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# The Poetological Thought of the Epic in France, England, and Spain (1650–1800)

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# The Poetological Thought of the Epic in France, England, and Spain (1650–1800)

Claudia GARCÍA-MINGUILLÁN

The study is based on the analysis of a large corpus of French, English and Spanish theoretical texts produced between 1650 and 1808, focusing on theoretical reflection and literary criticism of the epic genre. From a comparative and pan-European perspective, the dialogue between these texts has allowed me to demonstrate that the epic genre is not a discourse limited to the cultural codes of antiquity, but is updated from the profound epistemological, social, and political crisis of Enlightenment thought. The ensemble of poetics, literary arts, treatises, essays, and discourses produced on the epic genre dictates the rules of composition of the narration of war exploits. This ensemble also instructs on how to articulate the elements that challenge the reader, generate emotions, and build memory. This discourse theory has the function of formulating resources that incite the reader to legitimise the war through his or her emotional involvement in the war campaign, and to believe in the institutional discourse through the vehemence created by the combination of image, emotion, affection, morality, and virtue.

## Conformities, Particularities and Tensions in Enlightenment Literary Thought

The theme of the project deals with the definition of the epic genre in the 18th century. Epic is a literary genre of great relevance for the Western historical-cultural heritage.<sup>1</sup> The compositions attributed to the poet Homer, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, are not only a narration of selected historical events related to periods of war, travel, discovery and conquest in 7th century BC Greece, but also a detailed account of the customs, language, culture, gestures and affections of the society that the poet reflected in his text.<sup>2</sup> The genre achieved early relevance as a discourse with an anthropological background developed in a historical context. However, it became even more significant with the appearance of Virgil's "Aeneid", the representative text of Roman antiquity. The particularity of the Virgilian text lies in the connection between the design and content of the poem and the political asset of the time, the emperor Augustus, in terms of legitimising power. The epic genre was thus closely related to political current affairs.<sup>3</sup> The association established by Virgil between epic discourse and historic-political allegory meant that the epic was recognised as a harangue for the creation of a mythical and historical genealogy that was fundamental for the

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<sup>1</sup> This refers in this case to the abstract construction of a literary genre from a Eurocentric perspective through the features and particularities of the poetic manifestations originating in ancient Greece. Epic can be defined according to its expressive-communicative value in its mixed modality identified by Plato in the *Republic*, according to its medium and mode of imitation of reality (Aristotle's "Poetics") or according to the Horatian formal modes that would constitute Classicism and influence later formalist theories. Richard R. Martin, *Epic as Genre*, in: John Miles Foley (ed.), *A Companion to Ancient Epic*. Oxford, Victoria 2005, 9-16.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Dalby, *Rediscovering Homer. Inside the origins of the epic*. New York, London 2006, 64-65.

<sup>3</sup> David Quint, *Epic and Empire. Politics and generic form from Virgil to Milton*. Princeton, New Jersey 1993, 3-18.

legitimisation of power. It thus became the most important literary genre.<sup>4</sup> The consolidation of epic consequently produced a renaissance of the genre between the 16th and 17th centuries, motivated by years marked by the conquest of America, the tensions between European monarchies and the wars of religion. The vigour of the epic as a discourse proper to the political machinery led in parallel to its regularisation, in other words, its normativisation by means of a theory inspired by the epic poems of Homer and Virgil.<sup>5</sup> Once the value of the epic was established, other important epic poems appeared, such as the *Orlando Furioso* or the *Gerusalemme liberata*, distancing themselves from the theory inspired by the ancient idea of the genre. These works, which manifest both a classical and a modern character, were also considered in the construction of the theory of epic, thus initiating a process of dissociation between the different notions of the genre.<sup>6</sup>

The construction of the theory of the epic develops in a very broad process, which spans from antiquity until the 17th century. Its main problem is the reconciliation of the characteristics of the ideal epic, the *Iliad*, with others which, imitating it, also manifest the particularities of their time.<sup>7</sup> The epic experienced a renaissance between 1650 and 1800. However, this resurgence was not notable for the appearance of many important epics, as was the case during the Renaissance, but for the considerable amount of works of literary thinking, or poetological, which discussed the forms of epic. Thus, an important debate was taking place during the Enlightenment, which mainly discussed dissociated ideas between the preservation of the ancient model and the modernisation of the epic discourse according to the interests and particularities of contemporary society.

