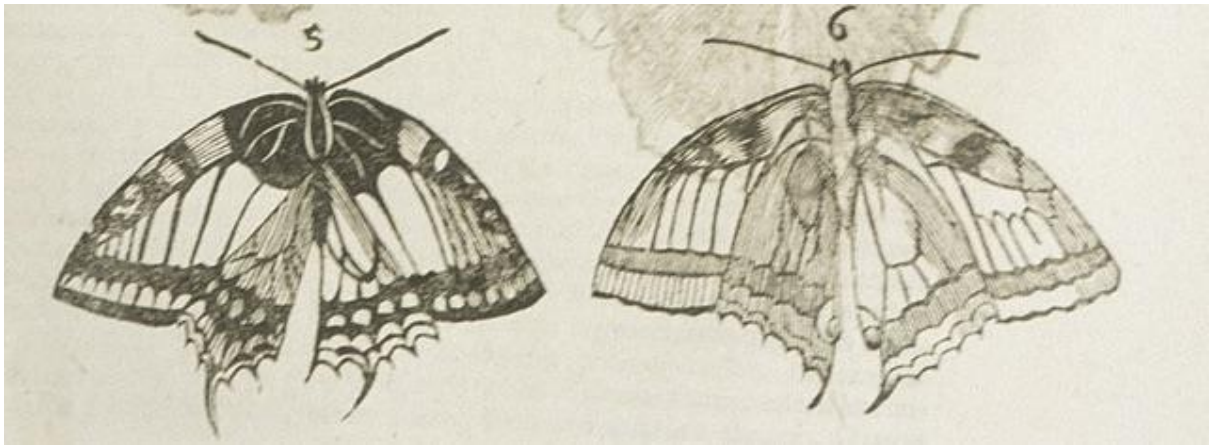

"Minor" Epic as "Bad" Poetry

By Jane Grogan (University College Dublin)

> Which when the greisly tyrant did espie,
> Like a grimme Lyon rushing with fierce might
> Out of his den, he seized greedilie
> On the resistles pray, and with fell spight,
> Vnder the left wing stroke his weapon slie
> Into his heart, that his deepe groning spright
> In bloodie streames foorth fled into the aire,
> His bodie left the spectacle of care.
>
> (*Muioptomos*, ll. 433-40)

This essay considers an important category that we as scholars and teachers have failed to write into the story of early modern English writing. Indeed, we have arguably lost sight of it entirely, partly through the directions our critical scholarship have taken, and partly through the fallacies engendered by the name by which we know it. From the outset, "minor epic" is styled as "bad," or secondary, or simply less worthy of scholarly time and attention. It has been edged out of consideration for some time now by the more straightforward, classical-sounding form "epyllion," although that was only one of the many kinds of minor epic written in the period.[1] (It seems also to be haunted by CS Lewis's frequent use of the term "minor" to consign certain texts and authors to "Drab" or even "Golden" obscurity, sometimes as a mitigation hardly worth the having, damning with faint praise; the term "minor epic" retains something of this dubious legacy.)[2] Yet it is a genre in which early modern writers in English were

[1] The 'tradition' of epyllion itself has been misconstructed thanks to its name and critical history, as Tania Demetriou and others have shown; see note 12 and the discussion below.

[2] For example, Lewis deems Nicholas Breton 'a minor Golden poet': 'after starting as a Drab poet, had strength to follow the lead that his betters gave him and become a minor Golden poet.' Even in his 'Drab' days, 'he was not one of the worst of his kind'! In this, Lewis

proficient, prolific and popular, not least because of its fundamentally hybrid, often experimental character.

