballad Singer at *Athens*, and went about the country there, and at other Places in Greece, singing his Ballads from Door to Door; only with this Difference, that the Ballads he sung were generally of his own making. . . . But, says my Friend, this *Homer*, in Process of Time, when he had gotten some Fame,—and perhaps more Money than Poets ought to be trusted with, grew Lazy and Knavish, and got one *Andronicus* a Spartan, and one Dr. S——l, a Philosopher of *Athens*, both pretty good Poets, but less eminent than himself, to make his songs for him; which, they being poor and starving, did for him for a small Matter. And so, the Poet never did much himself,

¹ By 'the Right Reverend Author' Defoe must surely mean Benjamin Hoadley, since his association with the *London Journal* was well known in an age when it was rare for bishops to undertake journalism [Lawrence Hanson, *Government and the Press, 1695-1783* (Oxford and London, 1936), pp. 108, 117].

This identifies the attack on Pope which Defoe is referring to as the paper signed 'Homerides' which had appeared in the *London Journal* on 17 July, two weeks before (cited by Sherburn, *Pope*, pp. 262-4). It is not likely that Hoadley wrote the article himself. Although he was an enemy of Pope, his main activities as a writer for the *London Journal* had ceased earlier in the year—the last article reprinted in the *Works*, 1773, is dated 20 March 1725.

The fact that Defoe attacks Hoadley personally does not prove anything, since his article would be even more embarrassing if 'Homerides' were actually Hoadley's 'Deputy Journalist'. Defoe had often written against 'Parson Benjamin' (Lee, i. 270-1, and *C.B.E.L.* under 1717, 1719); and the *London Journal*'s unidentified dramatic and literary commentator, 'Momus', had recently attacked Defoe, by listing among 'impertinent short *Novels* . . . the *Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, and the memorable *Actions of Moll Flanders*' (26 June 1725). Lee (i. 400-1), followed by Dottin (*Defoe*, i. 363), assumes that Hoadley wrote the attack on *Robinson Crusoe* in the *London Journal* of 4 September. That article, also signed 'Momus', was probably a retaliation for Defoe's two articles of 31 July and 7 August, themselves provoked by the attack of 26 June on Defoe's novels.

only published and sold his Ballads still, in his own Name, as if they had been his own; and by that, got great Subscriptions, and a high Price for them.¹

Defoe had close precedents for this picture of Homer²—even for his presentation of him as a ballad-monger³ and for his tone of good-natured derision.⁴ But the account of Homer as a plagiarist and a successful literary entrepreneur⁵ seems to have been invented by Defoe to suit the argument of the moment. And this strategy—to reduce all literary matters to their commercial equivalent—is well calculated to undermine not only the prestige of epic, but the basic premisses of Augustan culture.

Defoe's destructive purpose is made clear by his conclusion:

Now, Mr. Applebee, if my Friend be right, was not Cousin *Homer* a Knave for imposing thus upon the Grecian World. In a Word, it seems to me that old *Homer* was a mere Mr. *Pope*, and Mr. *Pope* in that particular, a mere Homer; so that there's ne'er a Barrel the better Herring, except the Master Manufacturer; who, like a Bawd to a —, knew the fraud, and imposed it upon his Customers, and has been worse than both of them.

It is exhilarating sport. Lintot, the publisher of Pope's *Odyssey*, is a procuress to the public in a deception where the poets themselves, Pope and Homer, figure only as poor wantons who cannot unaided supply the demand for their wares. The Augustans scorned Defoe as a Grub-Street hack: Defoe retaliates by dragging all the great ones of literature down to exactly the same mercenary level.

He continued the process in his letter on the following Saturday with typical cross-grained exuberance. Sir Richard Blackmore⁶ and John Robinson, Bishop of London,⁷ are glanced at, and the charge of plagiarism is

¹ The only 'Andronicus' connected with Homer is Livius Andronicus, the early Latin poet whose works included an *Odissia*, a translation of Homer. 'Dr. S——' would suggest Sacheverell. But neither reference seems to be intended seriously. There had to be two equivalents for Broome and Fenton, and Defoe probably took these two ill-matched names at random.

² See Foerster, *Homer in English Criticism*, pp. 17–23, 28.

