

MOCK-HEROIC FROM
BUTLER TO COWPER

RICHARD TERRY

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Mock-heroic is the exemplary genre of the English Augustan era: it is one of the few genres that the Augustans invented themselves, and it stands in a symbolic relation to a culture still reverential of the grandeurs of the classical past and uneasy about its ability to emulate them.

Mock-Heroic from Butler to Cowper shows the protean nature of mock-epic at this time. It recounts the rise of mock-heroic, discusses the properties of the form, and explores its relation both to classical epic and to contemporary genres such as the poetic travesty and the novel. It also tracks the relation of mock-heroic to the concept of the sublime, especially to the low sublime unwittingly perfected by Richard Blackmore.

Terry goes beyond previous commentators in arguing that mock-heroic was not merely a conventional genre, but also provided a supple discourse through which writers could represent a range of personal and social issues. He identifies mock-heroic properties in the Mandevillian discourse of economics and in the rhetoric of male gallantry towards women, in which women were simultaneously elevated and put down. He also sees mock-heroic as informing the idea of divine grace in the poetry and letters of William Cowper.

Mixing a historical approach with incisive close readings, Terry provides a powerful re-evaluation of the form.

Richard Terry is Reader in English Literature at the University of Sunderland, UK. He is the author of *Poetry and the Making of the English Literary Past 1660-1781* (2001), and has written numerous articles on the literary culture of the eighteenth century.

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Mock-Heroic from Butler to Cowper

An English Genre and Discourse

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General Editor's Preface

Studies in Early Modern English Literature

The series focuses on literary writing of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its objectives are to examine the individuals, trends, and channels of influence of the period between the Renaissance and the rise of Romanticism. During this period the English novel was invented, poetry began to tackle its unsteady relationship with non-literary discourse, and post-Shakespearean drama reinvented itself.

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Monographs on a variety of writers and topics will be accepted; authors are invited to combine the best traditions of detailed research with astute critical analysis. The use of contemporary theoretical approaches will be acceptable, but every book will be founded primarily upon historical, biographical and textual scholarship.

*Professor Richard Bradford,
University of Ulster*

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Introduction

The *New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* describes ‘mock-epic’ and ‘mock-heroic’ as

Terms used in a broad sense to describe a satiric method in poetry and prose and, more specifically, a distinct sub-genre or kind of poetry which seeks a derisive effect by combining formal and elevated language with a trivial subject.¹

We can isolate in this passage three main defining characteristics: mock-heroic, though constituting a specific poetic kind, asserts itself as a compositional method across both poetry and prose; it is inherently a satiric form, intent on creating an effect of derision; and it works through the incongruity existing between a formal, heightened language and a trivial subject. What can be added to this, as indeed the encyclopedia entry does in its next sentence, is that this heightened treatment of a subject is generally created by the importation of the style and manner of epic poems. The definition of mock-heroic proposed by the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* accordingly runs: ‘a satirical form that produces ridicule and humour by the presentation of low characters or trivial subjects in the lofty style of classical epic or heroic poems’.²

Although Ulrich Broich has suggested that five literary forms come together to create the mock-heroic poem – namely, comedy, occasional poetry, epic, parody and satire – uppermost in modern definitions has tended to be satire: thus Chris Baldick, in his *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, describes mock epic as a ‘kind of satire that mocks its subject by treating it in an inappropriately grandiose manner’.³ Even when some attempt gets made to suggest that mock-heroic actually generates a ‘variety of tone’, this variety is apt to seem rather pinched. Arthur Pollard, for example, suggests rather timidly that while mock-heroic can be ‘scornful and contemptuous’, it can also admit a ‘more generous ridicule’: but ‘ridicule’, even of this magnanimous kind, still places mock-heroic unambiguously in the category of satire.⁴ It is consistent with this attitude towards mock-heroic that one of the best older books substantially concerned with mock-heroic in the neo-classical era is Ian Jack’s study of 1952, entitled *Augustan Satire*.