What makes an epic "minor," then? Scale or quality? Subject or treatment? Language or style? Is it a matter of subsequent critical taxonomy (the terminology is surely a New Critical remainder) or—more interestingly—might it be possible to set out to write a "minor epic"? And if so, what kind of creature might an early modern writer thus seek to produce? These seem themselves minor questions, perhaps, but surely the very question of what (or why) a minor epic is or does matters to any understanding of what epic "proper" is about? Or, put another way, what makes an epic "major"? An absence - or preponderance—of the kinds of qualities that make another piece of heroical writing "minor"? One way or another, "minor epic" comes ready-charged with the qualitative judgement that it is "bad" or unimportant or lesser than its (epic) peers in some way. It is this underlying "badness" of its style, its ambitions (though not its models) that proves most troublesome about minor epic for readers today (though not for its first readers). Spenser's own minor epic is illustrative of the wider critical dubiety about the genre, as well as of a particular tendency in Spenser scholarship to over-value the élite and "high" intellectual qualities of his writing. Minor epic is, effectively, a mixed form, combining "high" models with "low" interests, "high" epic form and style with "low" heroic subjects and would-be heroes. Hybridity of style, commingling of "high" and "low," what Abigail Shinn calls his "cultural eclecticism" was a hallmark of Spenser's poetry from the beginning of his career (notably *The Shepheardes Calender*, 1579), and his use of popular forms (almanac, ballad, pageant, beast fables, and so on) is abundantly clear.[3] But the scholarly inclination (perhaps even professional necessity?) to uphold "sage and serious" Spenser means that these "low" and mixed elements of Spenserian style are habitually sidelined when it comes to defining approaches to his poetry, or situating them in literary history. In this piece, I want to explore Spenserian minor epic as a representative of both the general scholarly misconstruction of minor epic, as well as the particular case of scholarly discomfort with comic, popular, "low" or (especially) "mixed" Spenserian literary projects.

Considering "minor epic" necessitates engaging with, firstly, the scholarly tradition's ongoing wrangles with a certain kind of long narrative poem particularly

contrasts Breton with Thomas Churchyard, who 'continued to write Drab all through the age of Gold.' *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944), (p. 265).

[3] 'Searching for Spenser's Popular Voice,' *The Spenser Review* 48: 1 (2018).

popular in the 1590s among a certain cohort of aggressively upwardly-mobile young men-about-town, and secondly, the early modern theory and practice of these and other long narrative poems of the period. There is an additional problem of terminology given the qualitative styling of the critical term ("minor") as well as the scholarly tendency to conflate it with something termed "epyllion," usually Ovidian epyllion. The first part of this piece will review the critical history of the term and some of the more prominent definitions of it. The second part will offer some readings from *Muioptomos* and *The Faerie Queene* to show how an openness to their mixed style—to features of "minor epic" in *The Faerie Queene*, and to ("major"?) epic in *Muioptomos* (1591)—only enriches our sense of the exciting possibilities of heroical writing, mixed as well as "pure," for Spenser and his contemporaries. Consider, for example, the astonishing diverse nature of what an early modern theorist like William Scott understood to qualify as "heroical" writing in his *Modell of Poesy* (1599), almost none of which is "pure" epic, despite his promulgation of the usual theoretical definitions: not just Sidney's famously "mixed" *Arcadia* for example, but also Samuel Daniel's poetical history of the English civil wars, Thomas More's *Utopia* and perhaps most strikingly, William Warner's *Albion's England*, an "Historicall map" of Britain full of "historicall intermixtures, inuention and varieties;" indeed, "intermixture" nicely describes its presiding logic.[4] Given the self-critical nature of epic, as Susanne Wofford has so influentially shown, indeed the "constant movement of reassessment of epic in general and *The Faerie Queene* qua epic in particular," as Laetitia Sansonetti puts it, the experimental and critical nature of minor epic should be no surprise to Spenserians, at least. Minor epic demands to be accepted within a wider category of "heroic poetry," in spirit if not precisely form and detail of the admired Italian critical models of Cinthio and others.[5]

I.

The term "minor epic" became established in 1963 thanks to Elizabeth Story Donno's anthology of that year, *Elizabethan Minor Epics*.[6] Her anthology was a resolutely Ovidian one, including Thomas Lodge's *Scillaes Metamorphosis* (1588), George

[4] See *The Modell of Poesy*, ed. Gavin Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). I quote the title page of several of the editions of *Albion's England* (1586-1612).

[5] 'Effeminate epic in Elizabethan England: Spenser's *Faerie Queene,'* in *Genres/Genre dans la littérature anglaise et américaine II*, ed. Isabelle Alfandary, Charlotte Coffin and Vincent Broqua (Paris: Michel Houdiard Éditeur, 2015), p. 38-52. Sansonetti makes this point about Cinthio and 'heroic poetry' with regard to *The Faerie Queene*. Susanne Wofford, *The Choice of Achilles: The Ideology of Figure in the Epic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

[6] Story Donno (ed.), *Elizabethan Minor Epics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

