

A Tale of Two Papers
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Two Heads are Better Than One
or
It Could Be Verse

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Epic poetry is defined by Webster as a long narrative poem in elevated style recounting the deeds of a legendary or historical hero. An epic should never be confused with an episode, an epigram, or even an epigram, which is a concise poem dealing pointedly and often satirically with a single thought or event and often ending with an ingenious turn of thought. There will be none of that tonight! To understand this often neglected art form we must look at its greatest practitioners and provide you information for your own future study.

The earliest epics to influence English language epic poets are those ascribed to Homer (sixth or fifth century BCE), *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. *The Iliad* deals with the story of the Trojan War and *The Odyssey* with the journeys of Ulysses after the Trojan War. Many of what have come to be conventional characteristics of the epic stem from these poems. Of major importance in firmly establishing these characteristics for English poets is Vergil, the Latin poet who lived just before the Christian era. His epic is *The Aeneid*, the story of Aeneas, who fled from fallen Troy and after journeys and adventures, settled in Italy where his immediate descendants founded Rome. Though relatively few poets in English have attempted to write epics, the few epics or fragments of epics that have been produced make important a knowledge of the characteristics of the form. John Milton's 17th century *Paradise Lost* may be the most well known example.

What, then, are the normal characteristics of the epic? First, the story itself deals with an event of significance for a nation, or, indeed, for all mankind. In *Paradise Lost*, the fall of man is central to the poem. The story must be a single story, structurally unified; there may be any number of digressions, but these must be related to the story whose main forward movement remains dominant in the poem. In addition, the story frequently includes a visit to the world of the dead. The source of the story is usually a combination of history-at a time far removed from the poet and myth. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton writes of events that occurred before the Creation and shortly thereafter. Indeed, the main outlines of the stories of most epics are well known to the audiences for which they are composed; the poet's overall contribution is the artistry with which he retells known material and the interpretations he makes of it. His method of retelling the material usually involves a large number of dramatic scenes--scenes in which dialogue appropriate to characters of heroic proportions is used. Memorable in *Paradise Lost*, for example, is the initial conversation between Satan and Beelzebub when they regain consciousness after having been hurled from Heaven to the burning lake in the depths of Hell.

The epic traditionally begins with the announcement of the theme or subject matter either combined with or followed by an invocation to a heavenly power. In *Paradise Lost* the poem opens with Satan and the other fallen angels chained on the burning lake in Hell. After regaining consciousness, they arrange a great consult to determine how to proceed in their present plight, how to thwart the plans of God.

Another major characteristic of the epic is that the poem begins with the story "in the middle of things" (we will not have that problem tonight). Our saga is

continually moving forward toward its inexorable and unexplainable conclusion.

Milton opens *Paradise Lost* with an invocation to the heavenly muse to sing:

“Of man's first disobedience and the fruit/ Of that forbidden tree”.

The language of the epic is dignified and frequently exalted, as might be expected from the nature of the content. Characters are addressed in the most formal of terms, and rhetorical devices abound in the long speeches. Use of epic or expanded similes is another characteristic, as is the presence of one or more lists or catalogues of various heroes involved in the action, their backgrounds and their glorious deeds of the past.

From even this brief listing of major characteristics of the epic, it is easily understandable why so few poets in English have successfully used the form. It demands tremendous breadth of conception--of plot, characterization, and setting--and the highest kind of creative ability in the handling of all the elements of poetry. To sustain interest and the kind of excitement that the best poetry evokes through a work of impressive length is, indeed, the task of a major poet.

Gentlemen of the Atheneum Society. This is a tag-team paper, a paper connubially linked in theme as well as thesis. Marvin has been talking about the epic poem. Yes, you are all about to drop off, but it is very important that you understand the concept of the epic. Why? You shall soon know and quake in your very hearts.

Poetry, as we all realize, is a subjective art form at best. We've all heard the poet's conference on HCC TV (as we were flipping the channels between World Championship Wrestling and *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*) And many of us have thought, "Although I shall always pretend to like poetry for the sake of my wife and children, this stuff is making my teeth hurt."

The spangled bird of despair descends roughly
upon her furrowed countenance --
Well past her autumn, the dew has dried;
And home has come the wayward cow.