Except for Voltaire's "Henriade" (1723, *La Ligue* in its original title), it is difficult to name another epic poem composed in the long Enlightenment. Similarly, theoretical works have usually been reduced to the contribution of French Classicism, essentially Nicolas Boileau's *Art poétique* (1674). The absence of epic poems makes the significant presence of texts reflecting on it more relevant. This research project therefore aims to construct a European corpus of poetic texts on epic and to analyse them from a comparative perspective.

### Construction and analysis of a corpus of poetological texts

The object of study and the sources of our research are to be found in a set of poetological texts on the epic genre that appeared in France, England, and Spain

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<sup>4</sup> Lara Vilà, Epic and power in the Renaissance. Virgilio, la alegoría histórica y la alegoría política. In: María José Vega/Lara Vilà (eds.), *La teoría de la épica en el siglo XVI* (España, Francia, Italia y Portugal). Vigo 2010, 28-35.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Javitch, The assimilation of Aristotle's Poetics in sixteenth-century Italy, in: Glyp P. Norton (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. Volume 3. The Renaissance*. Cambridge 2006, 53-65; Brigitte Kappl, Die Poetik des Aristoteles in der Dichtungstheorie des Cinquecento. Berlin, New York 2006; Cesc Esteve, Una teoría incompleta: la idea de la poesía épica en las artes poéticas italianas del siglo XVI. In: María José Vega/Lara Vilà (eds.), *La teoría de la épica en el siglo XVI* (España, Francia, Italia y Portugal). Vigo 2010, 63-101.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance* (2 vols). Chicago 1961, 954-1073 (vol. II).

<sup>7</sup> This is an aspect that is related to the definition of what a literary genre is. Marie-Laure Ryan, On the Why, What and How of Generic Taxonomy, In: *Poetics*, 10 2/3 (1981), 109-126. Ralph Cohel, Genre Theory, Literary History, and Historical Change, in: David Perkind (ed.), *Theoretical Issues in Literary History*. London 1991, 85-113.

in the period of the long Enlightenment (c. 1650-1800). The concept of poetology refers to a textual modality oriented towards practical consideration and literary production, in contrast to the normative texts of literature.<sup>8</sup> Poetology usually shares space with poetics and literary criticism.<sup>9</sup> These are texts that are approached from a meditative and analytical stance in contrast to the prescriptive and descriptive stance of poetics. They are texts such as essays or speeches, or other types of minor works such as paratexts (prologues, prefaces, annotations, censorship).

The construction of a corpus of poetological texts was based on the consultation of works dedicated to the history of literary criticism and poetics. From the end of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century, important works appear to constitute an initial corpus. However, their main aim is not poetological analysis, but epic poems.<sup>10</sup> The works closest to our research topic are those of Swedenberg, Nerlich, Clark and Himmelsbach.<sup>11</sup> These works are important because they establish the fundamental authors and works for the poetological panorama of the epic. More up-to-date are the works of Csűrös, Goupillaud and Giorgi.<sup>12</sup> However, our study has analysed texts that have been little studied. It has therefore updated the corpus. For, in addition to treatises on poetics, works that are by nature better known and more widely disseminated, attention has been paid to texts that build a secondary but decisive channel of information for transforming thinking about epic. This channel consists of minor works such as speeches and essays that are paratexts of manuals or treatises, as well as prologues to epic poems of the time, dedications, censures, or press articles.

After composing the corpus, we delimited our methodology of analysis. The theories employed are those of literary genre theory and literary criticism. We have employed the perspective offered by Historical Poetics.<sup>13</sup> This theory, whose origin goes back to Alexander Veselovsky's "Istoricheskaja Poetika", argues that the features of a literary genre should be understood as "historically variable" and therefore no element should be limiting for its conception. Thanks to this perspective, it is possible to question the classicist poetics' definition of the epic. From a genre characterised by its link with antiquity, by its dependence on war scenes, by being a monocultured and eminently masculine genre, it is possible to

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<sup>8</sup> Jörg Robert, Poetologie, in: Rüdiger Zümmer (ed.), *Handbuch Literarische Rhetorik*. Berlin, Boston 2015, 303-332.

<sup>9</sup> René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*. New Haven, Yale 1963, 21-36.