If the association of mock-heroic with satire is commonplace nowadays, there is a good deal less consensus on what it is that such poems actually satirize. The *Oxford Companion*, proposes that the mock-heroic poem ‘parodies the conventions of epic poetry and satirizes the people and events so depicted’. Mock-heroic poems, in other words, will address some quotidian subject, and do so in a hostile, ridiculing way, while also, as constitutive of their total effect, engaging in parody of epic conventions. However, on this latter point about the parodying of epic, critics remain divided. The *New Princeton Encyclopedia*, for example, takes pains to observe that mock-heroic, far from comprising ‘mockery’ of epic, should be viewed instead as ‘elegantly affectionate homage’, and Chris Baldick relegates the whole matter of engagement with epic precedent to something of an incidental side-show: ‘Mock epics incidentally make fun of the elaborate conventions of epic poetry’.

While commentators agree nowadays that the essential trick of mock-heroic has to do with an incongruity between subject and style, the effects generated by this have been harder to determine. The *New Princeton Encyclopedia* proposes, for example, that the mock-heroic’s purposes are ultimately ‘deflationary’: what we are eventually left with is a sense of bathos or let-down. John Jump, however, in his little book on *Burlesque*, sounds a different note, one of expansion and magnanimity, when suggesting that the mock-heroic author ‘lavishes’ an elevated style upon a trifling subject.⁵ The same sort of metaphor is taken up in one of the most probing of recent engagements with the subject, Michael Edwards’s essay on ‘A Meaning for Mock-Heroic’ (1988), in which the incongruity of mock-heroic poems is attributed to the selection of a poetic topic that is ‘unworthy of the artistry bestowed on it’. These metaphors of ‘lavishing’ or ‘bestowing’ are gracious ones and seem far removed from the grimly deflationary.⁶

Edwards declares mock-heroic to be a ‘high or ascensional’ form of burlesque. Differently from the other commentators I have cited, he decides that ‘mock-heroic in itself, in its basic strategy, is a form of periphrasis’. It wraps up a trifling subject in ‘inflationary and circumlocutional language’ and by doing so enacts a transfiguration of the ordinary. Given that Edwards conceives mock-heroic in these terms, it is not surprising that he stands out from other recent definers in being most loath to assign it unreservedly to satire. Its aim is ‘partly satiric’, he concedes, and he allows, in a provoking remark, that mock-heroic ‘accompanies its rhetoric of praise

with a rhetoric of blame', but he sees the trajectory of the form as essentially upwards, as 'the celebration of a changing reality and of writing'.⁷

Mock-heroic is neither one technique nor one effect: it encompasses a variety of authorial attitudes and tones. Indeed, it is something of the complex, protean nature of the phenomenon that this book attempts to show. What is attempted here is not, as might have been thought, an annotated tour of the familiar landmarks of Augustan mock-heroic, such as Dryden's *Mac Flecknoe* and Pope's *The Dunciad*: admittedly, these works *do* feature, but systematic explication of them is not the immediate task undertaken here. My book begins by recounting the rise of the mock-heroic form in England, providing an overview of its main properties as understood by commentators of the time, and discusses its ambivalent relation to the epic and its rivalrous one to an alternative burlesque form, the travesty. After this point, however, certain key themes weave their way in and out of chapters, such as: the spur given to mock-heroic writers by the vogueish concept of the sublime; the Augustan habit of conceiving good and bad attributes as standing in symmetrical relation to each other; the role of Blackmore as the pioneer of an unwittingly self-parodic style of epic inflation; and the relation of mock-heroic to the development of a consumer culture. It is this web of themes that stretches across the book. Yet there are two further contentions that underpin the entire work, and I will say something about each of these in turn.