³ Henry Felton mentions, to reject, the view in his *Dissertation on Reading the Classics* (1713), pp. 22–23, and Fielding ridiculed it in *A Journey from This World to the Next* (ch. viii), though he accepted it in *The Champion* (i. 34).

⁴ See the anonymous Preface, *A Collection of Old Ballads*, vol. i (1723), p. iii, and the article by 'Momus' in the *London Journal*, 26 June 1725.

⁵ Homer was generally thought to have been poor [see, for example, *Monsieur Bossu's Treatise of the Epic Poem . . . done into English by W. J.* (1695), Sig. A 7].

⁶ Blackmore best fits Defoe's allusion to 'a Learned Poet, contemporary with Mr. Pope, who has received many Honours besides that of Knighthood for his most sublime Performances . . . '.

⁷ 'And if we recur to a late celebrated Piece, in vindication of the Orthodox Faith, against Mr Whiston, we find it suggested, that his Lordship's Chaplain had a Share in the Labour.' Whiston had engaged the polemical arduous of a good many members of the bench of Bishops: but he had made this special charge against Robinson in his *Second Letter to the Right Reverend the Lord Bishop of London, concerning the Primitive Doxologies . . .* (1719), p. 5. See also Whiston's *Memoirs* (1749), p. 289.

then levelled at the whole clergy: 'Reverend Fathers . . . made florid by delivering . . . the borrowed Labours of their Ancestors.' It is cant, therefore, to pretend that Pope has done anything out of the ordinary.

Defoe's main interest in the two papers is not Homer. Nor indeed is it Pope.¹ The immediate—though probably incidental—effect is rather to defend Pope from the accusations which had been made in the *London Journal* and elsewhere by showing that they applied almost universally: although Pope could have derived little comfort from the tone of the defence, a tone which is clearly irreverent to all serious literary purposes. Still, the *London Journal* is his main target. As regards Homer, Defoe's attitude is indicated partly by the fact that he placed the poet of poets on exactly the same level as 'all other Operators with Pen and Ink', and partly by the fact that with Homer alone did he *invent* a charge of plagiarism, and phrase it in terms of contemptuous familiarity. Homer certainly emerges with the most damaged reputation from the general assault.

Indiscriminate impudence was at a premium in *Applebee's Journal*, and Defoe's performance on this occasion was so well calculated to please the groundlings that it need not be taken altogether seriously as representing his own views. His next references occur in a more serious work, the *Essay upon Literature*, published in 1726, and reflect his settled opinion of Homer.

By literature, Defoe means writing. His general thesis is that the art of writing was a divine gift given by Moses which enabled man to escape from 'that most corrupting, multiplying Usage of Tradition',² that is, the primitive, 'oral History of Men and Things'.³ Unfortunately the 'Writings of the Ancients', which are our only 'foundation'⁴ for early history, are often contaminated by the fallacious and exaggerated reports of previous oral traditions. The famous 'scandals' of the ancient world would have been seen in their true and odious colours if their lives had been written down at once. Instead, their lives were turned into 'Fable and Romance' by story-tellers in whose works 'Scoundrels are made Heroes and Heroes are made Gods'.²

It is in this context that Homer occurs. His works are essential historical documents: what a pity that, despite their 'fragments of truth', they are so unreliable! 'The Siege of Troy, were it unsung by *Homer*,

¹ In the context of the controversy, it is perhaps misleading to speak of these articles as 'a long attack on Pope's *Homer*' as Sutherland does [*The Dunciad* (London, 1943), p. 437, referring only to the second letter in *Applebee's Journal*]. Defoe prefaced some quotations from Pope's *Homer*, both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, with the phrase 'these Mr. Pope expresses very well': he apparently did not regard himself as an enemy of Pope. [*History and Reality of Apparitions* (Oxford, 1840), p. 171.]

² p. 115.

³ p. 17.

⁴ p. 22.

what shou'd we have known of it?'¹ But unfortunately 'even now we scarce know whether it is a History, or that Ballad-Singer's Fable to get a Penny'.¹ The last phrase echoes the one cited above; and there is no doubt which alternative Defoe prefers. His mind is made up: the *Iliad* is a Fable, and Homer is his favourite example of the corruption of historical truth among the ancients. This he states elsewhere in the *Essay Upon Literature*: '... there has been too much Fiction and Fable enter'd into the Writings of the Learned, especially their Poetical Works, as *Homer* in particular, who has sung the Wars of the *Greeks*, and the Siege of *Troy* from a Reality, into a meer fiction. . . .'²

On at least one other occasion³ Defoe links the name of Homer with his frequent references to the general tendency of the ancients to adorn truth instead of recording it reliably. This insistence on literal veracity is the key to the basic difference between Defoe and the realistic novel on the one hand, and Homer and the whole classical literary tradition on the other.