What does it mean? Who knows? Who cares? If it's one thing I hate, it's a poem where the poet refuses to tell you what he's talking about. When I was taking an English class in college, we spent weeks trying to get a handle on an extremely dense poem by T.S. Eliot called *The Waste Land*, only to conclude, after weeks of classroom discussion, that the poem was about expressing angst. Well, duh. I felt like calling Eliot up and saying, "Listen TS, the next time you want to express angst, just express it, ok? Just say 'Yo, I'm feeling some angst over here.'" It would save the rest of us a lot of trouble.

And now I speak the words that strike fear into every heart of an Atheneum gentleman. As my part of this joint presentation, I have written.... a poem.

This poem originally began as an art project which my son Christopher had begun, and, as many poems tend to do, ran amok. The illustrations are by Chris and represent about a third of the final project. So, with that in mind, I give you...

Giovanni Potatoe And The Pizzas of Love--
a morality tale

Prelude

Giovanni Potatoe (that's spelled with an "e")
Ran a small cooking school over top of his diner;
In the too-smallish kingdom - just south of Dhee
Known to all of the citizens there as Dhee Minor.

Giovanni was known far and wide for his art
His school was quite full of the finest apprentices
He taught them to mince and to serve a-la carte
At the parties of lawyers and doctors and dentistes.

He showed them the best of all Dhee Minor dishes
Like "Par-boiled Echidna" and "Dan Quail with Kraut",
"Bats on the Bonnet" and "Squid Aloisius"
"Honey-dipped Trotters", and "Barbequed Snout."
"Limpet Linguini", and "Chicken-Fried Hound"
And "Broasted Whole Hedgehog", and "Ripe Shank of Dove,"
But he knew that the day that his fortunes turned 'round
Was the day he discovered "The Pizzas of Love."

The subjects of the epic and tragedy should be purely human, important, and pathetic: The characters stand best at a certain level of culture, where self-activity is still left to its own resources, where one operates not morally, politically, or mechanically, but rather personally. The myths from the heroic time of the Greeks were, in this sense, particularly favorable to the poet.

The epic poem presents man working outside himself: battles, journeys, every sort of undertaking, which requires certain sensual breadth. 4

There are five kinds of themes:

- 1) Progressive ones, which advance the plot; drama especially makes use of these.
- 2) Regressive ones, which remove the plot from its goal; of these the epic poem almost exclusively makes use.

- 3) Impeding ones, which delay action or prolong the process; epics make use of this to the greatest advantage.
- 4) Reflexive ones, through which what has happened before the epoch of the poem, will be drawn upon.
- 5) Anticipative ones, which anticipate what will happen after the epoch of the poem; both kinds are needed by the epic poet, in order to make his poem complete.

The worlds, which should be brought to view are:

- 1) The physical is indeed the nearest to which the characters represented belong, and which surrounds them. The epic poet moves often on a global scale (although, alas, our current protagonist seems rooted in one kingdom) secondly, the more remote world, which is the whole of nature. The epic poet, who generally employs the imagination, brings this world nearer through images.
- 2) The moral is represented most happily in its physiological and pathological simplicity.
- 3) The world of appearances, accidents, and fates. This is allowed if only it is understood that it would be brought in proximity to the sensual; whereby a special difficulty arises for the modern poets, because we do not easily find a replacement for the wonderful creatures, gods, fortune-tellers, and oracles of old, as much as it were desired. But, now back to our story.

Part The First – In which the King woos the princess.

"Giovanni," said the king after quite a fine meal,
 "I'm monarch of all I survey and I feel
 That it's time I should marry, I know just the one
 It's the daughter of wretched old Rozzelbatum,
 The King of Dhee Major, and said he with glee.
 "Then I inherit the kingdom of Dhee."

Giovanni just nodded, it wasn't his station
 To tell the King just what he thought of his plan.
 So he was contented to serve his creation
 Dessert of plumped frogs topped with hot curdled flan.

The King clapped his hands and announced "I propose
 To wed a fine princess and thus guarantee
 that my Kingdom shall flourish. The girl that I've chose
 Is the daughter of Rozzelbatum, King of Dhee!
 It's true she's not pretty, it's true she's not young,
 Her eyes tend to cross and her nose is quite wide,
 Her hair-do is awful, she's very high-strung,

But she is a princess, and wealthy beside."