II

Mock-heroic is perhaps *the* exemplary genre of the English Augustan era: it is one of the few genres that the Augustans could be said to have invented themselves, and it could be seen as a paradigmatic literary form for a culture still reverential of the grandeurs of the classical past but increasingly vexed about their continuing relevance to a shabby modern reality. One attitude that can be attributed to the great Augustan mock-epics in general is nostalgia, or at least a feeling of being wrenched uneasily between the old and the new. Even a poem like Samuel Garth's *The Dispensary*, which supports a contemporary innovation, a charitable dispensary set up to provide cheap medicines for the poor, is still coloured by respect for tradition, both literary and medical. It is tempting to see Pope's *The Dunciad* as the quintessential mock-heroic poem, the one in which this attitude of cultural nostalgia permeating mock-heroic as a form is inscribed most openly in a

single poem. And it is fitting that *The Dunciad* should be the last of the great mock-epics, for it describes in apocalyptic terms the demise of precisely the kind of classically-influenced culture in which mock-heroic could seem an appropriate language to detail society's ills. What is lost subsequently is the confidence shared by Pope and others in the practicality of producing works whose meaning would be in large part encoded in their relation to the classics, as well as their conviction about the exemplary status of the works of the classical tradition. Yet something else that later writers struggle to maintain is that certainty of moral outrage on which Pope's *Dunciad* is founded.

The most thorough historical treatment of attitudes to satire in the eighteenth century is P.K. Elkin's *The Augustan Defence of Satire*, which concludes that over the course of the century the moral case for satire is defeated. The satiric imagination becomes increasingly perceived as a distortion of reality, and its accompanying righteous indignation as a form of emotional excess: 'by the late eighteenth century comedy was held to be far truer to human nature than satire'.⁸ Part of this trend was a tendency for rhetorical mockery to be vilified as falsificatory and inhumane. The most obvious casualty, indeed, of the lively debate about ridicule conducted in the middle of the century is the idea that the application of ridicule to a concept or argument could act as a 'test of truth'.⁹ In this climate of suspicion about satire, mock-heroic loses, as it were, its chief alibi: it becomes required that it justify itself on grounds other than the satiric.

Richmond Bond's *English Burlesque Poetry 1700-1750* is entitled to be considered the best book on eighteenth-century mock-heroic poetry, but the fullness of its treatment of the first fifty years of the century, and its rigidity in breaking off absolutely at mid-century, creates its own kind of problem. For while there exists no equivalent study of attitudes to mock-heroic between 1750 and 1800, Bond's conclusions about its first fifty years inevitably get to speak for the century as a whole. What gets lost when this is done is the process through which the late eighteenth century redefines mock-heroic not as a satiric form but as a comic one. It is in the writings of theorists of humour such as James Beattie and George Campbell that mock-heroic comes to be seen not just as a humorous kind but, in an extraordinary development, as a paragon of victimless humour. It is at this time that the Hobbesian 'sudden glory' theory of laughter, the cynical notion that laughter is incited by a flashing confirmation of our superiority over others, is supplanted by a newer theory: namely, that laughter arises,

in an entirely genial way, from our experience of incongruity. Proponents of this form of laughter see literary burlesque, a genre characterized by incongruity between style and subject, as not just illustrating their case but as providing its clinching proof. Within this new conception of humour, a special place, however, continues to be reserved for one particular burlesque kind: the mock-heroic. Mock-heroic's technique of addressing a low subject in a high style was seized on as consistent with the type of humour most highly regarded in polite circles: this is 'grave humour' or joking with a straight face, where the humorist conducts himself as if in denial of his own mirthfulness. In Joseph Priestley's consideration of laughter in his *Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* (1777), indeed, the latest of the theorizations of humour discussed here, mock-heroic is proposed not just a paragon of civilized laughter, but as a key to understanding the very concept of humour.

One aspect of this general elevation of comedy above ridicule is the changing reception of Samuel Butler's poem *Hudibras*, a waspish satire on seventeenth-century Presbyterianism. My second chapter discusses the poem itself, especially its mock-heroic credentials, but also traces the work's critical reinvention over the course of the eighteenth century. Early eighteenth-century critics are apt to see Butler as a poetic vulgarian, adopting methods redolent of the low travesty, and accordingly at an extreme from the politer methods of the genuine mock-heroic. As the century progresses, however, his witty iconoclasm becomes received as a form of creative innovation, in tune with an increasing enthusiasm for originality as a literary concept. Yet the final stage of the poem's renaissance is to occur in the hands of theorists of laughter who, remarkably, perceive *Hudibras* as a shining epitome of the incongruity theory of humour, a theory that specifically sought to divorce humour from satire.