The classical literary tradition contains standards of truth and propriety which are to a considerable extent autonomous: standards which depend primarily, not upon correspondence to direct experience of life, but upon correspondence to other approved literary works. Thus in the epic, 'truth' was viewed largely as a literary problem, as subject to special literary rules which reconciled verisimilitude with the marvellous, and excused apparent immorality by interpreting it in allegorical terms. Defoe instinctively disregarded such sophistries. His originality, and indeed his greatness, derive from his single-minded, and from some points of view simple-minded, re-definition of truth which made it depend only upon literal correspondence with the experiences of Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders. This drastic re-definition of 'truth' made it impossible for Defoe to be influenced by literary models: in turning to view the raw details of experience, he necessarily turned away from all the available literary models.

One last aspect of Defoe's attitude to Homer, and one which is related to the general Puritan dislike of the patently fictional, calls for mention. His iconoclastic rationalism combined with his Christian outlook judges classical superstition harshly. In *A System of Magic* (1727) he explores the literature of the occult. One of his conclusions is that 'the Greeks were the most superstitious of all the Devil-worshippers in the World, worse than the Persians and Chaldeans, from whom they borrowed all the fundamentals

¹ p. 117.

² p. 22.

³ *Applebee's Journal*, 3 Feb. 1722; cited by Lee, *Daniel Defoe*, ii. 483-6; the passage is itself based upon Augustine's Epistle to Marcellinus. The unreliability of the ancients is an early theme of Defoe's: it appears in the preface to *The Storm* . . . (1704).

of their Idolatry'.¹ Ancient religious literature is vitiated by the 'infernal juggles' of the devil who 'chops in' with 'a horrid Rhapsody of complicated Idolatry' from time to time.² In another passage, too long to quote, from a similar work, the *History and Reality of Apparitions* (1727), he examines the statements of Homer and Virgil on apparitions and concludes scornfully: 'What learned Nonsense, and what a great deal of it is here, to reconcile a thing, which, upon the Christian foundation, is made as easy as anything not immediately visible to the common eye can be made!'³

Nor, indeed, is this superstitiousness rendered tolerable by any intrinsic moral purpose: for, in terms that must be read as applicable to Homer, Defoe also laments that there was 'not a Moralist among the *Greeks* but *Plutarch*'.⁴

This note of hardly concealed impatience at the irrational and immoral idolatry of the ancients is a suitable one on which to leave Defoe. Homer could have been a most valuable source of historical evidence. But—partly because of his own inveterate ballad-mongering, and partly because of the obdurate superstitiousness of the Greek civilization—he failed to make full use of his opportunities, and the truth was never told. If only Troy had had a really good journalist!

II

Richardson is like Defoe in that he does not establish any critical relationship between his dislike of Homer and his own work as a novelist. But in his later years, when the allusions to Homer occur, he was aware that his literary intentions accorded little importance to the epic. One would not expect from a man of Richardson's temperament and education the outspoken and defiant expression of distaste so natural to Defoe. Nevertheless a similar hostility can be discerned in Richardson's more cautious utterances.

His earliest reference is the most outspoken. It occurs in an undated letter, probably of 1749, to Lady Bradshaigh.⁵ She had apparently initiated a discussion in similar terms, and Richardson replied:

I admire you for what you say of the fierce, fighting Iliad. Scholars, judicious scholars, dared they to speak out, against a prejudice of thousands of years in its

¹ Oxford, 1840, p. 226. This aspect of Defoe's thought is well and fully treated in Rudolf Stamm's *Der Aufgeklärte Puritanismus Daniel Defoes*, pp. 168–90.

² pp. 191, 193.

⁴ *Essay upon Literature*, p. 118.

³ Oxford, 1840, pp. 171–4.

