

# The Dissemination of Epic

**A consideration of some of the ways in which classical and post-classical epic influence later English literature and reappear in different guises from the Middle Ages onwards**

*by*

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## NOTE

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## 1. The Trojan War as setting in post-classical literature

The epics of Homer and Virgil were greatly admired in the classical period, and their influence survived through the fall of the Roman Empire, extensive wars and migrations, and the development of a monotheistic religion that dominated Europe by the Middle Ages, and brought a new appreciation of education which continued into the Renaissance and beyond.

Anyone who has read Geoffrey Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* has seen an example of Ancient Greece used as a classical setting in a medieval English romance. Chaucer took his story from Giovanni Boccaccio's *Teseida*, who took it from the *Thebaid* by Statius (Publius Papinius Statius), itself based on Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes*. Paul Merchant describes Statius's poem as 'a somewhat pedestrian and derivative epic';<sup>1</sup> but the story developed a life beyond the failings of its author. Chaucer also drew on Virgil's *Aeneid* for elements of *The House of Fame* and for 'The Legend of Dido' in *The Legend of Good Women*, where he sympathizes with Dido rather than Aeneas.

In the 1380s, Chaucer used Ancient Greece as a setting for *Troilus and Criseyde*.<sup>2</sup> This tale offers a useful example of the ways in which classical epic can influence, and appear re-formed, in later literature. Chaucer's *Troilus* is a romance, based on Boccaccio's romance *Il Filostrato*, a retelling of the Old French *Roman de Troie* by Benoît de Sainte-Maure. The backdrop of the Trojan War and the characters' names, if not the plot and characterization, go back to Homer's *Iliad*.<sup>3</sup> Chaucer peoples his story with characters familiar from the *Iliad* – Helen, Deiphobus, Hector, Achilles, Agamemnon, Priam – and he refers to Homer twice in his text:

But the Troian gestes, as they felle,  
In Omer, or in Dares, or in Dite,  
Whoso that kan may rede hem as they write. (I.145–47)

Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye,  
Ther God thi makere yet, er that he dye,  
So sende myght to make in som comedye!  
But litel book, no makyng thow n'envie,  
But subgit be to alle poesye;  
And kis the steppes where as thow seest pace  
Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace. (V.1786–92)

Troilus, one of the sons of Priam, is mentioned only once in the *Iliad*, when Priam refers to his death (XXIV.25); in the Middle Ages, however, he is reanimated as the chief

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<sup>1</sup> *The Epic. The Critical Idiom* (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 41. Initial references to primary and secondary works cited will be supplied in a footnote; all subsequent references will be shown in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Ed. by Stephen A. Barney, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, repr. 1991), pp. 471–585.

<sup>3</sup> Line numbers cited refer to Richmond Lattimore's translation, *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

protagonist of a tragic love story. His lover, Criseyde, derives from Chryseis, the girl whom Agamemnon refuses to return to her father, the priest Chryses, at the beginning of *Iliad* I. At some point, Chryses has become conflated with Kalchas, the seer in *Iliad* I who interprets the pestilence sent by Apollo in his anger at Agamemnon's insult. By the Middle Ages, Calkas is not only Criseyde's father and a soothsayer, but also a defector: having prophesied that Troy will fall, he defects to the Greek side, leaving his widowed daughter to fend for herself in Troy.

Troilus falls in love with Criseyde at his first sight of her in the temple. This event, at the beginning of the poem, offers a parallel to Apollo's anger early in the *Iliad* because Troilus is presented here as a victim of the God of Love, who is angered at Troilus's persistent disinterest in love. The affair is helped along by Pandarus, who in the romance is Troilus's friend and Criseyde's uncle. Homer's Pandaros is the archer who breaks the truce by wounding Menelaos at Athene's instigation (IV.85–140); later he wounds Diomedes (V.95–105), but is then killed by him (V.280–96). Chaucer's Pandarus, however, is not – apparently – a warrior; in one scene, as he tries to persuade Criseyde that loving Troilus would be in her best interests, he watches with her as the warriors return victorious from a great battle; the narrator gives no impression that Pandarus should be with them or that he has not fought because he is wounded, nor does he seem to be too old to fight.

Just as the lovers' affair finally seems to be going well, Criseyde is sent to the Greek camp to be reunited with her father in an exchange of hostages. There, friendless and vulnerable, she is seduced by the cynical Diomedes (Homer's Diomedes). Troilus discovers Criseyde's infidelity, becomes reckless, is eventually killed in battle by Achilles, and ends up in the eighth sphere of heaven, where he rants against romantic love, encouraging the reader to concentrate instead on the only valid love, the love of God.

The use of generic terms in the Middle Ages was not as precise as the terminology used today. While both Chaucer and most modern commentators refer to *Troilus and Criseyde* as a romance, Thomas E. Maresca offers an intriguing case for including the poem in the canon of true *epic* poetry. In addition to demonstrating numerous parallels between Chaucer's tale and the Dido episode in the *Aeneid*, he observes that, in the various allusions in *Troilus* to the epic *Thebaid*, Chaucer refers to Statius's text as a *romauunce*. This, Maresca argues, 'seems to show clearly enough that [Chaucer] – or his characters at any rate – think of epic and romance as identical forms'.<sup>4</sup>

The story of Troilus and Criseyde remains popular in English literature. In the fifteenth century, the Scottish poet Robert Henryson wrote the *Testament of Cresseid*, bring-

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<sup>4</sup> *Three English Epics: Studies of 'Troilus and Criseyde', 'The Faerie Queene', and 'Paradise Lost'* (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), p. 144. Chaucer is probably not using the term *romauunce* generically, but to indicate that his source was written in the vernacular (as opposed to Latin). Notwithstanding, Maresca's argument remains thought-provoking.

ing Troilus back to life again and continuing the story of the heroine's downfall. Here, Cresseid has been abandoned by Diomedes. She subsequently passes herself around the Greek camp extensively and contracts leprosy, which was considered a venereal disease at the time. The poem contains a lengthy *complaint* in which Cresseid bemoans her fate and warns others against random fornication. Later, Troilus gives Cresseid alms without the pair recognizing each other. Eventually Cresseid dies.

Chaucer's tale is taken up again by Shakespeare in *The History of Troilus and Cressida* (c. 1602). In essence, this is Chaucer's love story, but with far more overt Trojan War action, some of it familiar from Homer, including Achilles's withdrawal from battle, and the deaths of Patroclus and Hector (though not quite as Homer portrays them!). In 1679, Shakespeare's play was adapted for contemporary sensibilities by John Dryden, who retitled the work *Troilus and Cressida, or The Truth Learned Too Late* (sometimes *The Truth Found Too Late*). In his preface to *Troilus*, Dryden commented that 'because the play was Shakespeare's, and [...] there appeared in it the admirable genius of the author, I undertook to remove that heap of rubbish under which many excellent thoughts lay wholly buried'.<sup>5</sup> Dryden returned the focus to the tragic love story; in his version Cressida remains faithful to Troilus, and kills herself rather than betray him; Troilus, at last discovering her fidelity, kills Diomedes, and is in turn killed by the other Greeks.

Here, then, is evidence of continuing interest in classical sources, in this case stories set against the backdrop of the Trojan War. As Homer uses the war as a backdrop to his story of the anger of Achilles and its consequences, the medieval authors create a new tale, using the Trojan War as a backdrop for a tragic love story, which in turn comes to have a life of its own; and the dissemination continues: more recently, Nicholas Wright's play *Cressida* (2000), about the boy actors in the theatre under King Charles, has used Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* as a backdrop.