Chapman's *Ovids Banquet of Sence* (1595), Thomas Edwards' *Cephalus and Procris* (1595), Thomas Heywood's *Oenone and Paris* (1594) and Francis Beaumont's *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus* (1602)—but not Spenser's *Muioptomos* (1591) nor Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece* (1594) or *Venus and Adonis* (1593), though the latter was discussed as an alternative kind of "erotic epyllion." Clark Hulse's 1976 essay, "Elizabethan Minor Epic: Towards a Definition of a Genre," clarified Story Donno's principles of selection (short narrative poems from the 1590s on classical—usually Ovidian—themes) and in his well-known monograph, *Metamorphic Verse: The Elizabethan Minor Epic* (1981), he travelled beyond the Ovidian to point out the contribution of English chronicle history, Petrarchism and satire, as well as various other literary and visual genres to this 1590s phase of "minor epic."[7] It is Hulse who intensifies the evaluative strain, offering a set of rankings, within which Shakespeare must, of course, shine.

For Hulse, Marlowe, Spenser, Shakespeare and Lodge's works formed a premier league, guiding lights for minor epic understood as a sort of telescoped epic tradition in miniature, deeply allusive and entangled, bound up with questions of authorship and authority and the evolving careers and authorial personae of its practitioners. His analysis expanded the term a little to include further contenders (such as Sir John Davies's *Orchestra*, 1596), concluding with a brief epilogue on John Milton's *Paradise Regained* (1671)—the latter the focus of Barbara Lewalski's influential *Milton's Brief Epic* (1966), of course.[8] William Weaver's 2012 monograph, *Untutored Lines: The Making of the English Epyllio*n follows suit, working from *Hero and Leander* by way of the two Shakespearean examples and *Orchestra* to *Paradise Regained*, though omitting Spenser.[9] Despite Hulse's argument that "the significance of such a literary genre cannot be overestimated," citing its articulation of the influence of "continental Renaissance culture" as well the uses of "minor epic" as a space of "poetic experimentation," especially for "apprentice" poets, the concept has lingered on, inertly and inconsequentially, at least as far as broader assessments of the Anglophone literary culture of the period is concerned. Its absent presence has led to the gradual replacement of the term "minor epic" with "epyllion" since Hulse.

[7] Hulse, 'Elizabethan Minor Epic: Towards a Definition of a Genre,' *Studies in Philology* 73: 3 (1976), pp. 302-319; *Metamorphic Verse: The Elizabethan Minor Epic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[8] Lewalski, *Milton's Brief Epic: The Genre, Meaning and Art of* Paradise Regained (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1966).

[9] Weaver, *Untutored Lines: The Making of the English Epyllion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

Studies of minor epic—or even epyllion—are rare, however, whether in journal articles or monographs, or in prominent literary surveys of the period, both student-facing anthologies such as the 2024 eleventh Norton anthology (which features only *Hero and Leander*), or critical surveys such as the 2018 Blackwell *Companion to Renaissance Poetry* (which devotes just one of four essays to epyllion in a subsection of Forms and Genres devoted to "Epic and Epyllion"). This Blackwell *Companion* survey is usefully instructive: in his essay on "The Epyllion," which he persuasively argues is a "queer genre" Jim Ellis offers some introductory comments about the state of the field.[10] Here, he signals that the debate about "minor epic" is now over, the term functioning now mostly as a less useful synonym for "epyllion," and Ovidian epyllion at that.

> [E]pyllion, or minor epic, flourished for a little more than a decade at the end of the sixteenth century. The first poem in the genre, Thomas Lodge's *Scillaes Metamorphosis*, was published in 1588, and the last major example, Francis Beaumont's *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*, appeared in 1602. The poems typically take a story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, often little more than 20 lines in the original, and spin it out into 900 lines of ostentatiously rhetorical verse.[11]

And thus we move on, minor epic demoted to one of its many kinds, albeit a rich, provocative, and influential one.

The problem of accessing minor epic through a critical back-history that may not have done it the favours it thinks it has turns up as a key concern of Daniel Moss's 2022 essay for the *Oxford History of Poetry in English*, leading Moss to a more descriptive, but still broadly similar definition of the genre.