⁵ *Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, ed. A. L. Barbauld (London, 1804), iv. 287. The letter is certainly early, as it is addressed to 'My dear Incognita', and it was placed by Mrs. Barbauld before a letter dated 16 Dec. 1749. The letter, and that of Lady Bradshaigh which provoked it, are not extant [see Alan D. McKillop, *Samuel Richardson, Printer and Novelist* (Chapel Hill, 1936), p. 285].

E. Poetzsche gives a useful, though not exhaustive, account of Richardson's reading in his *Samuel Richardsons Belesenheit* (Kiel, 1908).

favour, I am persuaded would find it possible for Homer to nod, at least. I am afraid this poem, noble as it truly is, has done infinite mischief for a series of ages; since to it, and its copy the *Eneid*, is owing, in a great measure, the savage spirit that has actuated, from the earliest ages to this time, the fighting fellows, that, worse than lions or tigers, have ravaged the earth, and made it a field of blood.

The ideas in the attack are not original. Pope had written that 'the most shocking' thing in Homer was 'that spirit of cruelty which appears too manifestly in the *Iliad*'.¹ And it is obvious that, since in epic warfare is 'an essential rather than an accessory',² its moral world stands for values which are alien to all members of a peaceful urban society, and most of which are even likely to appear reprehensible to the moralists of that society. Nor was the idea that people were afraid to confess their actual feelings about Homer because of the traditional agreement to praise him, wholly new. Voltaire, in a very significant passage of his *Essay on Epic Poetry*, had suggested that few people had been able to read the *Iliad* 'without struggling against a secret dislike'.³

There are, however, some wholly characteristic touches in Richardson's letter. Richardson could lay no claim to classical learning; so he attributes what is presumably his own opinion to 'Scholars, judicious scholars', although without any particular one in mind, as is made clear by the phrase 'I am persuaded'. This indirectness is matched by the first charge itself, which is, overtly, that 'Homer sometimes nods'. But this opinion, of course, dates at least as far back as Horace,⁴ and the word used echoes his. The qualification 'at least', however, suggests that Richardson, for his part, would go a good deal further; perhaps because he stands outside that tradition of 'thousands of years in its favour'.

Secondly, the most sweeping charge, that of the 'infinite mischief' done by the *Aeneid*, is substantially new, and indeed anticipates Blake's more general accusation that '... it is the Classics ... that Desolate Europe with Wars'.⁵ Richardson's language in formulating the charge is unrestrained, full of loathing for 'the fighting fellows', and their inspirations, the epics.

¹ Note, *Iliad* iv. 75; cited by Foerster, *Homer*, p. 16.

² H. M. and N. K. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature* (Cambridge, 1936), ii. 488.

³ Florence D. White, *Voltaire's Essay on Epic Poetry: A Study and an Edition* (Albany, 1915), p. 90. 'It is very strange, yet true, that among the most learned, and the greatest admirers of Antiquity, there is scarce one to be found, who ever reads the *Iliad*, with that Eagerness and Rapture, which a woman feels when she reads the *Novel of Zaida*; and as to the Common Mass of Readers, less conversant with Letters, but not perhaps endow'd with a less Share of Judgement and Wit, few have been able to go through the whole *Iliad*, without struggling against a secret dislike, and some have thrown it aside after the fourth or fifth book.'

⁴ *De Arte Poetica*, 259.

⁵ William Blake, 'On Homer's Poetry' (c. 1820); *Poetry and Prose*, ed. G. Keynes (London, 1946), p. 583.

This overstrained tone is the most valuable clue we have to Richardson's own feelings on the matter: apparent impartiality about Homer himself is only an artfully reluctant prelude to an outburst of moral indignation about his effects. The reprobation is particularly significant coming from a man whose critical standards were based upon the primacy of moral purpose, upon judging the value of a work by its effect on the reader.¹

Two of the passages about Homer in *Sir Charles Grandison* are very similar in attitude to that in the letter. The first² occurs in the course of a discussion on whether there is any need for women to learn classical languages. Richardson puts admirers of Homer into two categories: foolish scholars like Mr. Walden and forward and masculine disgraces to the female sex such as Miss Barnevelt, of whom Miss Byron reports to Miss Selby, in tones that echo Richardson's own ejaculatory horror to Lady Bradshaigh, that 'Achilles, the savage Achilles, charmed her'.³

It is significant that Richardson should provide Homer with such damaging support. Later, a somewhat more direct attack is made by Miss Charlotte Grandison:

But men and women are cheats to one another. But we may, in a great measure, thank the poetical tribe for the fascination. I hate them all. Are they not inflamers of the worst passions? With regard to *epics*, would Alexander, madman as he was, have been so *much* a madman, had it not been for Homer? Of what violences, murders, depredations, have not the epic poets been the occasion, by propagating false honours, false glory, and false religion?⁴

These opinions need not be Richardson's, for Miss Grandison, we know, lacks prudence and is given to 'severe rallying', of which this is an example.⁵ Nevertheless, her opinions on the dire consequences of epic poetry are Richardson's own, as given privately to Lady Bradshaigh. Even the phrase 'in a great measure' is retained. The opinion is surely given to Miss Grandison because Richardson felt that he had to be more cautious and defensive when putting such extreme and heretical statements before the public, than when agreeing with them when they had already been addressed to him by a private correspondent. That the opinion is repeated at all suggests that it is felt to be important.

Adverse criticism of classical epic because of its bad moral effects on the reader has a necessary corollary: assertion of the supremacy in the heroic

¹ See, for example, 'Preface by the Editor', *Pamela*.

² Vol. i, 'Letter XII. Miss Byron. In Continuation' (London, 1812 ed., i. 67-86).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁴ Vol. vi, 'Letter XLV. Lady G. to Miss Byron. Friday morning, Nov. 10' (vi. 315).

⁵ She goes on to 'banish . . . the poets and poetasters of all ages, the *truly*-inspired ones excepted . . . from . . . *our* commonwealth, as well as Plato's' (p. 316).

genre of the Christian writers and notably Milton. This topic is also discussed by Harriet Byron, Mr. Walden, and others in the first volume of *Grandison*.¹ Walden, the classically minded pedant, supports his preference for Homer by citing Addison in the *Spectator*, who 'gives but the second place to Milton, on comparing some passages of his with Homer'. Miss Byron, who obviously represents Richardson's own views, deals with this impiety in two ways. First, she argues that she can only compare Milton with Homer in translation since she cannot read Greek: and that 'If Homer is to be preferred to Milton he must be the sublimest of all writers; and Mr. Pope, admirable as his translation is said to be, cannot have done him justice.'² This is indirect enough. No concession to Pope could be less gracious than 'admirable as his translation is said to be'. The second argument is based on hearsay evidence even more difficult to controvert. Harriet Byron alleges that in a contest of a similar kind, 'the excellent Mr. Deane' cited some unspecified 'passages of sublimity' from Milton which easily convinced a supporter of Homer that 'the English poet as much excelled the Grecian in the grandeur of his sentiments, as his subject, founded on the Christian system, surpasses the Pagan'.

This view of Milton's superiority to Homer is certainly Richardson's own.³ Once, it is true, Homer receives great praise.⁴ Harriet Byron is arguing that it is possible to have a full understanding of the passions without having travelled:

why is the Grecian Homer, to this day, so much admir'd, as he is in all these nations, and in every other nation where he has been read, and will be to the world's end, but because he writes to nature? and is not the language of nature one language throughout the world, though there are different modes of speech to express it by?

Richardson, whose lack of travel was second only to his ignorance of classical and foreign languages as a stigma in the polite world of letters, was adroit in finding unchallengeable support for his literary pretensions in the camp of the enemy. Homer serves an important objective so well that he can afford to grant freely what nobody denied—the universality of the admiration accorded Homer. Milton would not have suited this particular argument, and it is the general agreement about Homer, not his own or Miss Byron's opinions, which are in question. In any case the other adverse criticisms of Homer are unaffected.

¹ See reference in note 2 above; pp. 79–80. The passage referred to by Mr. Walden is presumably *Spectator*, 279.

² This was a common complaint, echoed, for example, by Fielding in *Amelia* (bk. VIII, ch. v) '... in some places no translation at all!'

³ It is, of course, that of the christianizing moderns such as Blackmore, Dennis, Watts, and Aaron Hill; see Swedenberg, *Theory of Epic*, p. 70.

⁴ *Grandison*, i, 'Letter XXXVI. Miss Byron to Miss Selby. Friday, Feb. 24' (p. 284).

Two other general discussions of epic and the ancients in Richardson serve to amplify our understanding of his attitude.