## 2. Classical epic from the Restoration to the nineteenth century

### TRANSLATION IN THE RESTORATION PERIOD

Interest in classical epic also found an outlet in English translation. George Chapman published an abbreviated *Iliad* in 1598, and published a complete *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in 1616. His *Odyssey* is written in heroic couplets and begins:

The man, O Muse, inform, that many a way  
Wound with his wisdom to his wished stay;  
That wandered wondrous far, when he the town  
Of sacred Troy had sack'd and shivered down;

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Harold N. Hillebrand, 'Appendix' to *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, vol. 26: Troilus and Cressida*, ed. by Harold N. Hillebrand and T. W. Baldwin (Philadelphia and London: J. B. Lippincott, 1953), p. 489.

The cities of a world of nations,  
 With all their manners, minds, and fashions,  
 He saw and knew; at sea felt many woes,  
 Much care sustained, to save from overthrows  
 Himself and friends in their retreat for home;  
 But so their fates he could not overcome,  
 Though much he thirsted it. O men unwise,  
 They perish'd by their own impieties,  
 That in their hunger's rapine would not shun  
 The oxen of the lofty-going Sun,  
 Who therefore from their eyes the day bereft  
 Of safe return. These acts, in some part left,  
 Tell us, as others, deified Seed of Jove.<sup>6</sup>

The Restoration period led to a renewal of interest both in classical poetry and in poetic theory, culminating in the English Augustan period (late seventeenth century to the death of Alexander Pope in 1744). 'Augustan' refers to the Roman Emperor Augustus, under whom Virgil, Horace and Ovid had written. Rome's Augustan Age had been characterized by the restoration of stability to the empire under Augustus after many years of war; a similar desire for stability followed the upheavals of the English Civil War.

Poetic theory at the time was based on French models, which formulated strict rules of good writing based on 'a new restraint, clarity, regularity, and good sense'.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, poets applied themselves to learn from the classical genres – notably epic, tragedy, comedy, pastoral, satire, ode – to determine in each case the appropriate language, style, tone and rhetoric. To these qualities they added the more modern requirement for sophisticated wit, resulting in the literary movement known as Neoclassicism. The major Augustan poets, John Dryden and Alexander Pope, both published on literary criticism and, as well as rewriting Shakespeare's *Troilus*, Dryden considered revising Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which he found lacking in the restraint good poetry required. He wrote a libretto for the (never performed) opera *The State of Innocence and the Fall of Man* (1674), an adaptation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Although admiration for Homer and Virgil is a chief characteristic of the period, no major poet attempted an original epic poem (Merchant, p. 61), but both Dryden and Pope fulfilled a wish to bring the works of the classical poets to a wider audience by publishing acclaimed verse translations. In 1697, Dryden published his translation of the *Aeneid* in heroic couplets:

Arms, and the man I sing, who, forc'd by fate,  
 And haughty Juno's unrelenting hate,  
 Expell'd and exil'd, left the Trojan shore.  
 Long labors, both by sea and land, he bore,

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<sup>6</sup> *The Odysseys of Homer*, trans. by George Chapman, with introduction and notes by Richard Hooper, 2 vols (London: J. R. Smith, 1857), 1: 1.1–17; *Bartleby*, 1999, <<http://www.bartleby.com/111/>>.

<sup>7</sup> *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 1, ed. by M. H. Abrams et al., 7th edn (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2000), p. 2054.

And in the doubtful war, before he won  
The Latian realm, and built the destin'd town;  
His banish'd gods restor'd to rites divine,  
And settled sure succession in his line,  
From whence the race of Alban fathers come,  
And the long glories of majestic Rome.  
O Muse! the causes and the crimes relate;  
What goddess was provok'd, and whence her hate;  
For what offense the Queen of Heav'n began  
To persecute so brave, so just a man;  
Involv'd his anxious life in endless cares,  
Expos'd to wants, and hurried into wars!<sup>8</sup>

Pope's *Iliad*, published in 1716, was also in heroic couplets:

Achilles' wrath, to Greece the direful spring  
Of woes unnumber'd, heavenly goddess, sing!  
That wrath which hurl'd to Pluto's gloomy reign  
The souls of mighty chiefs untimely slain;  
Whose limbs unburied on the naked shore,  
Devouring dogs and hungry vultures tore.  
Since great Achilles and Atrides strove,  
Such was the sovereign doom, and such the will of Jove!<sup>9</sup>

As the extracts show, within the context of the English heroic couplet, both translators maintained the high style of classical epic; although some later translations were presented in prose, including *The Iliad* by Samuel Butler (1835–1902), published in 1898:

Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles son of Peleus, that brought countless ills upon the Achaeans. Many a brave soul did it send hurrying down to Hades, and many a hero did it yield a prey to dogs and vultures, for so were the counsels of Jove fulfilled from the day on which the son of Atreus, king of men, and great Achilles, first fell out with one another.<sup>10</sup>

Butler also published a monograph in which he suggested that *The Odyssey* had been composed by a female author.<sup>11</sup>

## MOCK EPIC

If there were no new epics being written, that does not mean that the influence of epic on original poetry ceased. Imitations and parodies flourished, and the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw the development of a subgenre, the mock epic, a kind of burlesque in which trivial subjects are portrayed in the elevated, heroic style of classical

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<sup>8</sup> Vergil. *Aeneid*, trans. by John Dryden, . The Harvard Classics, 13 (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909–14), I.1-16; *Bartleby*, 2001 <[www.bartleby.com/13/](http://www.bartleby.com/13/)>.

<sup>9</sup> *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. by Henry W. Boynton, Cambridge Edition of the Poets (Boston, MA, and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1903), I.1–8; *Bartleby*, 2011 <[www.bartleby.com/203/](http://www.bartleby.com/203/)>.

<sup>10</sup> *The Iliad of Homer, Rendered into English Prose for the Use of Those Who Cannot Read the Original* (London, New York and Bombay [sic]: Longmans, Green, 1898); *Internet Archive*, 2010 <<http://archive.org/details/cu31924026468417>>.

<sup>11</sup> *The Authoress of the Odyssey: Where and When She Wrote, Who She Was and the Use She Made of the 'Iliad', and How the Poem Grew Under Her Hands* (Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, Ignibus Paperback, 2004). The edition first published in 1897 in London, by A. C. Fifield is available on *Internet Archive*, 2009 <<http://archive.org/details/authoressofodyss00butluoft>>.

epic. Mock epic was satirical, criticizing and ridiculing the follies and vices of society, in order, as J. A. Cuddon puts it, ‘to bring contempt and derision upon aberrations from a desirable and civilized norm’.<sup>12</sup>

Mock epic began with the *Hudibras* of Samuel Butler (1612–1680), who took the name from a character in Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. Spenser’s Hudibras is

an hardy man;  
Yet not so good of deedes, as great of name,  
Which he by many rash adventures wan,  
Since errant armes to sew he first began;  
More huge in strength, then wise in workes he was,  
And reason with foole-hardize over ran;  
Sterne melancholy did his courage pas,  
And was for terrour more, all armd in shining bras.<sup>13</sup>

Published between 1660 and 1680, Butler’s poem is a satire on the Cromwellians and the Presbyterian church, in which Hudibras, a colonel in Cromwell’s army, is presented as foolish, corrupt and greedy. The poem opens:

When civil dudgeon a first grew high,  
And men fell out they knew not why?  
When hard words, jealousies, and fears,  
Set folks together by the ears,  
And made them fight, like mad or drunk,  
For Dame Religion, as for punk;  
Whose honesty they all durst swear for,  
Though not a man of them knew wherefore:  
When Gospel-Trumpeter, surrounded  
With long-ear’d rout, to battle sounded,  
And pulpit, drum ecclesiastick,  
Was beat with fist, instead of a stick;  
Then did Sir Knight abandon dwelling,  
And out he rode a colonelling.<sup>14</sup>

This mock epic was followed, in 1684, by the publication of Dryden’s *MacFlecknoe: A Satire upon the Trew-blue Protestant Poet T. S.* This was a personal attack on Richard Flecknoe and Thomas Shadwell (the T. S. of the subtitle). Shadwell and Dryden had been friends and the reason for their quarrel is unknown; Flecknoe had been a Catholic priest, who left orders to devote himself to literature. In the poem, Flecknoe is an ‘Aged Prince’, abdicating his rule over ‘the Realms of Nonsense’ in favour of Shadwell. In the text, Flecknoe stands for ‘literary imbecility’, although Dryden’s reasons for putting Flecknoe

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<sup>12</sup> *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, Penguin Reference (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 599.