What I am describing here is how theorists of the later eighteenth century reread one of the most celebrated literary genres of the earlier Augustan era. In the poems and letters of William Cowper can be discovered a similar process, one in which mock-heroic can be seen as again turning away from satire and entertaining what Michael Edwards calls a 'rhetoric of praise'. Cowper's poems repeatedly dwell upon ironies of scale: numerous of them detail the behaviour and predicaments of animals, in ways that consciously court the possibility of triviality. A very representative poem in this connection is his 'On Observing Some Names of Little Note Recorded in the Biographia Britannica'. Cowper's interest in such trifling subjects is always, however, a self-absorbed one, for his own

sense of spirituality admitted similarly mock-heroic ironies of scale, being informed by the poet's rapt sense of the 'Great and Little of ... [his] lot', a sense of his standing tiny and undeserving before a God characterized by unimaginable power and potential vindictiveness 'in whose awful sight the nations seem as grasshoppers, / As dust, a drop, a dream'.¹⁰ Cowper seems to have required a kind of poetry that would incorporate a strong sense of disproportion but which would also celebrate the possibility of grace, of an unaccountable condescension of high to low, that would have the effect of raising up the lowly thing to a position of greater estimation. In this respect, his mock-heroic is not satiric or 'deflationary' but panegyric, or as Edwards terms it 'ascensional'.

III

These varieties of mock-heroic tone, and mock-heroic's capacity to enjoy a life unaccompanied by satire, are major themes of this book. However, across a range of chapters, my book argues a further general case: this is that mock-heroic, rather than being narrowly a *literary* form, confined to a relatively small number of seventeenth and eighteenth-century works, provides a way of thinking which diffuses outwards so as to inhabit and structure a range of eighteenth-century social discourses. Let me give one example of what I mean in the form of the following extract from Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela*, in which Mr B. defends his marriage to his low-born servant against the blazing indignation of his sister, Lady Davers:

Suppose, said she, I had marry'd my Father's Groom! what would you have said to that? – I could not have behav'd worse, reply'd he, than you have done. And would you not have thought, said she, I had deserv'd it? Said he, Does your Pride let you see no Difference in the Case you put? None at all, said she. Where can the Difference be between a Beggar's Son marry'd by a Lady; or a Beggar's Daughter made a Gentleman's Wife? Then I'll tell you, reply'd he; The Difference is, a Man ennobles the Woman he takes, be she *who* she will; and adopts her into his own Rank, be it *what* it will: But a Woman, tho' ever so nobly born, debases herself by a mean Marriage, and descends from her own Rank, to his she stoops to.

When the noble Family of *Stuart* ally'd itself into the low Family of *Hyde*, (comparatively low, I mean) did any body scruple to call the Lady Royal

Highness, and Duchess of *York*? And did any body think her Daughters, the late Queen *Mary* and Queen *Anne*, less Royal for that? When the broken-fortun'd Peer goes into the City to marry a rich Tradesman's Daughter, be he Duke or Earl, does not his Consort immediately become ennobled by his Choice? and who scruples to call her Lady Duchess, or Countess?

But when a Duchess, or Countess Dowager, descends to mingle with a Person of obscure Birth, does she not then degrade herself? and is she not effectually degraded? And will any Duchess or Countess rank with her?

Now, Lady *Davers*, do you not see a Difference between my marrying my dear Mother's beloved and deserving Waiting-maid, with a Million of Excellencies about her, and such Graces of Mind and Person, as would adorn any Distinction; and your marrying a sordid Groom, whose constant Train of Education, Conversation, and Opportunities, could possibly give him no other Merit, than that which must proceed from the vilest lowest Taste, in his sordid Dignifier?