> The Elizabethans had no special name for one of the most popular literary genres of the 1590s: highly digressive but strangely static narrative poems of middling length (500–1,500 lines), treating mythological subjects mostly taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, thick with rhetorical ornament drawn from grammar school exercises, erotic but short of pornographic, often satirical or even cynical in tone, dedicated to aristocratic patrons but intended for university-educated readers like the lawyers of the Inns of Court.[12]

Moss, however, is more reluctant to dispense with the term "minor epic" and goes so far as to create a table of an "expanded minor epic canon" beyond Donno's, working

[10] Jim Ellis, 'The Epyllion,' in *A Companion to Renaissance Poetry*, ed. Catherine Bates (Oxford: Blackwell, 2018), pp. 239-49 (p. 241).
[11] Ibid.
[12] Moss, 'Minor Epic,' in *The Oxford History of Poetry in English*, vol. 4, ed. Catherine Bates and Patrick Cheney (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 285-300 (p. 285).

from published scholarship since. But the table he produces only reproduces the older evaluative strain by listing a set of "Primary minor epics" (Lodge, Marlowe, Shakespeare) and various subservient categories of "Secondary minor epics," "Additional secondary minor epics" and even "Other poems occasionally discussed as minor epics."[13] (Spenser appears in the "Additional secondary minor epics" thanks to his omission from Story Donno's selection, unwittingly demoted further by Moss in a footnote describing it, perplexingly, as yet another category again: an "analogue to the epyllion.")[14] Despite his valiant interest in understanding the early modern realities as well as the critical afterlife of "minor epic," Moss effectively reinstates the evaluative approach to "minor epic": this is "bad poetry" that needs quasi-Ramist taxonomising to earn our attentions; first the (Ovidian) premier league and then the other divisions.

But Moss is right, I think, to seek something in minor epic beyond Ovidian epyllion. Tania Demetriou has done invaluable work to complicate our understandings of Elizabethan epyllion, specifically on the critical genealogy as well as the classical sources of what she terms the "non-Ovidian epyllion."[15] Like Moss, Demetriou tackles the terminology of what Moss called this "genre without a name," and traces the critical genealogy of the idea of epyllion all the way back to … 1958, in Paul W Miller's essay on epyllion, following classicist Marjorie Crump (*The Epyllion: From Theocritus to Ovid*, 1931).[16] Crump's analysis had no place for late Greek epics like those of Colluthus and Musaeus, or even mock epic, each of which were important sources for early modern writers of minor epic, she points out. Demetriou thus usefully adds Richard Barnfield's *Hellens Rape* (1594) and Thomas Watson's Latin *Amyntas* (1585; translated by Abraham Fraunce 1587, and much reprinted) to the mix, while showing the precarity of notions of "the poems as a distinct, new 1590s genre," primarily Ovidian in nature: "these works, first grouped together as 'Ovidian poems' and now often referred to as 'Ovidian epyllia,' have continued to be seen entirely as a chapter in the afterlife of Ovid," she contends, arguing that we have also over-emphasised "perceived affinities between these specific works" because of this critical history of analysing them as "epyllia."[17] If epyllion has stolen minor epic's thunder, studies of

[13] Ibid., 289.

[14] Ibid., 290.

[15] Demetriou, 'The Non-Ovidian Elizabethan epyllion: Thomas Watson, Christopher Marlowe, Richard Barnfield,' in *Interweaving Myths in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries*, ed. Janice Valls-Russell, Agnès Lafont and Charlotte Coffin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 41-64.

[16] Demetriou, pp. 47-9. Paul W. Miller, 'The Elizabethan Minor Epic,' *Studies in Philology* 55: 1 (1958): 31-8. M. Marjorie Crump, *The Epyllion: From Theocritus to Ovid* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1931). See also Walter Allen, 'The 'Non-Existent Classical Epyllion,' *Studies in Philology* 55: 3 (1958): 515-18.

[17] Demetriou, p. 48.

epyllion have also diverted attention from the historic range and stylistic flexibility of minor epic—and from its embrace of its own mock-lowly status; a poetry happy in its inferiority complex, open to other forms and norms, encompassing mock epic (a genre usually considered a creature of a later era) as well as "historical poesy," occasional poetry, complaint, and several other mixed forms of narrative.