Writing to Aaron Hill about his *Gideon. An Epic Poem*, in 1748, Richardson commiserates with Hill about the degenerate tastes of the reading public.¹ Still, they cannot be ignored:

As to your particular title to this great work, I have your pardon to beg, if I refer to your consideration, whether epic, truly epic, as the piece is, you would choose to call it epic in the title-page since hundreds who will see the title, will not, at the same time, have seen your admirable definition of the word.

Hill's definition is an extreme statement of the didactic and scriptural view of epic,² so that Richardson's assent is to be expected. But as an expert on public taste he knew that the mere word 'epic' on the title-page was likely to discourage buyers. This gives us one very strong reason why Richardson did not try to claim any filiation of his own work with epic: it was bad for sales.

A further reason is to be found in a letter written to Young in 1758 about the *Conjectures on Original Composition*. MacKillop has shown³ that Richardson was responsible for the final form of several passages, for the apotheosis of Addison, and for the general sharpening of Young's polemic in the direction of a new anti-classical hierarchy of literary values. For Richardson to include Addison as a 'great original' could not but place his own work in a more favourable light than would be accorded it by a critical scale of values dominated by the ancients. In one celebrated passage of the *Conjectures* written by Richardson this concern with his status as a writer becomes very evident:

After all, the first ancients had no merit in being originals: they could not be imitators. Modern writers have a choice to make; and therefore have a merit in their power. They may soar in the regions of liberty, or move in the soft fetters of easy imitation; and imitation has as many plausible reasons to urge, as pleasure had to offer Hercules. Hercules made the choice of an hero, and so became immortal.⁴

¹ *Correspondence*, i. 122.

² It begins 'I take an Epic Poem, then, to mean some noble Lesson in Morality, delivered under Colour of One Action, which must be illustrious and important' and proceeds to equate epic with the parables of the New Testament, but for the 'little Difference . . . in Ornament and Size' (1749, pp. 39-41). Hill did not take Richardson's advice, apparently, about his title, and only a quarter of the plan was accomplished [D. Brewster, *Aaron Hill: Poet, Dramatist, Projector* (New York, 1913), p. 166].

³ 'Richardson, Young, and the *Conjectures*', *M.P.* xxii (1925), 393-9. Richardson's letter cited below was reprinted in the *Monthly Magazine*, xlv (1818), 238-9. It is dated 26 Dec. 1758. Young used it without alteration, except for the omission of Richardson's free use of underlining for emphasis.

⁴ *The Works of the Author of the Night Thoughts* (London, 1773), v. 94.

Richardson's purpose is transparent. He is claiming that he had been an original, not by accident, like Homer, but by a deliberate rejection of previous models of narrative.¹ The new literary Hercules was probably being brave after the event, since we have no evidence of his awareness of classical models until after the completion of his masterpiece, *Clarissa*. But we must accede to part of Richardson's plea: his originality was connected, whether by accident or design, with his neglect of established literary models in favour of his own vivid awareness of life, and the unfashionable literary modes which enabled him to express it directly.

There are many other reasons why epic was unlikely to be an acceptable model to Richardson. 'The marvellous' was still accepted as an essential ingredient of epic in literary theory.² But its presence would have undone the minute and studied realism of Richardson's literary method.³ And, even more important, the moral world of epic was too masculine for Richardson, or his readers.

This is reflected in the passages cited above. Lady Bradshaigh started him upon his course against Homer: Harriet Byron and Charlotte Grandison carried it on. There was certainly little in Homer to commend him to feminine readers, except, perhaps, to mannish bluestockings like Miss Barneveld: as James Macpherson was later to say, 'Homer, of all ancient poets, uses the sex with least ceremony'.⁴

The wider contrast between modern and epic ways of life is a clue to what is probably the major reason for the inutility of epic as a model not only for Richardson but for the novel in general. There was an ever-increasing gap between the manners of heroic times and those of eighteenth-century England; so that reading Homer meant an ever-increasing effort to exclude the normal expectations of daily life—in the words of Addison, it was difficult not to feel that 'you were reading the History of a different Species'.⁵ Richardson's success, on the contrary, was achieved by bringing

¹ It is some confirmation of the personal motive here attributed to Richardson, to find that Richardson explained Dr. Warburton's view that 'the character of an original writer is not confined to subject, but extends to manner' by the latter's need to secure 'his friend Pope's originality' (*Correspondence*, ii. 56).