He called his Court Poet, the oily Merlot,
And he called his Court Gifter, a merchant named Poe,
"Get cracking!" he cried, "I want sonnets and rhymes,
And gifts of the almost-extravagant kinds."
I want love-songs and idylls and odes and laments,
And all the gifts marked down to fifty percent."

And so with a flurry of stanzas and lyrics
The oily old poet began with a will
While the copiers, artists, and registered clerics
Put to parchment whatever came out of his quill.
Merlot wrote of love (on behalf of the King)
He wrote of desires, deepest feelings, and then
After four-hundred pages of counterfeit longing
He crossed his last "t" and he put down his pen.

Meanwhile, Poe the Gifter called 'round to his minions
And had them to look, and to be quite precise,
In the back of his storerooms, then got their opinions
On what he could sell to the King at half-price.
They found some old cartons of door-knob extenders
They dusted them off, and then gave them a shine
And hidden down under some pretzel-unbenders
Was a brass cuspidor and an old valentine.
They found a nose-whistle, a set of old skates,
A mouse-scented candle, and one velvet glove,
Then putting them neatly in several large crates,
They printed outside "To the Princess, with love."

Then off with a flourish, the letters and prizes
Were sent straight away to the Kingdom of Dhee,
Where the princess invented, in various guises
Her far-away suitor, to quite a degree.
His strength was enormous, quoth she, and so vast,
He could carry a pig under each mighty arm.
His looks and good nature could not be surpassed
His edicts showed kindness, his manners showed charm.

These letters are poignant, the poetry – sublime,
The odes and the sonnets were quite without peer
The door-knob extenders, the old valentine,
Told her heart that this King was her brave cavalier.
The brass cuspidor she proclaimed an antique.
She donned the left glove and then, thusly arrayed,
With the nose-whistle planted inside of her beak,
Lit the mouse-scented candle and called for her maid.

"Pack all my belongings," she cried with a tweet.
(For the whistle was stuck and it would not come free)
"And prepare for a trip to Dhee Minor to meet
This King who has loved me to such a degree."

So the princess, her maid, and a small retinue
Left the castle in hopes of a love-rendezvous
With a monarch and suitor she'd never before
Considered an option in matters d'amour.
She followed the maps and they hardly got lost.
Only once, when her eyes got a little bit crossed.

The supernatural, too, usually plays a large part in the epic. In Homer, the gods and goddesses take an active part in working out the destinies of the characters. In Beowulf, the hero has the power of thirty men in his handgrip and fights a major battle with a monster in an underwater cave. Battles-of major proportions -are also characteristic of the epic: the Trojan War is the setting of the Iliad, Beowulf risks his life in two battles with monsters and loses his life in a third battle with a dragon, and Satan and his cohorts in Paradise Lost are defeated in a tremendous battle against the forces of God.

Part the Second - In which Giovanni Potatoe discovers the Pizzas of Love.

"The princess, she's here!" yelled the King in alarms.
"I haven't had time to procure a toupee!
I'd planned on some implants - my chest and my arms
And to start running twenty-five miles every day!
I need to be taller," he cried. "Get my boots.
The ones trimmed in silver with seven-inch heels.
And get my whale-girdle, and one of my suits
That makes me look thin as a couple of eels."

He called Giovanni Potatoe at once,
And eyeballed him sternly, then made him agree;
That he would be cooking an enchanted lunch,
So special it would be a bride-guarantee.
"Make it with tonics, concoctions and potions.
This princess is haughty, yet her I will wed.
So make her fall madly in love with the notion.
And make it taste good, or I'll cut off your head!"

Giovanni Potatoe ran down to his books.
He searched high and low for a new recipe
That was filled with some magic he thought he could cook
And save his poor pate from a lopping-decree.
But look as he might, there were none to be had.

His cookbooks were not of the magical sorts;
So he rushed off to visit old Heimlich the Mad,
A wizard with dubious morals and warts.

"I need a concoction," he screamed in alarm,
As he burst into Heimlich's decrepit abode;
"A potion of love or a magical charm
That will make a princess fall in love with a toad.
It has to work fast, and it has to work well.
There's no room for error or incorrect facts.
I have to make lunch and without such a spell
My head and my neck have a date with an ax."