Whether they have a name for it or not, the Elizabethans (just to stick with them) certainly appreciated the range and opportunities of heroical writing in shorter and hybrid forms, not just mixing but connecting the "high" and the "low." But as this brief and selective review of critical scholarship implies, the critical scholarship has tended to privilege certain kinds of minor epic (1590s Ovidian), and to neglect others (non-Ovidian, historical or occasional examples). Moreover, the efforts to define and pin down a wide-ranging and characteristically hybrid form have led to a problematic synecdoche whereby Ovidian epyllion is made to stand for a very diverse range of narrative poetry (and prose) with heroical framing. If there's a strengthening appreciation for the experimental nature of minor epic, the scholarly debate thus far tends to assign this kind of experiment to its status as juvenilia, or a rite of passage, or literary apprenticeship, or some other quality of youth moving towards adulthood, rather than treating it as quality of heroical writing—major and minor—in itself. What characteristics of epic might this critical history of treating minor epic as "bad" poetry obscure? If our generic expectations derive only from Ovidian exemplars, what questions have we not asked of a text like *Muioptomos*, or *Virgil's Gnat*, or indeed of King James's *Lepanto* or Anne Dowriche's *French Historie*? And what different kinds of company might it keep, in the eyes of its contemporary readers and writers? For example, Tom McFaul groups *Muioptomos* with what he terms "miniature mock-epics" by Davenant ("Jeffereidos") and Jonson (the furiously scatological "Famous Voyage").[18] There is certainly scope for much more comparative work on minor epic outside of the terms of epic alone, and perhaps also in relation to other mixed genres.

But there is also much to be learned by comparing *Muioptomos* to other Spenserian writing, as Richard Danson Brown does in a formidable chapter on the poetics of *Muioptomos* as a "radical beast fable," specifically within the *Complaints* volume.[19] (And it is true that some of the contents of that volume—notably *Virgil's*

[18] Tom McFaul, 'The Butterfly, the Fart and the Dwarf: the Origins of the English Laureate Micro-Epic,' *Connotations* 17: 2-3 (2007-8): 144-64.

[19] Brown, *The New Poete': Novelty and Tradition in Spenser's* Complaints (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999) (chapter 6, pp. 213-54).

Gnat—have effectively been treated as "minor," and have not received the critical attention they deserve, either in their own right or in dialogue with other poems within and beyond this volume, precisely as "minor" poetry.) Brown's useful insight that "parody, in *Muioptomos*, would seem to be an end in itself," and not simply "a literary joke or topical allegory," moves away from understanding the ambitions of *Muioptomos* solely in terms of epic—though there is also a small and rich tradition of Spenserian scholars using *Muioptomos* to cast light on episodes within *The Faerie Queene* (Rao and Ramachandran among them).[20] Victoria Coldham-Fussell and Rachel Hile have done fine work recently to "write Spenser back into the history of satire" (as Hile puts it in her 2017 book), and indeed to point out the rich moral and cognitive affordances of comic forms and styles within the very logic of Spenserian heroism in *The Faerie Queene*, for Coldham-Fussell.[21] Both approaches allow for a tactical reframing of heroism and the received values of heroic writing, and both make "mixed" status—of tone, form, register, genre and much more—central to Spenserian poetics in an exemplary way.[22]

For the remainder of this piece I will focus on epic simile, an easy motif for a would-be heroical poet to imitate or recast, whether "major" or "minor," "good" or "bad," but a useful site for identifying and exploring the less elevated or celebrated qualities of early modern heroical writing. *Muioptomos* boasts just two epic similes, one of which is the famous (and somewhat unfinished) closing simile, modelled on Aeneas's killing of Turnus, which I consider here.[23] The concluding incomplete epic simile (if we can call it that) is worth remarking (as numerous scholars have done), both stylistically and for the conceptual work it performs.[24] I want to note two stylistic features, both produced to some extent by the mixing of genres and registers. The first has to do with the sense of ironic distance that this epic simile creates, from the action and its articulation, even from its Virgilian epic original. *Unironic* distance is a basic requirement of epic simile, of course. But if a standard epic simile lifts us out of the immediate scene to one distant but usefully resonant, the mock-heroic epic simile

[20] As he writes, '[d]espite the beguiling presence of parody, we must be prepared to read beyond the burlesque veneer.' '*The New Poet,*' pp. 222, 220. See also Namratha Rao, 'Fearful Symmetry in Spenser's *Muioptomos*,' *Essays in Criticism* 69: 2 (2019): 136-56, and Ayesha Ramachandran, 'Clarion in the Bower of Bliss: Poetry and Politics in Spenser's *Muioptomos*,' *Spenser Studies* 20 (2005): 77-106.

[21] Coldham-Fussell, *Comic Spenser: Faith, Folly and* The Faerie Queene (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022); Hile, *Spenserian Satire: A Tradition of Indirection* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

[22] See also the work of Abigail Shinn.