² See Swedenberg, *Theory of Epic*, pp. 256–7; Ethel M. Thornbury, *Henry Fielding's Theory of the Comic Prose Epic* (Madison, 1931), pp. 132–50.

³ As Thomas Blackwell wrote in his *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735): 'in a well ordered state . . . we can hardly be surprised' (2nd ed., 1736, p. 26). Francis Jeffrey's review of the *Correspondence* is a representative estimate of Richardson's originality as a realist [*Edinburgh Review*, Oct. 1804; reprinted in *Contributions to the Edinburgh Review* (4 vols.: London, 1844), 302–23; see especially pp. 321–2]. For Richardson's 'hate' of 'the French marvellous', see letters, cited by McKillop, *Richardson*, pp. 39–40.

⁴ *Temora, an ancient epic poem* (1763), p. 206, n.; cited by Foerster, p. 57.

⁵ *Spectator*, 209.

literature and daily life into a closer and more detailed *rapprochement* than had ever obtained before:¹ no such *rapprochement* was possible between the manners of the Homeric world and those of 'a great luxurious city' in the eighteenth century. The implications of this difference were beginning to be obvious to Richardson's contemporaries. Thomas Blackwell, for example, expressed them pointedly in his *Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735), and drew the obvious conclusion: 'Tho' . . . your lordship may regret the Silence of the Muses, yet I am persuaded that you may join in the Wish, *That we may never be the proper Subject of an Heroic Poem.*'²

The sentiment, though perhaps not elevated, commands assent. It would certainly have received that of Richardson. For his conception of heroic virtue was one very fully accommodated to the modest possibilities of the times. The problem of creating a new and contemporary beau ideal according to Christian and middle-class needs was not new. Steele had wondered 'why the Heathen struts, and the Christian sneaks in our imagination?'³ Defoe had suggested as a solution that the real test of courage was 'to dare to be good'.⁴ In this controversy Richardson gave a model, and a maxim, which are at the opposite pole from the active and extroverted ideals of the Homeric world. The model, of course, was Sir Charles Grandison; the maxim, less well known, and perhaps not wholly representative, but nevertheless revealing, was Richardson's sedentary and suburban reflection to Miss Highmore: 'In such a world as this, and with a feeling heart, content is heroism.'⁵

III

So much for the attitude of Defoe and Richardson to Homer and to the epic model generally. An obvious gap remains. How far does Fielding prove or disprove the inutility of the epic for the novel?

The subject is too large to attempt here. But it may be useful to suggest briefly how it could be argued that the full picture of Fielding's relation to epic does not greatly modify the present thesis.

It could first be suggested that neither Fielding nor his commentators have dealt very persuasively with the theory of the Comic Epic in Prose as a guide either to the creation or to the criticism of the novels themselves.⁶

¹ See, for example, Diderot's 'Éloge de Richardson' (1761), in *Œuvres*, ed. A. Billy (Paris, 1946), pp. 1090-1104. Blackwell pointed out that to 'poetize in the higher strains' we must 'unlearn our daily way of life' (p. 25); thus epic leads the eighteenth-century poet to do the opposite of what Richardson did.

² p. 28. The identity of the lord is not made clear. The previous quotation is from p. 123.

³ *The Christian Hero* (1701), ed. R. Blanchard (London, 1932), p. 15.

⁴ *Applebee's Journal*, 29 Aug. 1724, cited by Lee, op. cit., iii. 299-300.

⁵ *Correspondence*, ii. 252.

⁶ e.g. E. M. Thornbury, *Henry Fielding's Theory of the Comic Prose Epic* (Madison,

The qualifications 'comic' and 'in prose' remove the formula from any concrete references to other literary works. In the last analysis the formula is suspiciously like a piece of simple semantic addition, not unlike the method recommended by Mr. Potts for writing about Chinese Metaphysics: 'He read for metaphysics under the letter M, and for China under the letter C; and combined his information, sir!' Fielding does not seem to have explored the French theorists of epic and romance;¹ but much of his writing about the epic analogy resembles them in one particular²—it is more concerned with phylogeny, with claiming a respectable pedigree for an unhallowed literary genre, than with ontogeny, with explaining the nature of the genre itself.

On these grounds, then, it could be claimed that the effectiveness of the epic analogy remains to be proven even for its greatest exemplar. And although the comic epic in prose became an 'obsessive'³ phrase among later novelists much the same could be said of their treatment of it.