Old Heimlich the Mad gave a smarmilous smile
"I have just the thing you've been pondering of."
And he gave Giovanni a recipe file
That fell open at once to "The Pizzas of Love."
When he saw the inscription, Giovanni turned pale
But the final results seemed to be quite ideal.
So he paid the mad wizard in weasels and ale
And set off for his kitchen to make the King's meal.

He sent all his students away at a run;
And he made all the dough but before it was done
The magical bit he would need to conceal
Just under the sauce, so the princess would feel
True love for whoever would serve her a slice
Of the pure heart of music, and make it taste nice.

A thin pepperoni, the chef of the court,
Thought would go very nicely with toadstools and bread,
And made from the heart of a musical sort,
Someone we won't miss till the princess is wed.
For the recipe purchased from Heimlich the Mad
Although it was potent, had never been made.
The magical portion was shockingly bad;
The hearts of musicians, sliced, diced and sautoed.

Giovanni Potatoe (that's spelled with a "e")
Took his knife and his mallet and then straight away,
He headed downtown to the Chapel of Dhee
Where the choir was rehearsing for St. Beadle's Day
They sang Beadle's hymn and the Beadle's last verse,
The Great Beadle introit along with his prayer;
And after the choir had their chance to rehearse,
They left, leaving only the organist there.

This crusty musician had quite an affection

For Kyries, Glorias, Sancti and Credos;
He had a whole room for his music collection
All written by dead German men in tuxedos.
"I'll do them some good," thought the cook with a smile;
"It's time for some newer, more relevant things;
This organist's been here a good little while;
And besides, I'm involved in the wishes of Kings."

Giovanni Potatoe snuck round to the back
He crawled up behind on his hands and his knees.
He took out his mallet and then with a whack
The organist dropped on the black and white keys.
Giovanni Potatoe had smacked him quite hard;
He lifted the body and with a clean swipe
He cut out the heart, and with little regard,
Stuffed the organist into a large organ pipe.

Giovanni was smug as he took home his prize.
"That tired old man was a musical prune;
So dried up and shriveled, his knees to his eyes,
That he won't smell a bit till the fifteenth of June.
But I think that his heart will do well in a pinch.
He's the finest musician that I ever knew.
I'll slice it and dice it, it's surely a cinch
That the Pizzas of Love are too good to be true."

One of the most enduring of the western European epics is the 11th or early 12th century Chanson de Roland. It is one of a group of songs celebrating the reign of Charlemagne (742-814). Briefly: After Charlemagne has conquered virtually all of Spain, the King of Saragossa makes a deceptive peace treaty and then attacks the rear guard, commanded by Roland, as it is returning northward through the Pyrenees. Roland need merely sound his horn to summon reinforcements, but neglects to do so--not to be seen as cowardly! The practical problem is his 20,000 men are being assaulted by around 100,000 Saracens. Despite great and noble efforts, all the French are killed outright or mortally wounded--only a last trumpet call from Roland summons Charlemagne's main forces--too late to save the rear guard but in time to scare off the enemy. The poem has virtually all the chivalric ideals of heroism: honor, feudal loyalty, love of homeland, devotion to God, fearlessness--but not great intelligence. Losing an entire army unnecessarily may promote good poetry--but not probably admiration from the officers. However, this concept of noble sacrifice will now serve us well.

Part the Third - In which the choir is eaten

Giovanni Potatoe was on pins and needles,
His meal was well planned and the menu concise.
The King and the Princess returned from St. Beadle's
Where they had just heard quite a sermon on vice.

They entered the hall, arm in arm, as she tittered,
"My journey was long, I'd could use a short rest."
But the whole entourage, all agog and atwitter,
Sat down to the banquet and she was the guest.

The King knew the spell and he favored the plan,
The Pizza Of Love would be served right away.
It had to offered from only his hand,
For the Princess to proffer her passion away.
Giovanni approached with the magical dish
Beneath a glass cover, and caught the King's eye,
Then he whisked off the lid and he muttered a wish,
As the King took a slice from the heart of the pie.

He leaned 'cross his chair and he tickled her nose,
The Princess, not knowing the practice supposed
That this was a custom and so with chagrin
She opened her mouth, and he popped the slice in.
Her eyes became wide as she struggled to swallow,
For the King, who was runty, now looked like Apollo.