<sup>10</sup> Julien Duchesne, *Histoire des poèmes français du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris 1870; Léon Levrault, *L'épopée (Évolution du genre)*. Paris 1900.

<sup>11</sup> Hugh Swedenberg, *The Theory of the Epic in England, 1650-1800*. California 1944; Michael Nerlich, *Untersuchungen zur Theorie des klassizistischen Epos in Spanien*. Genève 1964; Alexander F. B. Clark, *Boileau and the French classical Critics in England*. New York 1965; Siegbert Himmelsbach, *L'épopée ou la 'case vide'. La réflexion poétologique sur l'épopée nationale en France*. Tübingen 1988.

<sup>12</sup> Klára Csűrös, *Variétés et vicissitudes du genre épique de Ronsard à Voltaire*. Paris 1999; Ludvine Goupillaud, *De l'or de Virgile aux ors de Versailles. Métamorphoses de l'épopée dans la seconde moitié du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Genève 2005; Giorgetto Giorgi (ed.), *Les Poétiques de l'Épopée en France au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Paris 2016. Also, H.B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Criticism. Volume VI. The Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge 2005; Roland Greene (ed.), *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. New Jersey 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Jarvis, *What is Historical Poetics*, in: Jason Potts and Daniel Stout (eds.), *Theory Aside*. New York 2014; Ilya Kliger & Boris Maslov (eds.), *Persistent Forms. Explorations in Historical Poetics*. New York 2016; Anna M. Foy, *Historical Poetics and the Definition of Epic in the Eighteenth Century*. In: *Literature Compass* (17/7) 2020, 1-22.

understand, based on many critical texts, the possible paths towards which epic evolves.<sup>14</sup>

### **Obstacles due to the clashes between normative poetics and literary thinking**

The greatest obstacles facing this research are due to the study of a genre that nowadays is little studied, and to its changing and fragmentary nature. Epic poetry still receives a great deal of attention in the curriculum of Classical studies. However, in all other undergraduate and research master programmes, the study of this genre is simplified to overly general questions, which in turn give way to the study of other epic-narrative genres in which the novel plays a leading role. On the other hand, curricula devoted to literary theory hardly explain the nature of Aristotle's "Poetics" and the complex process of reception and transformation undergone during early Modernity. Nor does the shaping of the theory of the different literary genres or the contribution of literary criticism as a discipline receive special attention.

The construction of a corpus requires the tracing of many works. For example, a work such as the French translation of the "Iliad" by Anne Dacier in 1711 is often cited for its great contribution to the knowledge of Homer's work.<sup>15</sup> However, one of the chapters accompanying the translation, "Remarques sur l'Iliade de Homere", which contains a true treatise on the genre, is not so often cited. Another difficulty of the study of the corpus is that it is developed in several languages, mainly English, French, and Spanish, in addition to studying some neo-Latin texts such as the "Dissertatio peripatetica de epico carmine" (1652).<sup>16</sup> The linguistic issue and the comprehension of the texts – especially in terms of a contemporary historical meaning – demand the edition of the texts to make them readable. In our case, as we are dealing with a trilingual corpus in French, English and Spanish, we have had to familiarise ourselves with the editing rules of each language.

The discussion in the paratexts on the epic constitutes, in Stockhorst's words, a "discussion forum for the poetical Avant-garde".<sup>17</sup> The sources for our study thus take on a character very close to that of a conversation. This makes it extremely difficult to study, since the research needs stable elements to structure the narrative. Therefore, one of the great difficulties of this research lies in resolving the numerous ideas and interpretations that each literary critic offers of epic poetry. In addition to the disparity in the definition and consideration of the genre, there is a progressive distancing between the theory of epic poetry and its pragmatic manifestations. To give an example that best explains this difficulty, one need only consult one of the most important treatises. Le Bossu's "Traité du poème épique" is a vast work in which, following classicist rhetoric, certain elements more closely linked to modern epic are discussed (the allegorical

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<sup>14</sup> The position of these critics has been denounced, among others, by Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire*. Paris 1989.

<sup>15</sup> Anne Dacier, *L'Iliade d'Homere, traduite en françois, avec des remarques*. Rotterdam 1711.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Mambrun. *Dissertatio Peripatetica de Epico Carmine*. Parisiis 1652.