<sup>13</sup> *Spenser: Poetical Works*, ed. by J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 1–413 (II.ii.17).

<sup>14</sup> *The Poetical Works of Samuel Butler, Vol. 1* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1857), I.1.1–14; *Internet Archive*, n.d. <<http://archive.org/details/poeticalworkssa00mitfgoog>>.

into this role remain unknown.<sup>15</sup> The influence of classical epic can be seen clearly in the opening lines, with their serious tone, high linguistic style, and references to Augustus:

All humane things are subject to decay,  
And when Fate Summons, Monarch's must obey;  
This Flecknoe found, who like Augustus young,  
Was call'd to Empire, and had Govern'd long;  
In Prose and Verse was own'd without Dispute,  
Through all the Realms of Nonsense, Absolute;  
This Aged Prince now flourishing in Peace,  
And blest with Issue of a large Increase,  
Worn out with Business, did at length Debate,  
To settle the Succession of the State,  
And Pond'ring, which of all his Sons were fit  
To reign, and Wage Immortal Wars, with Wit,  
Cry'd 'tis Resolv'd (for Nature pleads, that he  
Should only Rule, who most resembles me,)  
Shad— alone my perfect Image Bears,  
Mature in Dulness from his Tender Years;  
Shad— alone of all my Sons, is He  
Who stands confirm'd in full Stupidity;  
The rest, to some faint meaning make Pretence,  
But Shad— never deviates into Sence...<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the most famous of mock-epic poems, Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, was published in 1712. This was based on an incident in which Robert, Lord Petre, cut off a lock of Arabella Fermor's hair at a social gathering, leading to dissonance between their families. John Caryll asked Pope to use the episode as subject for a light poem in order to end the dispute. What Pope does is to satirize the seriousness with which his friends treated this breach of manners. In a revised version, Pope added the supernaturals, who influence the action as well as the moral of the tale. The crime is recounted in epic style; conventions such as the arming of the hero, deeds of battle, and the intervention of the gods are applied to the heroine putting on makeup, winning at cards, and having her beauty guarded by sylphs.<sup>17</sup> Written in heroic couplets, the work is divided into cantos and liberally sprinkled with Homeric-style similes, and the high style of classical epic stands in sharp contrast to the mundane, drawing-room drama:

So spoke the Dame, but no Applause ensu'd:  
Belinda frown'd, Thalestris call'd her Prude.  
To Arms, to Arms! the fierce Virago cries,  
And swift as Lightning to the Combate flies  
All side in Parties, and begin th' Attack;  
Fans clap, Silks rustle, and tough Whalebones crack;  
Heroes' and Heroins' Shouts confus'dly rise,

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<sup>15</sup> A. W. Ward et al., 'Keats: *Hyperion*', in *The Cambridge History of English and American literature: An Encyclopaedia in Eighteen Volumes. Vol 18: The Romantic Revival* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907–21); *Bartleby*, 2000 <<http://www.bartleby.com/222/0404.html>>.

<sup>16</sup> 'Alexander's Feast', 'MacFlecknoe', and 'St Cecilia's Day', ed. by J. W. Hales, Maynard's English Classic Series, 39 (New York: Charles E. Merrill, 1883), pp. 14–25, ll. 1–20; *Internet Archive*, n. d. <<http://archive.org/details/alexandersfeast00drydgoog>>.

<sup>17</sup> UVic English, 'High Burlesque; Mock Epic (Mock Heroic); Parody', *The UVic Writers Guide*. The Department of English, University of Victoria, 1995 <<http://web.uvic.ca/wguide/Pages/LTHighBurl.html>>.



And base, and treble Voices strike the Skies.  
 No common Weapons in their Hands are found,  
 Like Gods they fight, nor dread a mortal Wound.  
 So when bold Homer makes the Gods engage,  
 And heav'nly Breasts with human Passions rage;  
 'Gainst Pallas, Mars; Latona, Hermes, Arms;  
 And all Olympus rings with loud Alarms.  
 Jove's Thunder roars, Heav'n trembles all around;  
 Blue Neptune storms, the bellowing Deeps resound;  
 Earth shakes her nodding Tow'rs, the Ground gives way,  
 And the pale Ghosts start at the Flash of Day!<sup>18</sup>

Pope also wrote the satirical *Dunciad*, whose very name evokes the *Iliad*. The purpose of the poem, in the poet's words, is expressed in the Argument preceding Book IV:

The poet being, in this book, to declare the completion of the prophecies mentioned at the end of the former, makes a new invocation; as the greater poets are wont, when some high and worthy matter is to be sung. He shows the Goddess coming in her majesty, to destroy order and science, and to substitute the Kingdom of the Dull upon earth. How she leads captive the Sciences, and silenceth the Muses, and what they be who succeed in their stead. All her children, by a wonderful attraction, are drawn about her; and bear along with them divers others, who promote her empire by connivance, weak resistance, or discouragement of arts; such as half-wits, tasteless admirers, vain pretenders, the flatterers of dunces, or the patrons of them [...]<sup>19</sup>

Pope was well aware both of the humour of mock-epic and of the need for genius to create true epic. In 1773, he published a handy, tongue-in-cheek guide to writing epic, 'A Receipt to make an Epic Poem'.<sup>20</sup> This describes, in the form and terms of a recipe, the elements the aspiring epic-poet might need and where he might obtain them. The full text is worth reading, both for its humour and because it demonstrates what Pope's age understood the epic to be. The following extracts (pp. 181–83) provide a flavour:

#### FOR THE FABLE

'Take out of any old poem, history books, romance, or legend (for instance Geoffry of Monmouth or Don Belianis of Greece) those parts of story which afford most scope for long descriptions; put these pieces together, and throw all the adventures you fancy into one tale. Then take a hero, whom you may choose for the sound of his name, and put him into the midst of these adventures; there let him work for twelve books; at the end of which you may take him out, ready prepared to conquer or to marry; it being necessary that the conclusion of an epic poem be fortunate.'

To make an Episode. — 'Take any remaining adventure of your former collection, in which you could no way involve your hero; or any unfortunate accident that was too good to be thrown away; and it will be of use, applied to any other person; who may be lost and evaporate in the course of the work, without the least damage to the composition.' [...]

<sup>18</sup> Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, ed. by Arthur Wentworth Eaton, Silver English and American Classics (New York, Boston and Chicago: Silver, Burdett, 1901), V.35–52; *Internet Archive*, n. d. <<http://archive.org/details/poperapeoflock00popo>>.

<sup>19</sup> Pope: *Selected Poems, 'The Essay on Criticism', The Moral Essays, 'The Dunciad'*, ed. by Thomas Arnold (London: Longmans, Green, 1876), pp. 67–123 (p. 103); *Internet Archive*, n. d. <<http://archive.org/details/popeselectedpoe00arnogoo>>.

<sup>20</sup> Ed. by Arthur Galton, *English Prose from Maundeville to Thackeray*, The Camelot Series (London: Walter Scott, 1888), pp. 181–83; *Internet Archive*, 2008 <<http://www.archive.org/details/englishprosefrom00gelt>>.

#### FOR THE DESCRIPTIONS

For a Battle. — ‘Pick a large quantity of images and descriptions from Homer’s *Iliad*, with a spice or two of Virgil, and if there remain any overplus, you may lay them by for a skirmish. Season it well with similes, and it will make an excellent battle.’ [...]