O the Wretch! said she, how he finds Excuses to palliate his Meanness!¹¹

For all the rhetorical triumph of Lady *Davers*'s parting shot, and the unappealing nature of Mr B.'s gender politics, his remarks are ones that carry authorial endorsement. Richardson would no doubt have concurred that a man of high birth who condescends to make a lowly match 'ennobles the Woman he takes', whereas a high-born woman marrying beneath her is instead guilty of stooping from and demeaning her true station: such a match in principle and practice could only ever be unhappy. These issues of class intermarriage might at first sight seem altogether remote from mock-heroic, the subject of this book, a literary (and largely poetic) form constituted by the application of heroic phraseology or sentiments to unheroic modern situations. Yet I want to suggest here that the terms in which Mr B. frames the distinction between *his* marrying downwards and his sister's contemplation of doing the same thing owes a great deal to Richardson's awareness of eighteenth-century discussion of the properties of mock-heroic.

In Mr B's ideology of marriage, the man is the agent and the woman the patient: the female is the softer principle, yielding to and being imprinted by the male. In a union with a man of higher social station, a woman will find herself (in Mr B.'s repeated term) 'ennobled'; in the opposite kind of match, of a lady of station with her social inferior, the woman 'stoops' and 'descends' to her lover, and by so doing 'debases' and 'degrades' herself and her family. No matter her social superiority to her mate, she is demeaned by connection with him, not he dignified by union

with her. The argument between Mr B. and his sister could be understood, in abstract terms, as concerning what happens when a high principle and a low one find themselves drawn into connection, and in what ways one might assimilate or change the other. During the eighteenth century, 'burlesque', as a way of writing characterized by the bringing together in the same work of the high and low, the great and small, the solemn and trivial, was a particularly useful tool for the exploration of such issues. Indeed, the very terms in which Mr B. sets out the consequences of union between men and women of different social rank were ones that were commonly used about burlesque works, especially in describing the relation in them of form and content.

In the eighteenth century, mock-heroic enjoys greater critical respect than the other burlesque kinds, especially the travesty, for reasons very similar to those that enabled the marriage of a man to a woman of lower social rank to be seen as more socially acceptable than the case of women marrying downwards. For, just as in marital relations women were seen as the mutable party, so in burlesque works this position was occupied by a poem's content, seen as being open to reconstitution through its liaison with style. Mock-heroic works were routinely championed for the way their style elevated, ennobled or dignified their content; while the travesty was often pilloried by critics for using low style to degrade or besmirch an ostensibly high content. Joseph Addison argues, for example, that 'where the low Character is to be raised the Heroic is the proper Measure, but when an Hero is to be pulled down and degraded, it is done best in Doggerel'; and elsewhere we can find William Broome praising the skill of mock-heroic writers in terms of their ability to elevate a 'low subject and exalt common appearance into dignity'.¹² Like Mr B.'s condescending to wed Pamela, mock-heroic was seen as devolving station and spreading largesse; like an aristocratic lady's stooping to the level of a 'Beggar's Son', the travesty was seen as conspiring in a general degradation.

A conviction of this book is that mock-heroic provided a formula for thinking through a range of personal or social issues, ones involving ideas of triviality, disproportion, condescension or degradation. It will be clear from what I have already said that mock-heroic works in this way for Cowper, giving him a way of conceptualizing his sense of spiritual inferiority to an omnipotent God. In chapter 4, I argue for the existence of mock-heroic properties in the Mandevillian discourse of economics, the theory, that is, that allowed the selfish consumption habits of the rich, especially as

expressed through the purchasing of the toys and gewgaws associated with the cult of luxury, to be seen as cascading a general subsistence to the poor, and so as enacting an unlikely but happy economic providence. The discourse was one in which the rich and poor, the sweaty artisan and the trifling epicurean, could be seen as united in a common cause, though a cause whose commonality remained invisible to both parties. When a commentator like Johnson, adopting the tones of Mandeville's thesis, talks about the workings of the economy as a 'secret concatenation', linking together 'the great and the mean, the illustrious and obscure' in a process which raises 'thousands and myriads to dignity', his language, like that of Mr B.'s discourse on marriage, resonates with a rhetoric of mock-heroic.¹³