"By Jingles, it works!" cried the King with great glee.
While the guests and the courtiers looked on in surprise.
"I think that she loves me, just ask her and see."
But the princess just tweeted and rolled her crossed eyes.
She stared at the King like a schoolgirl and stammered,
"I thought you were short and repulsive - ill-bred.
But now that I see your true self, I'm enamored,
And bow to your wish that we soon shall be wed."

"How long will it last?" asked the jubilant ruler
Of his chef who was watching with wonder and awe.
"I really can't say, but I'd send for the Jeweler,
And get her a ring 'fore her heart starts to thaw."
"These things you can't rush," said the King with delight.
So make some more pizzas, at least one a day.
Till the date of the wedding; I'm thinking it might,
Take a month, more or less, so we'll need a buffet.

Giovanni was silent and worried and troubled,
He scratched at his head and he tugged at his vest.
But the King soon informed him his salary doubled
And awarded him gold in a great wooden chest.
Then he gave him a staff and a fine crew of waiters;
The latest in cookware, the finest allowed;
A new cooking school, with resources to cater
To all of Dhee Minor's most affluent crowd.

He needn't do parties unless he was able,
His staff would take care of the day to day needs.
His one single job was to bring to the table
The Pizzas of Love, so their plan would succeed.

Giovanni thought hard. Could he find more musicians?
He puzzled and queried and grew more perplexed;
Then suddenly came an inspired recognition;
With the organist gone, why, the choir should be next!
And so, every night, Giovanni went out
To their choir room rehearsals, again and again,
Where they practiced for hours and bandied about
Why the rest of the choir seemed to vanish, and when.

He skulked in the shadows and hunted them down.
One by one, they cemented his fiendish renown.
Until Giovanni was cherished at court,
And known far and wide as a marvelous sort;
Yet just as his status had reached its acclaim,
He ran out of choir — and that was a shame.

We come, finally, to the type of poetry known as the mock-epic. As the name implies, the mock-epic is written in imitation of the epic, usually for humorous or satirical purposes-or for both; it adopts the epic manner, form, and conventions to deal with subject matter normally unsuited to epic treatment. The result is apt to be amusing or even farcical and in the hands of a skillful poet, the mock-epic has proved to be not only amusing but powerful as a vehicle for social criticism. One of the most notable examples of the form is Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, a poem recounting in the epic manner the story of young Lord Petre's snipping a lock of hair from Miss Arabella Fermor's pretty head. It opens with an announcement of subject, uses the machinery of supernatural elves, has a major battle in the form of a card game, describes the robing of, and application of makeup to, a fair young lady in terms of the epic arming of a "knight," uses epic address and epic similes, and includes satirical criticism of the manners and morals of the day. In a letter to Mrs. Fermor, Pope explained (and I quote)

“it was intended only to divert a few young ladies, who have good sense and hood humour enough to laugh not only at their sex's little unguarded follies, but at their own...If this poem had as many Graces as there are in your person, or in your mind, yet I could never hope it should pass through the world half so uncensured as you have doe. But let its fortune be what it will, mine is happy enough, to have given me this occasion of assuring you that I am, with the truest esteem, Madam, your most obedient, Humble Servant, A Poe”

Part the Fourth – In which music is put to rest

"No more pizzas?!" the King cried in total alarm,
"There's weeks till the wedding, we mustn't let loose.
I can't just rely on my wit and my charm;
It's more pizzas I need and I'll take no excuse."
So mark my words well," the King suddenly hissed,
"You'll bring me the goods and you'll serve them up right.
Because if you don't and this plan goes amiss,
It's your heart for dinner on this very night.

"But my Lord!" cried Giovanni, "There are no more singers
The people will notice, they'll want to know why.
I suppose I could start with the chapel bell ringers,
But there aren't very many. Besides, they'd taste dry."

The King sat and thought on his cook's current grievance;
But the more that he pondered, the madder he got.
Could his royal musicians who owed him allegiance,
Thwart his kingly desires? "No," he thought, "They could not!"
And as his brain worked through the problem at hand
He thought of an answer, for all would agree
It was music itself that should really be banned
Since it stood in the way of his merger with Dhee.