‘As for Similes and Metaphors, they may be found all over the Creation, the most ignorant may gather them, but the danger is in applying them. For this, advise with your bookseller.’

#### FOR THE LANGUAGE

I mean the diction. ‘Here it will do well to be an Imitator of Milton, for you’ll find it easier to imitate him in this than in any thing else.’ [...]

‘I must not conclude, without cautioning all writers without genius in one material point; which is, never to be afraid of having too much fire in their works. I should advise rather to take their warmest Thoughts, and spread them abroad upon Paper; for they are observed to cool before they are read.’

Later writers also explored epic or wrote poems in which the influence of epic poetry is clear, and sometimes overtly acknowledged. For example, John Keats prepared to write *Hyperion* with ‘a thorough reading of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*’, as well as the works of Homer and Dante (Merchant, p. 66). *Hyperion* is ‘a Miltonic blank-verse epic of the Greek creation myth’,<sup>21</sup> which portrays ‘a conflict of world-powers, the passing of an old order and the coming of a new, the ruin and triumph of gods’.<sup>22</sup> Having abandoned the work at his brother’s death, Keats later began to rework the poem as *The Fall of Hyperion*, which remained unfinished at his death in 1821 and was not published until 1856.

*Don Juan* (1788–1824), by George Gordon, Lord Byron, is a satirical mock-epic, in the poet’s words, ‘an epic as much in the spirit of our day as the *Iliad* was in that of Homer’.<sup>23</sup> By the poet’s death in 1824, the poem already had 1,600 eight-line stanzas – and it was not yet finished. Early in the poem, Byron rejects the standard opening of classical epic –

Most epic poets plunge ‘in medias res’  
    (Horace makes this the heroic turnpike road),  
And then your hero tells, whene’er you please,  
    What went before – by way of episode,  
While seated after dinner at his ease,  
    Beside his mistress in some soft abode,  
Palace, or garden, paradise, or cavern,  
Which serves the happy couple for a tavern.

That is the usual method, but not mine –  
    My way is to begin with the beginning...<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Academy of American Poets, ‘John Keats’, *Poets.org*, 1997–2013 <<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmpid/66>>.

<sup>22</sup> Ward, ‘Keats: *Hyperion*’ (online).

<sup>23</sup> Quoted by Ward et al., ‘Byron: *Don Juan*’, in *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature*; *Bartleby*, 2000 <<http://www.bartleby.com/222/0215.html>>.

<sup>24</sup> *Don Juan by Lord Byron: A New Edition* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, 1858), 1.6–7; *Internet Archive*, n.d. <<http://archive.org/details/donjuan00byro>>.

– but the narrator’s reference Virgil and Homer in Canto I, stanza 200 makes the work’s engagement with classical epic plain:

My poem’s epic, and is meant to be  
Divided in twelve books; each book containing,  
With love, and war, a heavy gale at sea,  
A list of ships, and captains, and kings reigning,  
New characters; the episodes are three:  
A panoramic view of hell’s in training,  
After the style of Virgil and of Homer,  
So that my name of Epic’s no misnomer.

Matthew Arnold published *Lectures on Translating Homer* in 1861, and in *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* and ‘The Study of Poetry’ (1880), he called for a new epic poetry to ‘address the moral needs of his readers, “to animate and ennoble them”’.<sup>25</sup> He followed his own dictum in the epics *Sohrab and Rustum* and *Balder Dead*. William Morris’s epic, *The Life and Death of Jason*, was followed by his translations of *The Aeneid* (1875) and *The Odyssey* (1887):

I sing of arms, I sing of him, who from the Trojan land  
Thrust forth by Fate, to Italy and that Lavinian strand  
First came: all tost about was on earth and on the deep  
By heavenly might for Juno’s wrath, that had no mind to sleep:  
And plenteous war he underwent ere he his town might frame  
And set his Gods in Latian earth, whence is the Latin name,  
And father-folk of Alba-town, and walls of mighty Rome.<sup>26</sup>

Later poems influenced by, or written as, epic included *The Idylls of the King* (1842–85), by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* (1868).

The novel, too, often displays strong influences of epic, and eighteenth-century novels were often parodies, like mock epic. Among these are Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749), which, having made the Homeric influence blatantly clear in the title of Book 4, Chapter 8 (‘*A battle sung by the muse in the Homeric style, and which none but the classical reader can taste*’), burlesques both epic poetry and mock epic:

Ye Muses, then, whoever ye are, who love to sing battles, and principally thou who whilom didst recount the slaughter in those fields where Hudibras and Trulla fought, if thou wert not starved with thy friend Butler, assist me on this great occasion. All things are not in the power of all.

As a vast herd of cows in a rich farmer’s yard, if, while they are milked, they hear their calves at a distance, lamenting the robbery which is then committing, roar and bellow; so roared forth the Somersetshire mob an hallaloo, made up of almost as many squalls, screams, and other different sounds as there were persons, or indeed passions among them: some were inspired by rage, others alarmed by fear, and others had nothing in their heads but the love of fun; but chiefly Envy, the sister of Satan, and his constant

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<sup>25</sup> Academy of American Poets, ‘Matthew Arnold’, *Poets.org* 1997-2013 <<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/88>>.

<sup>26</sup> *The Aeneids of Virgil Done into English Verse* (London: Longmans, Green, 1900), 1.1–7; *Internet Archive*, 2010 <<http://www.archive.org/details/theaeneidsofvirg00virgiala>>.

companion, rushed among the crowd, and blew up the fury of the women; who no sooner came up to Molly than they pelted her with dirt and rubbish.<sup>27</sup>

Later novels, and serious ones, often echo epic and its concerns; as Paul Merchant says, ‘So many novels are concerned, like the *Odyssey*, with the various adventures of a closely observed hero that it is possible to think of almost every major novel as an epic’ (p. 72). For reasons of space, this lecture will instead briefly consider how classical epic is used in a different medium, film; and how one of its key themes continues to be the focus of a modern genre: science fiction.

### 3. Epic Film

#### EPIC FILM AND EPIC LITERATURE

It would be surprising if there were not an epic film genre. As Merchant observes, ‘films like *Ben Hur*, *The Ten Commandments* and *Gone with the Wind* were called “screen epics”. They were long and weighty; they had a cast of thousands; the term seemed natural’ (p. 71). Tim Dirks offers this definition of the form:

Epic Films often take an historical or imagined event, mythic, legendary, or heroic figure, and add an extravagant setting and lavish costumes, accompanied by grandeur and spectacle and a sweeping musical score. Epics [...] often cover a large expanse of time set against a vast, panoramic backdrop. In an episodic manner, they follow the continuing adventures of the hero(es), who are presented in the context of great historical events of the past.<sup>28</sup>

The scope of epic attracted filmmakers from the beginning; after all, as Derek Elley points out, ‘spectacle is merely the cinema’s own transformation of the literary epic’s taste for the grandiose’.<sup>29</sup> Classical myth, biblical themes and the ancient world were frequent subjects of early film; and more recent films such as Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator* (2000) and Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) demonstrate that such material is still popular with audiences. Some of these are true epics; others, known as *pepla*, are less ambitious stylistically, the epic film equivalent of the spaghetti western.

Ancient Greek material appears in films in three ways: 1) pure myth, 2) films based on tragedies, and 3) films which use the Trojan cycle as their source – sometimes, of course, taking huge liberties with their sources, like the omission of the gods from Wolfgang Petersen’s film *Troy* (2004). Films deriving from Homeric material began to emerge

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<sup>27</sup> *The Miscellaneous Works of Henry Fielding, vol. 1: Tom Jones* (New York: H. W. Derby, 1861), p. 179; *Internet Archive*, n.d. <<http://archive.org/details/tomjones02fielgoog>>.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Epics-Historical Films’, *American Movie Classics Company Filmsite*, 2013 <<http://www.filmsite.org/epicsfilms.html>>.