[23] The second is 'Like as a wily Foxe, that hauing spide, / Where on a sunnie banke the Lambes doo play … So to his worke Aragnoll him prepares' (ll. 401-8).

[24] Most recently, perhaps, it offers '[a]n emblem of the vexed alliance between art and labor,' for Colleen Rosenfeld. *Indecorous Thinking: Figures of Speech in Early Modern Poetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), pp. 1-20 (p. 2).

either amplifies the distance and its relevance, or crudely closes the distance between the two scenes or images, making it impossible not to imagine them together, scarecrow-ish. Here, for example, Spenser manages both, closing the distance for comic incongruity (the spider "rush[es]" lion-like out of his webbed "den," while the distance between spider and lion is so great that it is difficult to hold together in any but the most comic ways. (I can't help but think of those Halloween spider-costumes fitted onto small dogs, turning them into convincing XL arachnids!) Spenser's minor epic at this moment looks more like mock-epic, and yet is something else still. Certainly, it shows how close heroic elevation is to comical diminution: distancing strategies of scale or disjunction not always in control of their effects.

Secondly, Spenser employs a technique familiar from *The Faerie Queene*, and typical of its self-critical movement: a strategically confusing use of pronouns at a key moment, where the subject of the pronoun is unclear, the import of a key scene thus made unexpectedly comic or even outlandish, even as it delivers its significant narrative. Without the Virgilian original as a guide, the pronouns are surprising; but even with it, new surprises are revealed. Yes, we can now make sense of the action of this moment, as well as its emotional drama, the dynamics of the avenger avenged, a bloodied corpse as evidence. But rather than conclude with the vanquished Turnus's spirit, an image that justifies and displaces Aeneas's paralysis and uncertainty about his action (a paralysis only overcome by the easy route to anger offered by the revenge motive, upon seeing Turnus wear Pallas's belt), *Muioptomos*'s conclusion complicates matters, complicates even the attribution of predator and victim, hero and enemy. (Richard Danson Brown is surely right to find the tone of this ending "elusive," its work not simply "parodic.")[25]

In fact, with the additional licence of minor epic, Spenser adds a line to the conclusion of his Virgilian original here, leaving us not with the victim's spirit flying through the air (Phaer and Twyne: "His ghost flies fast with greife, and great disdayne, to Lymbo lake"; or Dryden: "The streaming blood distain'd his arms around, / And the disdainful soul came rushing thro' the wound") but with the grisly remains of the bee, or indeed the bloody spider (in/transitive "left"?): "His bodie left the spectacle of care."[26] The image—or emblem?—thus approaches more closely the ending of Tasso's

[25] *'The New Poet,'* p. 224.

[26] Richard Danson Brown has identified an allusion to Thomas Lodge's *Scillaes Metamorphosis* (London: Richard Jones, 1589) here, in his forthcoming editorial work on the *Complaints* volume for Manchester University Press. I'm very grateful to him for sharing this with me. Interestingly, the allusion evokes a scene in which Glaucus's mother, Thetis, chides him for his 'foolish louing,' only to have her son throw himself on the ground as if dead: 'And were not teares which from his eyes did flowe, / And sighes that witnesse he enioyd his breath, /

Gerusalemme liberata, with the victorious and blood-smeared Godfrey, down on his knees praying, himself left as a bloody spectacle of anxious earthly care. This is surely not "bad" poetry, in any literary sense? In recasting the *Aeneid*'s gripping closing image, the minor epic version acquits itself admirably in its intertextual reach, its allusiveness, its jolt of immediacy through disjunction, its sense of distance sweeping the simile along into a grander register than those of its entomological materials. But this supplemented supplement to Virgilian epic—the conspicuous artifice of the additional line-does bring a different kind of poetic thinking into play: counterfactual (counterfictional?), reopening rather than closing the epic parallel and its empire-grounding action. It is by no means an inferior version of epic style, in literary terms, but a more satirical, less enthralled inflection of it.