In my following chapter, I argue that a further social discourse infused by mock-heroic is the rhetoric of gallantry addressed towards women which the eighteenth century termed 'fair sexing', a rhetoric which I see as being continuous in tone with Pope's *Rape of the Lock* and as exemplified by the poet's felinely condescending dedicatory epistle to Arabella Fermor. Fair-sexing was a way of elevating women, but in terms that were consistent with a general subjugation of them: women were subject to treatment, rather like that of Belinda's lock in the poem itself, that simultaneously aggrandised and trivialized them. We can find just such a discourse in *The Spectator*, where Addison tries to establish a manner of proceeding suitable for those papers which will be addressed specifically to women (falling on 'a Woman's Day'): he concludes that for these subjects 'I shall not lower but exalt the Subjects I treat upon. Discourse for their Entertainment, is not to be debased but refined'.¹⁴ Faced with the requirement to address women's issues, Addison becomes, as it were, a mock-heroic poet negotiating his relation with intractably humble subject-material: he will accordingly 'not lower but exalt' his own discourse so as best to safeguard against the possibility of its being 'debased' by a topic in reality beneath itself.

Like Richardson's discussion of unequal matches, Addison's rhetoric of condescension is imbued with a mock-heroic logic. It understands that a certain kind of artificial inflation of a subject can paradoxically be a way of deflating it: in the gallant discourse, rhetorical exaltation of women goes with actual social relegation of them. In examples such as these, mock-heroic shows itself as less a lofty and erudite neo-classical genre than a supple discourse through which eighteenth-century writers construe and recreate the world around them.

Notes

- 1 *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (Princeton, N.J., 1993).
- 2 *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, ed. Margaret Drabble (Oxford, 2000).
- 3 Ulrich Broich, *The Eighteenth-Century Mock-Heroic Poem*, orig. published as *Studien zum komischen Epos* (1968), trans. David Henry Wilson (Cambridge, 1990), p. 37; Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford, 1990).
- 4 Arthur Pollard, *Satire* (London, 1970), p. 46.
- 5 John D. Jump, *Burlesque* (London, 1972), p. 2.
- 6 Michael Edwards, *Poetry and Possibility* (Basingstoke, 1988), pp. 32-51, see p. 32.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 41-42, 51.
- 8 P.K. Elkin, *The Augustan Defence of Satire* (Oxford, 1973), p. 185.
- 9 See my "'The Mirthful Sting': Akenside and the Eighteenth-Century Controversy over Ridicule", in *Mark Akenside: A Reassessment*, ed. Robin Dix (London, 2000), pp. 108-31.
- 10 *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols (Oxford, 1980-95), 3: 80; 1: 305.
- 11 Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), ed. Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely (Oxford, 2001), pp. 421-22.
- 12 *Spectator* 249 (15 December 1711), in *The Spectator*, ed. D.F. Bond, 3 vols (Oxford, 1965), 2: 468; *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. J. Butt *et al.*, 11 vols (London, 1939-69), 9: 367.
- 13 See *Adventurer* 67 (26 June 1753), in *Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, 13 vols (New Haven, 1958), vol. 2, ed. W.J. Bate, John M. Bullitt and L.F. Powell (1963), pp. 383-89.
- 14 *Spectator* 4 (15 March 1711), in Bond (ed.), 1: 21.