Finally, evidence could be brought forward to show that Fielding himself came to doubt his earlier position. In *Amelia* epic imitation is of a different type, and the theory of the comic prose epic has been jettisoned. And the preface to the *Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon*, his last work, comes close to formal recantation:

But, in reality, the *Odyssey*, the *Telemachus*, and all of that kind, are to the voyage writing I here intend, what romance is to true history, the former being the confounder and corrupter of the latter. I am far from supposing that Homer, Hesiod, and the other ancient poets and mythologists, had any settled design to pervert and confuse the records of antiquity; but it is certain that they have effected it; and for my part I must confess that I should have honoured and loved Homer more had he written a true history of his own times in humble prose, than those noble poems that have so justly collected the praise of all ages; for, though I read these with more admiration and astonishment, I still read Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon with more amusement and more satisfaction.

Fielding proceeds to soften the verdict somewhat, and the purpose of

1931); F. O. Bissell, *Fielding's Theory of the Novel* (Ithaca, 1933); W. L. Renwick, 'Comic Epic in Prose', *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, xxxii (1946), 40–43. Gilbert Highet's view of the classical indebtedness of Richardson and Fielding seems much exaggerated [*The Classical Tradition* (Oxford, 1949), pp. 340–4]. A. W. Second gives a view similar to the present one in a review of Thornbury, *J.E.G.P.* xxxiii (1933), 418.

¹ A. L. Cooke, 'Henry Fielding and the Writers of Heroic Romance', *P.M.L.A.*, lxii (1947), 984–94. Nor does he meet the criticism of the idea of the *prose* epic which was current (see Swedenberg, *Theory of Epic*, pp. 159–65; Thornbury, *Comic Epic in Prose*, pp. 59, 102–3).

² For French analogues see the examples cited by Ralph C. Williams, 'Two Studies in Epic Theory', *M.P.*, xxii (1924), 133–58, and René Bray, *La Formation de la doctrine classique en France* (Paris, 1927), pp. 347–9.

³ George Sherburn, 'Fielding's *Amelia*: An Interpretation', *E.L.H.*, iii. (1936), 2. The tenor of the article substantiates some items of the present thesis.

the passage, to defend the literal veracity proper to a Journal, involves a further discounting. Still, it is interesting that Fielding should eventually have moved so far towards the position which Defoe had expressed with so much *sans-gêne*, the position of regarding Homer as a corruptor of historical truth; have seen the contradiction between his allegiance to epic, and his no less frequently expressed desire to be a true historian.¹

Fielding excuses Homer's 'extending fact by fiction' with the plea that 'the limits of nature' were 'too straight for the immensity' of his 'genius'. But the novel could derive little profit from following Homer outside the limits of 'nature'. Instead, by restricting its attention well within them, it hit upon a new literary resource—an exploration in depth which engaged the reader in a closer scrutiny of 'nature' than had been attempted before. This closer scrutiny—the 'realism' of the eighteenth-century novel—is closely connected with sentimentalism. For this other ingredient of the novel, the analysis of sentiment, was no more warranted by classical example than was realism. The complementary distinction between the modes of epic and novel is made explicit in a letter written either by the greatest of the 'sentimentalists', Sterne, or by his forger friend William Combe:²

. . . I love the classics as well as any man ought to love them,—but among all their fine sayings, their fine writings, and their fine verses, their most enthusiastic admirer would not be able to find me half a dozen stories that have any sentiment in them,—and so much for that.

¹ This is documented by Robert M. Wallace, who shows that the judgement given in the preface to the *Journal* is part of a general trend in Fielding's development ['Fielding's Knowledge of History and Biography', *S.P.*, xlv (1947), 89–107].

² *Original Letters of the Late Reverend Mr. Laurence Sterne . . .* (London, 1788), p. 14. The letter is not reprinted in most editions of the letters, and notably not in L. P. Curtis (Oxford, 1933; see pp. 189, n. 2; 252, n. 13; 294, n. 1). This rejection is not necessarily conclusive. At least one reviewer found Curtis 'a little too ready to brush aside . . . Combe' (*T.L.S.*, 1935, p. 173), and some of the arguments for the inclusion of his 'Letter 126' would favour the attribution of this part of the letter to Sterne.