<sup>17</sup> Stefanie Stockhorst, Defining conventions for the verse epic in German: Notes on the relationship between codified poetics and poetological paratexts in the Baroque Poetry Reform. In: *The Yale University Library Gazette* (82, ½ ) 2007, 39-53.

message inspired by Torquato Tasso, or a new heroism linked to the concept of the *honnête homme*). The problem lies in the fact that these ideas that innovate the corseted epic canon are deployed throughout the treatise, which requires the researcher to read very carefully to remember where these ideas have been mentioned. It is also difficult to identify the various ideas and their degree of innovation because the texts still belong to a strong classicist rhetoric, which does not distinguish precisely between Aristotle's own ideas and those of his commentators of the XV<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, the main task is to identify the ideas of each literary theorist or critic. However, each work is inescapably related to the socio-political order in which it originates. That is why this research has given rise to works that study the influence of Louis XIV's monarchical system on the poetology of the epic or the relationship between classicist theory and early 18th century Jacobitism as shown in the following section.

### **A Case Study: The Relationship between Poetics and Politics in the Early Enlightenment**

The first works that appeared because of this research were oriented towards the study of ideas about the epic and its poetic, aesthetic, and philosophical context. As for the most relevant recent results, it has been possible to publish a contribution that analyses the ideological context of a work dedicated to poetological reflection on epic, highlighting the relationship of poetics with the political currents of the time.<sup>18</sup>

Poetics, treated as a normative discussion that manifests guidelines for composition, responds to the concerns of the society in which it takes place. However, when it comes to a genre such as epic poetry, which, as mentioned above, is closely linked to political power, it thus becomes an instrument of the discourses of domination, since its purpose is to shape a message that exerts a particular influence on readers. Furthermore, the discourse of poetics and literary criticism can be seen as originating in the Classicism, an aesthetic-literary movement with ancient roots, which has as one of its main motives the shaping of a moral and ethical stance through the relationship between literature and the edification of readers' behaviour. Both epic poetry and its normative discourse thus exert a powerfully influential function through models of behaviour offered by narratives that enliven the readers' interest throughout the aesthetic effect of the sublime of heroic poetic language.

These elements were considered by poets, theorists, and critics alike. One of the cases observed in this sense is a discourse of poetological reflection on the epic published by Andrew Michael Ramsay. Entitled "Discours de la poésie épique, et de l'excellence du poème de Télémaque", which appeared between 1716-1717, it is a short discourse prefacing an edition of Fénelon's "Les aventures de Télémaque" by Andrew Michael Ramsay himself.<sup>19</sup> At first glance, the speech is presented as a prologue that defends the work as a faithful example of the epic

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<sup>18</sup> Claudia García-Minguillán, Andrew Michael Ramsay's Defence of Fénelon: Classical Poetics or Political Discourse. In: *Romance Studies* (40, 2) 2022, 61-75.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Michael Ramsay, Discours de la poésie épique, et de l'excellence du poème de Télémaque. In: *Les aventures de Télémaque fils d'Ulysse par feu Messire François de Salignac de la Motte-Fénelon, précepteur des Messeigneurs les Enfants de France, et depuis Archevêque, Duc de Cambrai, Prince du saint Empire*, I. [Paris] 1716, ix-xlj.