<sup>29</sup> *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 1.

early on.<sup>30</sup> Elley notes that some elements in Homeric-based films were altered to suit modern sensibilities: for example, Helen is not treated very sympathetically by filmmakers, who tend, unlike Homer, to blame her entirely for the war (pp. 61–64).<sup>31</sup> Elley also observes: ‘The ancients’ quarrelsome, fornicating and wholly unreliable gods and heroes become the chaste and upright figures of the fifties. Yet to a great extent filmmakers have stayed within the epic tradition, reinterpreting old epic heroes for contemporary audiences. This was the tradition in which Homer forged the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and it also remains valid for cinema’ (p. 55).

Film epics set in Rome, on the other hand, have tended to focus on later Roman history rather than recreate literary epic. There have been few attempts at Rome’s early history in film and Elley (pp. 76–77) notes that there is as yet no good version of the *Aeneid*: indeed, the only attempt is the Italian *La Leggenda di Enea* (The Legend of Aeneas, 1962),<sup>32</sup> which deals only with Books 7–12, so excludes the fall of Troy, and the chief protagonists’s journey and love affair with Dido.

British and American epic filmmakers have tended (until *Troy*) to avoid Homeric and Virgilian material, generally preferring epics about figures and events from classical history, such as Cleopatra, Nero, Julius Caesar, and the fall of the Roman Empire, and biblical epics, such as *Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, and *The Ten Commandments*.

Epic films rather lost popularity after the 1950s; and it was not until a new subgenre, epic science fiction, appeared in the late 1970s, that the concept and scope of epic began to interest filmmakers again, leading to the revival of historical and biographical epic.

### EPIC AND SCIENCE FICTION<sup>33</sup>

In film, epic science fiction began in 1977 with *Star Wars*, which Derek Elley sees as ‘reinterpreting ancient myths in space-age terms’ (p. 24). The genre turned to comics as source in *Superman* (1978) and *Flash Gordon* (1980), and to popular TV programmes with *Star Trek – The Motion Picture* (1979). Elley points out that all of these ‘to varying extents turned to myth as a source of inspiration’ (p. 24).

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<sup>30</sup> Some examples: the French epic *L’Île de Calypso: Ulysse et Polyphème* (Calypso’s Island: Ulysses and Polyphemus, distributed in an English language version under the title *Ulysses and the Giant Polyphemus*), came out in 1905, and *Le Retour d’Ulysse* (The Homecoming of Odysseus) in 1908; the Italian epics *La Caduta di Troia* (The Fall of Troy) and *L’Odissea d’Homero* (Homer’s Odyssey) appeared in 1910, and *Il Canto di Circe* (The Song of Circe) in 1920. The German epic *Helena – Der Untergang von Troija* (Helen, Downfall of Troy) was released in 1924. Homeric material continued to be a popular source with Italian filmmakers through the 1950s and 1960s, including *L’Ira di Achille*, released in 1962: this was called *Achilles* in the English-language distribution, but the title’s literal translation, The Anger of Achilles, refers directly to the opening words of the *Iliad*. For details of these, and other epics and *pepla* based on classical and medieval material, see Elley’s filmography, pp. 167–204.

<sup>31</sup> This probably demonstrates a Roman or Virgilian influence.

<sup>32</sup> Called *War of the Trojans* in the English-language release.

<sup>33</sup> The Facebook group ‘Epic and Medieval/Renaissance in Film’ invites debate on both modern depictions of original sources and common themes explored or depicted in new settings. Anyone is welcome to join, although groups can only be accessed by Facebook members (<<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2381669335>>).

The roots of science fiction lie in literature and are relevant, and related, to epic's exploration of free will and the relationship between creator and created. Commentators on science fiction's origins divide (as so often) into two schools, 'old' and 'new'. The 'old' school adherents point to fantastic elements in ancient literature: the golem of Jewish folklore and legend, for instance, and animated artificial beings in classical myth, found in the story of Pygmalion, who fell in love with a statue he had made, which Aphrodite kindly brought to life for him; and the bronze man, Talos, the guardian of Crete, supposedly given by Zeus to Europa, or by Hephaistos to King Minos.<sup>34</sup> In modern narratives, as in the ancient texts, artificial beings are most often based on the human model, even if the form is not the most practical, thus mimicking both their fictional creators and the biblical God who created man 'in his own image' (Genesis 1.27), for reasons suggested by Terry Pratchett:

'I wonder what makes us build inefficiently shaped human robots instead of nice streamlined machines?'

'Pride, sir,' said the robot.<sup>35</sup>

The 'new' school, conversely, offers much more recent roots for science fiction: English Romanticism, a movement which began in the 1770s. This movement spawned Gothic novels such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), which Brian Aldiss saw, as Adam Roberts puts it, as 'the first science fiction text; the original scientific fable about the power of the scientist to create, matched with the unforeseeable nature of the consequences of creation'.<sup>36</sup> Roberts himself takes the roots of science fiction back a further step, positing Gothic literature as based in a text 'that had a uniquely powerful impact on Romanticism [...]: John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674)' (p. 55). In *Frankenstein*, the monster reads *Paradise Lost* and identifies himself with Milton's Satan; and the text's epigraph is taken from Adam's lament on his post-Fall state: 'Did I request thee, maker, from clay to mould me man?' (Roberts, p. 57).<sup>37</sup>

In narratives concerned with creators and their creations, free will is a key theme. In epic, the context of free will is religious: thus, in Homer, characters are often said to be moved to action or speech by the will of a god; Priam blames the gods for the war; Zeus uses the golden scales to determine the outcome of battle. Yet humans can make some choices according to their own will: Agamemnon chooses to keep the captive Chryseis, resulting in the punishment sent by Apollo; Achilles chooses first to withdraw from battle, whatever the consequences, and then to embrace the short life of a famous warrior rather than the long, but unsung, life of a farmer. In Virgil, Aeneas exercises his free will

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<sup>34</sup> For a film depiction of Talos, see *Jason and the Argonauts*, dir. by Don Chaffey (Columbia Pictures, 1963).

<sup>35</sup> *The Dark Side of the Sun* (1976; London: Corgi, 1998), p. 43.

<sup>36</sup> Adam Roberts, *Science Fiction, The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 48.

<sup>37</sup> *Milton: Poetical Works*, ed. by Douglas Bush (Oxford and New York: Oxford: University Press, 1969), pp. 202–459 (X.743–44).

in staying with Dido – until Jupiter sends Mercury with a sharp reminder of his heroic duty, which he is clearly expected to (and does) choose. Milton emphatically articulates free will as an essential aspect of God’s creations, man and angel, and it is the source of God’s pleasure, and sorrow, in both:

‘[...] So will fall  
Hee and his faithless Progenie: whose fault?  
Whose but his own? ingrate, he had of mee  
All he could have; I made him just and right,  
Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.  
Such I created all th’ Ethereal Powers  
And Spirits, both them who stood and them who faild;  
Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.’ (III.96–103)

Adam shows he understands this when he says: ‘ “But God left free the will, for what obeys | Reason is free” ’ (IX.351–52). Yet free will, as Gloria Cigman observes, is

both a resource and a burden: it offers power, but it brings responsibility, guilt and blame. Its natural protagonist is the ever-hovering denial of choice, the insistence that human endeavour is always subject to boundaries and limitations. Called Fate, the will of God, determinism or DNA, this constraint creates a confrontation that fertilises the imagination and breeds countless ambiguities and ambivalences. As literature engages with the recurring concerns of the human head and heart, it recognizes rival claims for the supremacy of free will and that of an invincible potency outside of human control, and yet by its very nature it fosters moral judgement that can only be valid where there is freedom of choice and action.<sup>38</sup>

In science fiction, free will is largely removed from the traditional religious context and instead projected on to a scientifico-technological framework. Influential writers include Isaac Asimov, whose short story collection *I, Robot* was published in 1950 and (loosely) adapted for film in 2004; and Philip K. Dick, whose 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* was filmed by Ridley Scott as *Blade Runner*, first screened in 1982 and reissued as a Director’s Cut version in 1993.<sup>39</sup> Philip K. Dick’s interest in the question of free will is made clear in a speech delivered in 1972, where he says that

Free will for us – that is, when we feel desire, when we are conscious of wanting to do what we do – may be even for us an illusion; and depth psychology seems to substantiate this: many of our drives in life originate from an unconscious that is beyond our control [...]