Chapter 1

Mock-Heroic in the English Augustan Era

I

The genre of mock-heroic spread to England from Italy and France: the earliest instance of the kind is probably Alessandro Tassoni's *La Secchia Rapita*, published pseudonymously (and under a slightly different title) in 1622, and depicting a feud, fomented by the seizure of a bucket, between two thirteenth-century Italian peoples: the Modenese and Bolonians. The poem went through numerous editions in the next century and a half, and was translated into English in 1710 by John Ozell, who inserted into his long title the annotative detail: 'A Mock-Heroic Poem, The First of the Kind'. The earliest work to capitalize on Tassoni's seems to have been the French poet Boileau's heroi-comical poem *Le Lutrin* (from 1674), which recounts a feud between the priest and choir-master of a French church, in which the former tries to reinstall an old reading-desk expressly so as to obscure his rival from the sight of the congregation. There were several early translations into English: an incomplete one by N.O. in 1682; a loose rendering by John Crowne entitled *Daeneids, or the Noble Labours of the Great-Dean of Notre-Dame in Paris* (1692); and a full translation by Ozell in 1708.¹

The translation into English of these early mock-epics was accompanied by a recognition of the newness of the kind of writing which they exemplified. Sir William Temple's essay 'Of Poetry', for example, identifies *La Secchia Rapita* as the fountainhead of a type of writing that has 'helpt to Corrupt our modern Poesy', seeing its English exponents as consisting of the likes of Sir John Mennes, Samuel Butler and Charles Cotton.² A critical discussion of mock-heroic by Nicholas Rowe appended to Ozell's translation of *Le Lutrin* also emphasizes the relatively recent inception of the form, with Rowe expressing reluctance to attempt a 'Critical Account' of a mode of writing 'that is so new in the World, and of which we have had so few Instances'. Moreover, like Temple before him,

what instances there are he sees as standing in a direct line of descent from *La Secchia Rapita*, which is 'the first of this Sort that was ever written'.³ The foreign extraction of the mock-heroic kind forms the basis of a rather self-serving anecdote recorded by Francis Lockier (later Dean of Peterborough) about his first brush with the famous poet Dryden. As a seventeen-year-old, Lockier was in the habit of visiting Will's coffee house so as to rub shoulders with the literary eminences who gathered there. Happening to hear Dryden injudiciously talking up his *Mac Flecknoe* as 'the first piece of ridicule written in heroics', the young Lockier summoned up the pluck to object that Boileau's *Lutrin* and Tassoni's *Secchia Rapita* better deserved the title of originals, being poems from which Dryden had himself borrowed. "'Tis true", replied Dryden, 'I had forgot them'.⁴

The essential technique of mock-heroic consists of a contravention of the canon of fit style, the principle, that is, that the content and style of a work should be in sympathy with each other: Dryden, for example, praises Horace on just this account when noting that he writes in a style 'constantly accommodated to his subject, either high or low'.⁵ Early usages of the actual term 'mock-heroic' emphasize that works belonging to the form set style and subject-matter at variance from each other. John Ozell, for example, in the dedication to his translation of *Le Lutrin*, defines mock-heroic as 'a Ridiculous Action made considerable in Heroic Verse'; and John Quincy, in the Preface to his translation of Edward Holdsworth's *Muscipula* (second edn, 1714), cites *Le Lutrin* and *The Dispensary* as representative examples of mock-heroic, defining their technique as 'raising the Diction, and labouring the Poetry most, where the Matter is lowest, and most proper for Ridicule'.⁶ The achievement of a conspicuous elevation of style could best be achieved by mimicking the conventions of epic, or by adopting what, within the confines of vernacular literary culture, passed for an 'heroic style', this being equated alternatively with the closed decasyllabic couplet practised by Pope in his translation of Homer's *Iliad* or with the sprawling grandiloquence of *Paradise Lost*. However, mock-heroic effects were never seen as the preserve solely of works that made a close reference to an epic original: the constitutive fact of mock-heroic was a particular brand of irony; epic poems themselves provided only one place from which this irony could be procured.