genre and serves as a safeguard for Fénelon against the criticisms received. However, the reading of the text and the research on Ramsay's political identity reveal that it is a speech elaborated for a different purpose. Considering that this is an analysis of the work according to classicist postulates, the defence should respect a consistent discourse between the theory and the work. However, Ramsay's focus is on the different reasons for convincing that Fénelon's work is an epic poem, so his main aim is not so much to apply the theory, but rather to indicate a certain way of reading the "Télémaque" to convince critics and readers that it is a sample of the epic genre. The discourse assumes a position of defence, however, in the year 1716, the "Télémaque" was already well positioned in the contemporary reading canon, so its defence was unnecessary. When observing the text, it becomes clear that it is in fact politically motivated and not so much poetically, because the elements it puts forward are treated in an ambiguous manner. Namely, his analysis does not follow the traditional guidelines of theoretical analysis but concentrates exclusively on explaining the morality of the work. In addition to the elements manifested in the text, Ramsay's discourse departs from his interest in the literary by not having been disseminated in literary critical circles or considered as a normative text of poetics. Alongside this evidence, scholars who have studied Ramsay's political thought have pointed out that contrary to what was believed during the 18th and 19th centuries, Fénelon's apprentice had opted for an ideological path far removed from that of his preceptor. The most recent studies indicate this and show that Ramsay used the proximity of his name to the Archbishop of Cambrai to favour his ideological stance. Considering these elements and noting that the discourse defends the belonging of the "Télémaque" to the epic genre, it is possible to confirm without hesitation that the "Discours de la poésie épique" was produced according to an ideological plan with a calculated political impact. It is worth mentioning that the life of Andrew Michael Ramsay (1686-1743) presents a particular trajectory. Born in Scotland into a Calvinist and Anglican family, he travelled through France, meeting various important mystics, such as Madame Guyon, who brought him close to Fénelon. Passing under his protection, Ramsay converted to Catholicism, remained in France, and was commissioned to edit a new edition of his preceptor's complete works. With his preceptor's death, Ramsay abandoned the project, and began to write some of his works: "Essay de politique" (1719), "Essay philosophique sur le gouvernement civil" (1721) or "Histoire de la Vie de Fénelon" (1723), among others. During this time France was witnessing the death of Louis XIV in 1715 and the beginning of a period of regency that would last until 1723. England and Scotland were suffering the effects of the conflicting events of the Restoration, and the consequences of the Treaty of Utrecht (1713-1715) which prioritised the Hanoverians in their claim to the crown, along with their priorities (religious toleration with special consideration for Protestantism, Whig dominance in Parliament and political influence on the disadvantage of Scotland). This divided the conflict between supporters of the new monarchy and the banished Jacobites who sought support from Catholic nobles elsewhere in Europe. With the publication of Fénelon's life, Ramsay was appointed tutor in Rome to Charles Edward Stuart, the Jacobite prince, known as the *Young Pretender*. The Scotsman's proximity to the successor of the Jacobite candidate led him to engage in a rhetoric of legitimisation of the candidate by which he would build his profile by drawing on the reputed doctrine of the honest monarch conceived by Fénelon in his works. The "Discours" conceals this rhetoric by consciously disregarding the postulates



of poetics to make an explanation of the moral content by the truth and the honesty of the hero present in “Les aventures de Télémaque”.

### **A new notion of epic: contributions and future of the project**

The value of this research lies in questioning the discourse and definition of the epic that has been offered so far. First, it discusses the definitions whereby the genre is limited to an antiquated discourse with no link to the present. Following Schaeffer or, more recently, Foy, we discuss the elements of the epic produced between the 17th and 18th centuries and how they force us to propose another way of defining the genre.<sup>20</sup> From the not so extensive knowledge of epic poetry written in the long Enlightenment century, the important process of poetological reflection found in the theoretical and critical texts of the period is also evident.

After the discussion on the definitions offered of the epic genre by the most relevant theorists (György Lukács or Mikhail Bakhtin), the second major contribution of this project lies in the construction of a corpus of French, English and Spanish poetic texts studied from a comparative point of view to observe their similarities and differences. The tensions existing between the baroque poets of the generation of Jean de Chapelain or Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin and the classicist resistance of Boileau, the theory of the epic designed in England without an epic reference, the translation of Classicism through these three linguistic spaces and how their national particularities determine their notion of the epic genre, are just a sample of the subjects upon which this doctoral thesis reflects. The comparative analysis of these texts has made it possible to reach a third contribution, which consists of identifying a period in which literary precepts, literary criticism and the conception of heroism underwent a profound crisis that forced a rethinking of their principles. Thus, the theoretical-normative discourse loses authority, the poet and his confidence in literary genius ousts the critic in the public sphere, and heroism evolves towards a notion close to the *honnête homme* and modifies the principles of the classical hero.

With project results forward-looking to future outcomes, this project aims to offer a definition of epic by considering the poetological thought in other nations. All the aforesaid has highlighted the lack of a study that defines the idea of epic from the optic of the Enlightenment period in a European perspective, and it is therefore crucial to offer its definition as one of the most decisive literary genres for its history.

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<sup>20</sup> Anna Foy, Historical Poetics and the Definition of Epic in the Eighteenth Century. In: *Literature Compass* (17/7) 2020, 1-22.