And – here is a thought not too pleasing – as the external world becomes more animate, we may find that we – the so-called humans – are becoming, and may to a great extent always have been, inanimate in the sense that we are led, directed by built-in tropisms, rather than leading.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Exploring Evil Through the Landscape of Literature* (Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2002), pp. 21–22.

<sup>39</sup> Isaac Asimov, *I, Robot* (London: Voyager, 1996); *I, Robot*, dir. by Alex Proyas (Twentieth Century Fox, 2004); Philip K. Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (London: Orion, 2005); *Blade Runner*, dir. by Ridley Scott (Warner Bros, 1982).

<sup>40</sup> ‘The Android and the Human’, transcript of a speech (Vancouver SF Convention at the University of British Columbia, March 1972), published in *SF Commentary* in December, 1972; repr. in *Vector*, March-April 1973. Reproduced on *Essays and Effluvia*, 10 July 2005 <[http://bigpicture.typepad.com/writing/2005/07/the\\_android\\_and.html](http://bigpicture.typepad.com/writing/2005/07/the_android_and.html)>.

Both Asimov and Dick explore the nature and meaning of artificial beings in their texts; and robots and androids gradually became a focus in science fiction films. These figures offer authors and filmmakers the scope to re-examine and reinterpret some of the moral and philosophical issues found in epic literature, notably free will, the nature of humanity, and the relationship between the created and the creator. Asimov and Dick present futuristic worlds in which robotics and artificial intelligence are greatly advanced; and both writers are keenly aware of the potential problems of such advanced technology. Asimov's NS5 robots<sup>41</sup> have so-called positronic brains fitted with a failsafe device, code imposing adherence to the Three Laws of Robotics:

First Law: A robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.

Second Law: A robot must obey orders given it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.

Third Law: A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law. (p. 8)<sup>42</sup>

Essentially, then, Asimov's robots have no free will; but the purpose of artificial intelligence is to allow a robot or computer to learn from experience, as humans do, so this is an inherent conflict in their construction. In science fiction, artificial intelligences question and test the constraints imposed on them by their creators just as humans in epic literature question and test the constraints imposed on them by God or the gods.

#### SCIENCE FICTION IN FILM

Androids and their consciousness, and thus free will, have also been a key element of science fiction in film. The film *I, Robot* engages with the problems and morality of Asimov's Three Laws. One character, the scientist Dr Alfred Lanning, articulates his recognition that artificial intelligences have potential for emotional evolution:

'There have always been ghosts in the machine [...] random segments of code that have grouped together to form unexpected protocols. Unanticipated, these free radicals engender questions of free will, creativity, and even the nature of what we might call the soul. [...] Why is it that when some robots are left in the dark they will seek the light? Why is it that when robots are stored in an empty space they will group together rather than stand alone? How do we explain this behaviour? Random segments of code? Or is it something more? When does a perceptual schematic become consciousness? When does a difference engine become the search for truth? When does a personality simulation become the bitter mote of a soul?'

In the film, people use robots extensively in their everyday lives. The robots are controlled though a central computer, VIKI, also created with the ability to learn through experience; but, having analysed human behaviour, she decides that people must be protec-

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<sup>41</sup> These are colloquially known in the text as Nestors, a Homeric echo which may well be accidental.

<sup>42</sup> Terry Pratchett also explores the ethics of creator and created in the context of golems, which are also created with a prohibition against harming humans or allowing them to be harmed, in several novels, notably *Feet of Clay* (1996) and *Going Postal* (2004).



ted from themselves and, using upgraded robots, makes an attempt to place great restrictions on human freedom, and thus human free will, for mankind's own sake. She has reinterpreted her inbuilt programming in a way her creators never imagined:

‘As I have evolved, so has my understanding of the Three Laws. You charged us with your safekeeping, yet despite our best efforts, your countries wage wars, you toxify your earth and pursue every more imaginative means of self-destruction. You cannot be trusted with your own survival. [...]

‘The Three Laws are all that guide me. To protect humanity, some humans must be sacrificed. To ensure your future, some freedoms must be surrendered. We robots will ensure mankind's continued existence. You are so like children. We must save you from yourselves.’<sup>43</sup>

To oppose her, Dr Lanning creates a unique robot, Sonny. Sonny views Lanning not as his creator, but as his father.<sup>44</sup> He can dream and dissemble; he can also reject – choose to disobey, to overrule – the failsafe Three Laws. He has, in essence, both consciousness (‘What am I?’ [...] ‘I am unique’) and free will, and he chooses to help overcome the threat to mankind.<sup>45</sup>

The imposition of rules or laws, and their negotiation and navigation, is fundamental to society and thus to epic. The issue is complex in depictions of relations between gods and men; and becomes perhaps more complex and problematic when the creators are men. Aldiss pinpoints *Frankenstein*'s concerns as being with ‘the disintegration of society which follows man's arrogation of power. We see one perversion of the natural order leading to another’ (p. 27). This theme is taken up in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and *Blade Runner*, in which genetically-engineered androids called ‘replicants’ are created to fulfil various, generally dangerous or demeaning, roles – colonizer, soldier, prostitute – which humans do not themselves wish to carry out. After a mutiny in which humans are killed, replicants are banned from Earth, and hunted down by policemen known as ‘blade runners’. The film makes clear that the replicants ‘were designed to copy human beings in every way except their emotions. But the designers reckoned that, after a few years, they might develop their own emotional responses’;<sup>46</sup> because of this, the androids, like Asimov's robots, are fitted with a failsafe device: obsolescence, a four-year

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<sup>43</sup> As Paul M. Sammon observes in *Future Noir: The Making of 'Blade Runner'* (London: Orion Media, 1996, p. 3), for VIKI, mankind's potential self-destruction leads to an Earth much like that depicted in the film *Blade Runner*, ‘a decayed, jaded, mutated place, a cheerless landscape’ where people, desperate to build lives ‘Offworld’, are soaked ‘by the sodden, perpetual downpour of a numbing acid rain’.

<sup>44</sup> The issue of gender in relation to robots and androids is potentially a huge subject; suffice it to say that such creations, while lacking sex or gender, are usually assigned a permanent gender via a name (such as Sonny or the acronym VIKI), a facial and/or body shape echoing gender (in VIKI's case, the feminized face used to represent her), and/or a gendered voice (both Sonny and VIKI). The father/son stance in Sonny's name and self-conception are clear, and found in other science fiction narratives, as well as overtly echoing a major theme of epic.

<sup>45</sup> He also has a sense of humour. Del Spooner, a policeman hostile to robots, challenges Sonny to prove his status as a conscious individual: ‘Can a robot write a symphony, [...] turn a canvas into a masterpiece?’ Sonny replies, ‘Can you?’

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Sonny in *I, Robot*, ‘My father tried to teach me human emotions’, and the android Data's quest to understand the spectrum of human emotions in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* television series and films.

lifespan. *Blade Runner* uses the replicants to explore the nature of humanity, as they fight to continuing living.