As a way of examining the properties inhering in mock-heroic, it might be useful to focus on some lines from a single poem, one not of any particular note other than being by an author who will figure later in this

book as a writer of (what might be called) mock-heroic novels, Henry Fielding's 'A Description of U—n G— [Upton Grey]'. It takes the form of a poetic letter penned to a city belle by a frustrated suitor pent up in the country, much of it consisting of an exaggerated description of the *longueurs* of rural living:

On the House-Side a Garden may be seen,
 Which Docks and Nettles keep for ever green.
 Weeds on the Ground, instead of Flowr's, we see,
 And Snails alone adorn the barren Tree.
 Happy for us, had *Eve's* this Garden been;
 She'd found no Fruit, and therefore known no Sin.
 Nor meaner Ornament the Shed-Side decks,
 With Hay-Stacks, Faggot Piles, and Bottle-Ricks;
 The Horses Stalls, the Coach a Barn contains;
 For purling Streams, we've Puddles fill'd with Rains.
 What can our Orchard without Trees surpass?
 What, but our dusty Meadow without Grass?
 I've thought (so strong with me Burlesque prevails,)
 This Place design'd to ridicule *Versailles*;
 Or meant, like that, Art's utmost Pow'r to shew,
 That tells how high it reaches, this how low.⁷

The humiliation that the beau feels at his unsalubrious dwelling is made clear not by stylistic emphases but by the counterpointing of its rustic details against idealized opposites. The 'Puddles', for example, clash with the 'purling Streams' that figure as a traditional component of pastoral landscaping; snails here slither in the 'barren Tree' in an image that parodies Milton's serpent wreathing and coiling itself in the paradisaical tree; and at the end of the passage quoted, the narrator rests his aversion to 'This Place' on its being a sort of burlesque of Versailles: the garden at Versailles being the finest amongst imaginable landscapes, Upton Grey the worst.

The technique that Fielding applies in the passage is apt to confuse or alienate the modern reader. The humour of the poem lies in the intransigently humdrum details of the rural setting – a garden fallen to seed, tumbledown outhouses, a treeless orchard, brimming puddles and so on – and the wounded dignity that we sense in the narrator's attitude towards them. The poem devotes some space to simply listing the various items of rustic unkemptness ('Hay-Stacks, Faggot Piles, and Bottle-Ricks'), but also sets them in antithesis to images drawn from a much higher cultural register. What separates the poem from the literary sensibility of our own

day is its internalized conviction that realism by itself would be inadequate to show the full unsalubriousness of Upton Grey. For this to be done requires instead an infusion of 'Burlesque', which allows us to envisage Upton Grey by imagining what it is expressly *unlike* or rather by imagining to what it stands as an opposite extreme. Only by having summoned to our minds the tidy iridescence of the traditional pastoral landscape can we appreciate Upton Gray's full seediness; only by thinking about the universality of the Fall can we gauge its rustic obscurity; only in comparison with the splendour of Versailles do we appreciate its withering inelegance.

Fielding's resourcefulness in discovering for each realistic image a burlesque, countervailing one, as well as his sensitivity to how images of all kinds can be assigned within registers of politeness or cultural elevation, are part and parcel of an Augustan literary sensibility. The same sensibility expresses itself elsewhere in lines such as these from Swift's 'A Description of a City Shower':

Meanwhile the south, rising with dabbled wings,
A sable cloud athwart the welkin flings;
That swilled more liquor than it could contain,
And like a drunkard gives it up again.⁸

Swift's poem is an exercise in urban realism, describing how street-wise Londoners prognosticate, and then take cover from, a rain shower, and then following the rain-water as it sluices through the city's primitive drainage system before debauching into 'the conduit prone to Holborn Bridge'. The poem ends with a gruesome census on the various types of 'filth', 'Sweepings from butchers' stalls, dung, guts, and blood', that surge through the open sewers. It might be thought that the poem's technique of realistic itemization would be enough to capture the rancidness of city life, but, as in Fielding's poem about rural seediness, this objective seems unrealizable without some intervention of burlesque. Each one of Swift's verse paragraphs accordingly begins by consciously evoking the atmosphere and language of pastoral, as if to lay down a benchmark against which the obscenity of urban life can be seen for what it is. In the passage quoted, the opening couplet anticipates the onset of rain in a way in which the same prefiguration could occur in a pastoral poem; the second couplet then translates this into a familiar street idiom in which sudden flows of liquid inescapably call to mind the vomit of drunkards. In 'Upton Grey', the high element imported into the poem is a matter of imagery; in 'A Description of