He smiled as he thought of the upcoming days
When the concerts that so taxed his royal behind
By sitting through endless motets and boureOs.
Would come to an end, and he thought it just fine.
No more rondos, toccatas, or oboe sonatas,
No fantasies, fugues, or motets to endure
No preludes, recitals, or day-long cantatas,
The solution was final; the remedy, sure.

He called for his lawyer and then with some zeal
He signed the big parchment and fixed with a seal
The law that made music a capital crime;
And happily told Giovanni, "It's time."
"But let's not make it public just yet, I should think,
We still need musicians," he said with a wink.

Giovanni Potatoe set out with a will,
He found string quartets and accordion bands,
And brass players, pianists, all to fulfill,
His quota of pizzas for Kingly demands.
He harvested woodwinds like hay in the field
And bagpipers, drummers and harpers untold,
Then he visited pubs and he kept his eyes peeled
For guitar playing minstrels just in from the cold.

And finally, as per the royal request;
The music was gone, it was all put to rest.

In the 20th century the form has virtually disappeared. (AND WITH GOOD REASON--as you are no doubt seeing tonight!!) One American tried with some success. Frank Stanford's *The Battlefield Where the Moon Says I Love You* is a 542 page, twenty thousand line single sentence--totally devoid of punctuation. It includes various activities involving self-abuse and the destruction of a drive-in theater with a bulldozer leaving the projection flickering in the trees beyond where the screen used to be. Much of his work has been long out of print--but, if you were on certain campuses in the early 1970s you may just have one of his volumes of poetry or prose in a box in the attic. Unlike some of our later notables from Arkansas, Stanford died young--albeit at his own hand (three 22 caliber shots in the heart).

Part the Fifth - What happened next

The wedding took place on the fifteenth of June
In St. Beadle's Chapel, eight-thirty at night.
The guests seem to notice a lilting perfume
Which arose from the organ, third pipe from the right.
The princess looked tired, and felt quite alone.
Queasy and ill, from her head to her toes;
And the only small hint of a musical tone,
Was a faint, indiscernible tweet from her nose.

The reception turned into a solemn affair,
With no court musicians, the party was small.
The food was quite tasteless, the tables were bare,
The guests went home early, there wasn't a ball.
Soon after, a curfew was put into force.
There wasn't a need to go wandering around;
To stroll after dark wasn't prudent, of course,
And whoever was caught filled the dungeons in town.

Soon all of Dhee Minor began to turn gray.
The people grew angry and bitterness fell.
And after three long, hopeless years of decay
They squawked like the crows they resembled so well.
Their noses grew long from whose business they minded,
Their eyes, they grew beady, from looking askance;
Their voices grew shrill as they always reminded
The venturesome few of the cost of romance.

The King, he grew feeble, and so did his bride.
An heir to the throne never could be achieved.

His dream of a unified Dhee was denied
For they didn't combine as the King once believed.
And as for Giovanni, he sat on his gold,
In his icy, gray mansion, convinced of his station;
His cooking schools closed, and his ovens grew cold,
For no one had parties or gay celebrations.

He shuddered and groaned for he now understood,
And would give it all back to the King if he could.

We hope you've enjoyed our musings and rhymes.
Only the Postlude remains before we're duly scourged for our crimes.

We will take our much deserved comfort and scuttle
and see how many dare remain for the rebuttal.

Postlude

Giovanni Potatoe (that's spelled with a "e")
One day climbed his tower in utter despair,
The word had just come by a royal decree
That the King had expired, but he didn't much care.
He climbed on the ledge and he took a deep breath
Then teetered and fell through the clear autumn skies;
And as he plunged down to his imminent death,
He pondered - quite briefly - upon his demise.

Could his ruin, he wondered, have something to do
With the nature of music, it's spirit and sway?
Could the soul of the people be somehow renewed
If the music came back from its long holiday?
"By Jingles, it could!" he enthused with a grin.
"We'll hire some new players and singers so that
The kingdom will flourish, it's time to begin!
"I must tell the queen..." - Then he hit with a splat.

Giovanni Potatoe, lay cold on the ground,
His eyes staring up toward the heavens above;
For he knew at the last that his fortunes turned 'round
On the day he discovered the Pizzas of Love.