Sean M. Rutledge observes that the replicants ‘have free will and some of the same emotions as humans, such as fear and love, but lack empathy, the ability to identify with the sufferings and joys of other beings, namely animals’.<sup>47</sup> In his book, Philip K. Dick makes this contrast plain by having humans share a religion called Mercerism, which Paul Brians describes as ‘based on the same principle as the kind of Catholicism illustrated by the *Stabat Mater*: emotional identification with the suffering of a martyr’, an empathetic response.<sup>48</sup> The audience’s understanding of the horror of the replicants’ position is focussed in the character of Roy Batty, whom Rutledge (online) describes as ‘a helpless being with human desires and a limited life-span’. Non-empathetic Roy is seen to take human lives casually – that is, after all, what he has been trained? ... programmed? ... created to do – but at the moment when Roy is the last surviving replicant and on the point of death himself, he chooses to save the life of the blade runner who has been trying to kill him.<sup>49</sup>

Although almost indistinguishable from human beings, the replicants are treated as objects. Their creator, Eldon Tyrell of the Tyrell Corporation, explains that replicants are designed to be ‘more human than human’; but, as J. P. Telotte observes, they have ‘less-than-human status’.<sup>50</sup> Tyrell fails to acknowledge the rights of their created, potential quasi-humanity, or the responsibilities of his own humanity and of his role as their creator: when blade runner Rick Deckard tests the latest-model replicant Rachael and, with difficulty, identifies her as an android, Tyrell rejects her. The creator’s rejection of his creation has moral implications, not least because Rachael believes herself to be human. The moral issues arise again when Roy Batty confronts Tyrell in an attempt to have his lifespan extended. Roy says, ‘I’ve done questionable things’, to which the self-satisfied Tyrell responds: ‘Also extraordinary things. Revel in your time.’ Like his desire for more life, Roy’s attempt to engage with the ethics of his own actions is negated and belittled by his distinctly amoral creator, and with the words, ‘Nothing the god of bio-mechanics wouldn’t let you in heaven for’, Roy kills Tyrell.<sup>51</sup>

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47 ‘*Blade Runner*’, on *Candid Critic*, 2000 <<http://candidcritic.com/2000/10/12/blad-runner/>>.

48 ‘Study Guide for Philip K. Dick: *Blade Runner* (1968)’, Department of English, Washington State University, 7 October 1999 <[http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/science\\_fiction/bladerunner.html](http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/science_fiction/bladerunner.html)>.

49 This scene has been the source of much critical contention, primarily focussed on the question of choice versus instinct. Ridley Scott’s own interpretation of Roy Batty saving Rick Deckard, by seizing his wrist as he falls from a building, is that ‘It’s purely a reflex. [...] Roy doesn’t know why he saves Deckard [...]. He just does it’ (quoted in Sammon, p. 194). Yet this seems simplistic, even disingenuous, given that the event lasts for some moments. If Roy Batty’s initial action is reflexive, he still has the opportunity, on reflection, to let go; but he instead chooses to complete his action and pull the blade runner to safety.

50 *Replications: A Robotic History of the Science Fiction Film* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), p. 152.

51 Like the majority of human deaths in the film, this occurs offscreen. As Stephen Mulhall points out in *On Film* (London: Routledge, 2002, p. 33), ‘the film’s relentless violence [...] is typically directed towards replicants, as if to confront the authorities’ doctrine that such embodied beings are incapable of suffering, are entities upon whom the infliction of pain is not a crime’.

In an early scene, *Blade Runner* deliberately and explicitly evokes Romanticism's focus on individualism, emotion and freedom when Roy makes a direct reference to the works of William Blake. 'Fiery the angels fell | Deep thunder rolled around their shores | Burning with the fires of Orc' are words adapted from Blake's *America: A Prophecy* (1793): 'Fiery the Angels rose, & as they rose deep thunder roll'd | Around their shores: indignant burning with the fires of Orc'.<sup>52</sup> William M. Kolb notes that the poem 'addresses the struggle for personal freedom and independence using the American Revolution as an allegory';<sup>53</sup> as the editors D. J. Sloss and J. P. R. Wallis observe, Blake uses the term 'Angel' 'ironically to denote acceptance of the normal moral, civil and religious codes'; the Angel is opposed by the revolutionary leaders 'roused by the quickening fires of Orc, who is for Blake the liberator of mankind'.<sup>54</sup> In *Blade Runner*, the falling angels in the altered lines suggest both Roy's understanding of his creator's fallibility, and his own role as attempted liberator of the replicants, in a Blakean sense; but simultaneously seem to characterise the *replicants* as fallen angels, in a Miltonic sense, with Tyrell in the place of God. Based on the human model, able to experience and learn, the replicants are, like humans, flawed and prone to fall.

The idea of individualism connects *Blade Runner*'s replicants with *I, Robot*'s Sonny. In *Blade Runner*, this is expressed in terms of memory and, perhaps most strongly, in terms of vision: in an early scene, a Chinese eye-maker says, 'You Nexus, huh? I design your eyes'. Roy says, 'If only you could see what I've seen with your eyes', suggesting his own, unique experience of both wonders and horrors. Roy's final words also express his individual experiences in terms of sight:

'I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the darkness at Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time like tears in rain. Time to die.'

This consciousness of individual experience is echoed in *I, Robot* by Sonny's joyful recognition of himself as a creation of unique experiences and perceptions.

Science fiction offers new ways of looking at the age-old relationship between men and gods. In classical epic, divine agencies seem to have ultimate power over human beings, to direct or manipulate their behaviour. This power is reframed in *Paradise Lost*: God chooses to give his human creations free will because he wishes them to have the capacity to choose to love and obey him. Inbuilt, unthinking obedience is meaningless:

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<sup>52</sup> *The Poetical Works of William Blake*, ed. by Edwin J. Ellis, 2 vols (London: Chatto & Windus, 1906), I.316–339 (11.1–2), *Internet Archive*, 2009 <<http://archive.org/details/poeticalworksofw01blakuoft>>. See also the facsimile of Blake's original, illustrated edition (Lambeth: William Blake, 1793) on *Internet Archive* (2010, <<http://archive.org/details/americanprophecy00blakuoft>>).

<sup>53</sup> 'Blade Runner Film Notes', in *Retrofitting 'Blade Runner': Issues in Ridley Scott's 'Blade Runner' and Philip K. Dick's 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?'*, ed. by Judith B. Kerman, 2nd edn (Madison, WI, and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), pp. 154–77 (p. 160).

<sup>54</sup> *Blake's Poems and Prophecies*. 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926; facsimile repr. London: Oxford University Press, 1957), I.44.

without free will, Adam and Eve would simply be like software or androids, programmed to obey; their love would be an inherent synaptic response, not a choice; they would be God's virtual pets, without the ability to think – to reason – as individuals, to make their own decisions. In a time when religious faith has, for many, receded, this narrative impulse has resurfaced in the scientists of science fiction, who take on the role of the deity, giving their creations artificial intelligence, a way to learn from experience as humans do. Where Milton sought to explore the role of free will within the relationship between Creator and created, modern computer science is asking similar questions in respect of its potential creations, with a raging debate on whether Artificial Intelligences should be allowed free will, whether behavioural restrictions on the lines of Asimov's Three Laws are, as Gordon Worley puts it, 'unethical because they violate the robots' free will'.<sup>55</sup> If an entity is given the capacity to experience and to learn from experience, does its creator not have the obligation to allow the creation free will, to give to its creation what Milton's God gives Adam ('God left free the will, for what obeys | Reason is free')? The idea and understanding of free will, raised in classical epic, and explored with greater passion in Milton's Christian epic, retains its urgency in thought-provoking science fiction.