Compare the famously odd but not untypical simile in the Faunus episode of the Mutabilitie Cantos, where Diana and her "maydens all" drag the offending Faunus out into the open:

> Like as an huswife, that with busie care
> Thinks of her Dairie to make wondrous gaine,
> Finding where-as some wicked beast vnware
> That breakes into her Dayr'house, there doth draine
> Her creaming pannes, and frustrate all her paine;
> Hath in some snare or gin set close behind,
> Entrapped him, and caught into her traine,
> Then thinkes what punishment were best assign'd,
> And thousand deathes deuiseth in her vengefull mind.
>
> (VII.vi.48)

Here, the (admittedly Homeric) effect of incongruity lies partly with the nature of the comparison—the domestic and quotidian subject of the simile, down to the very pots and pans—and partly in the excessive action contemplated in her "vengefull mind" against "[s]ome wicked beast vnware." A great Spenserian term, "vnware," this one, unusually, does not extend two ways: like Faunus, the beast in the dairy is deliberate in this intrusion, and will be punished for it by the female whose privacy he transgresses. But the "busie care" that set up the dairy with such punctiliousness is the same busy care that now devises "thousand deathes," with no less skill and dedication; worlds don't so much collide as coalesce, are shown to be already indistinguishable. It is the kind of moment in which Spenser's mixed style, and its possibilities as a tool for

They might haue thought him Citizen of death. / Which spectacle of care made Thetis bow, / And call on Glaucus, and command her Sonne / To yéelde her right:' (sig. [B4]v. While the allusion strengthens the association of the term with the vanquished Clarion, it also acknowledges the ongoing affect of the prostrate body, its ability to include Aragnoll in its scope, perhaps.

thinking *with*, become very clear. Far from intensifying or enriching the significance of the moment of Diana's anger, or enforcing the kind of unironic distance upon which the heroic values of the epic simile depends, the "huswife" simile (apparently) diminishes both the occasion of Diana's anger and her response to it. And it reveals the outlandish, self-serving logic of transgression and punishment in the disordered world of mutability. The huswife's dairy—like Diana's fantastical Irish paradise, all traces of indigenous human life wilfully obscured—is a vain construction, a foolish artifice, a self-serving origin story, a spectacle of care.

And yet, structurally, both of these epic similes operate with the full formal power of epic: the telescoping of action, the infusion of affective force, the intertextual quality which has the vengeful "huswife" momentarily occupy the same terrain as the distraught Diana, Aragnoll the triumphant stance of Aeneas. Epic is nothing if not a remembrancer, and minor epic works just as hard at those intertextual memories; far from confirming them, however, it reopens them to less deferential interrogation.

Some time ago now, A.D. Nuttall pointed out what he termed the "mock-Gothic" nature of Spenserian epic, an aesthetic that marks out its difference from what it imitates—that is, the chivalric idiom of heroism, in the case of *The Faerie Queene*.[27] The semantic play of style, specifically of Spenser's characteristically mixed style (prospective as well as retrospective), is still a blind spot of Spenser criticism, even with the best efforts of the New Formalism. What might we learn if we attend to the mock-epic nature of Spenserian epic, of early modern minor epic in its many forms (Ovidian and otherwise)? And what drew Spenser and so many of his contemporaries to minor epic, or at the least, to mixed modes of heroical writing? The critical history of minor epic, and its terminology have overshadowed the extent to which early modern efforts at heroical writing embraced hybridity, promulgated the self-consciously "minor," the satirical, the slight, the outlandish, the salacious—or even, as occasion demanded, the historical, the perfectly serious. An exemplar of "bad" or impure poetry, minor epic has been relegated to the margins of scholarship, misunderstood and minimized thanks to its tastes for hybridity and experiment, but speaks no less strongly to and of the concerns of its moment than epic. And attending to the qualities of minor epic makes us better readers of *The Faerie Queene*, and indeed of Spenser's entire corpus. Minor epic also warrants re-reading in relation to a

[27] 'Spenser and Elizabethan Alienation,' *Essays in Criticism* 55 (2005): 209-25.

multitude of other mixed genres, whether in prose or poetry: heroical epistles, satire, pastoral, the mock-classical, "historical poesy," the many forms of romance, *romanze* and *novelle*, to name just a few. And, of course, it demands to be read in relation to epic, not as an inferior version of it but as something that openly and experimentally combines epic with other kinds of texts and concepts and thinking from a less elevated register or rank. If this is "bad" writing, it is not inferior in quality for its low subjects or mixed style, and it is not flawed in emulating or remodelling something scholars deem to be "higher" than it. And it is certainly not secondary to the main business of early modern English writing, though we have not always recognized it as such. If early modern writers already knew the pleasures and affordances of mixed style, of hybrid genres, of formal experiment, of speaking in comic or empoweringly non-serious voices, these are delights that still remain to be discovered and debated by readers today.