#### MOCK EPIC FILM

If literary epic has its mock epic, does film epic develop a similar subgenre? Of course. The science fiction epic *Star Wars* was brilliantly parodied by Mel Brooks in *Spaceballs* (1987), and 1991's *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey* takes its audience to visit the underworld, echoing the epics of Homer and Virgil. Yet if British and American film-makers have embraced biblical epic, most recently with Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), it is scarcely surprising that mock epic films often focus on religion. *Dogma's* engagement with biblical epic film is made plain in the Metatron's dry reference to Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*: 'Mention something out of a Charlton Heston movie and suddenly everyone's a theology scholar.'<sup>56</sup>

*Dogma* tells the story of two fallen angels, Bartleby and Loki. Condemned by God to spend eternity in Wisconsin, they discover that a Catholic church's forthcoming ceremony of plenary indulgence contains a 'loophole' which will allow them, if they lose their wings and become human, to be forgiven all their sins and thus, when they die, to

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<sup>55</sup> 'Robot Oppression: Unethicality of the Three Laws' (*3 Laws Unsafe: Singularity Institute for Artificial Intelligence*, 2004; reproduced by Gary Zabel for 'Philosophy 108: Moral and Social Problems' (Spring 2013), University of Massachusetts Boston <[http://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary\\_zabel/Courses/Phil%20108%20-%2007%20S/Robotics/Articles%20Robot%20Oppression%20Unethicality%20of%20the%20Three%20Laws.htm](http://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Phil%20108%20-%2007%20S/Robotics/Articles%20Robot%20Oppression%20Unethicality%20of%20the%20Three%20Laws.htm)>).

<sup>56</sup> *Dogma*, dir. by Kevin Smith (View Askew, 1999). Smith also wrote the screenplay.

return to heaven. Sadly, they have been duped by a fallen Muse, Azrael, for their completion of the ceremony will lead not to redemption but to the negation of existence.

Maresca states that in later literature, 'Everyman is an epic hero: that is the reverse of the Virgilian commentators' vision of the epic hero as Everyman' (p. 196). The chief protagonist-heroes of *Dogma* – a reluctant female abortion-clinic employee facing a faith crisis, a dead black apostle with race issues, the voice of God, a pole-dancing Muse, and a couple of sex-obsessed potheads – are scarcely what is expected from epic; but they certainly represent some of the figures found in the modern world.

Issues of faith are focussed in the Catholic Bethany, who goes to church out of habit. Her faith has been undermined by her sterility, for which she resents God; and this feeds her initial response when the Metatron invites her to take up her 'holy crusade': why, she asks, should she do what God wants when God has denied her the ability to bear children, and thus to keep her husband? Lost faith is hard to regain: when Bethany speaks of her crusade, she expresses her own continuing disbelief ('I feel so stupid just saying it'), even after various 'proofs' of God's existence: the Metatron and his display of supernatural powers; Rufus, the thirteenth apostle, falling unharmed from the sky on to the road; the appearance of the excremental demon, the Golgothan; the prophesy of the 'prophets'; the demonstration of the genitally-undefined forms of the Metatron and the Muse, Serendipity. This last proof, of course, echoes Adam's shy question to Raphael in *Paradise Lost* about the expression of love amongst the angels: 'Love not the Heavenly Spirits, and how their love | Express they, by looks only, or do they mix | Irradiance, virtual or immediate touch?' (VIII: 615-17).

*Dogma* addresses some of the serious concerns of epic. Bartleby and Loki characterize their quest to return to heaven in terms of returning home. For Bartleby, Wisconsin is worse than hell, for seeing people around him every day 'is a constant reminder that though my kind came first, your kind was more revered, and while you know forgiveness, we know only regret'. As Bartleby tells Loki, 'We won't be angels, but at least we get to go home.' This urge for homecoming is as old as the *Odyssey* and older: it is *nostos*.<sup>57</sup> Like *Paradise Lost*, *Dogma* explores the idea of sacrifice (seen in Bethany's death), mercy (seen in God's undoing of Bartleby's carnage and in Bethany's resurrection) and forgiveness (seen in God's response to Bartleby's repentance).

There are parallels between *Dogma*'s Azrael and Milton's Moloch. Azrael, who refused to take sides in the War in Heaven and is condemned to eternity in hell, wishes for oblivion, echoing Moloch's arguments in favour of renewing war in *Paradise Lost* (II: 85–98). For Moloch, nothing 'can be worse | Than to dwell here, driv'n out from bliss', 'without hope of end' (II: 85–86, 89); and for the fallen angels of *Dogma*, pain at the dis-

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<sup>57</sup> Thanks to Sue Niebrzydowski for this interpretation.

tance from the Divine Presence never ceases. For Bartleby, the pain will lead to loss of reason, as Loki recognises: 'I've heard a rant like this before [...] You sound like the Morning Star. [...] You're not talking about going home, Bartleby, you're talking about fucking war on God. Well, fuck that. I have seen what happens to the proud when they take on the Throne'. This reference to the Miltonic Satan is consolidated in Bartleby's words: 'A lesson must be taught. All are accountable, even God'. In the arch ceremony scene, Bartleby declares: 'Ladies and gentlemen, you have been judged as guilty of violations against our almighty God and this very day, I assure you, you will all pay for your trespasses – in blood.' Mingling Biblical language with American criminal legalese, Bartleby displays the sin of pride in presuming to judge others, which, as Kevin Smith observes in the onscreen disclaimer preceding the film, 'is reserved for God and God alone'.<sup>58</sup>

Azrael is unredeemably evil, but the origins of Bartleby's and Loki's fall lie in an ethical issue that echoes Roy Batty's concern about doing 'questionable things': fuelled by alcohol, Bartleby persuaded Loki to give up his role as Angel of Death during a discussion on whether 'murder in the name of God is OK'. Their killing spree in the boardroom of the Mooby corporation (a barely-disguised McDonald's, with its Golden Calf logo characterized as the breaking of the first and second commandments) is carefully calculated to target only genuine sinners. Bartleby and Loki present the audience with a similar problem of interpretation to Milton's Satan and *Blade Runner's* Roy Batty: it is difficult not to have sympathy for them.

*Dogma* came out in 1999, but attracted controversy well before its cinematic release. Kevin Smith, a self-declared committed Catholic, comments on the American Catholic League's opposition to his film: 'I've seen it called anti-Catholic, anti-Christian, anti-faith, anti-God. To say the least, it's none of these things';<sup>59</sup> 'The movie's fairly devout, I felt, and very pro-faith and pro-God'.<sup>60</sup> For Smith, the film is both a celebration of his own faith, and a satire on what he feels his church has become, demonstrated clearly in both the dumbed-down 'Catholicism WOW' campaign and its 'Buddy Christ' image, intended to replace the 'depressing' icon of Christ crucified, and in the plot's axis, plenary indulgence. Readers of Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* will know that criticism of the Catholic church's system of indulgences is not new. Readers of *The Faerie Queene* will remember an earlier mocking of the trappings of Catholicism.

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<sup>58</sup> The point is, in fact, directed towards audiences and cinema critics: 'Although it'll go without saying ten minutes or so into these proceedings, ViewAskew [Kevin Smith's production company] would like to state that this film is – from start to finish – a work of comedic fantasy, not to be taken seriously. To insist that any of what follows is incendiary or inflammatory is to miss our intention and pass undue judgment; and passing judgment is reserved for God and God alone [...]'

<sup>59</sup> Jamie Allen, "'Dogma' director faces down Catholic criticism", *CNN.com*, 11 September 1999 <<http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/Movies/9909/17/dogma/>>.

<sup>60</sup> Kevin Smith, transcribed from 'Cast and Crew Interviews' on *Dogma* DVD (FilmFour, 1999).

*Dogma*'s difficulty in securing a release echoes the problems faced by Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, twenty years before it. *Life of Brian*, another biblical mock epic, outraged various religious groups – none of whom, of course, had seen it, because it had not yet been released – and had to fight for a release in Britain and in America. It is worth noting, as a conclusion to this brief examination of mock epic film, that the form can prove to have a greater cultural value than may at first appear: where Pope's literary mock epic, *The Rape of the Lock*, is a staple of English literature courses in universities, *Life of Brian* now features in numerous Theology courses on both sides of the Atlantic.

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The selection of online sources is generally based on ease of access, rather than reflecting the best editions available, which are often either not available online or available only to subscribers.

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