

CLARK HULSE

Metamorphic Verse

The Elizabethan Minor Epic



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for Carolyn

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A Note on Texts

Citations of frequently mentioned authors are to the editions listed below. Citations of other authors are to first editions unless otherwise noted. Manuscript abbreviations have been silently expanded; "i" and "j," "u" and "v" have been modernized throughout.

Francis Beaumont: *Salmacis and Hermaphroditus*, in *Elizabethan Minor Epics*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

Samuel Daniel: The first, unauthorized, printing of Daniel's sonnets was in *Syr P. S. His Astrophel and Stella* (London: Thomas Newman, 1591), cited as *Newman*. For the 1592 authorized version, entitled *Delia* (hereafter cited as *1592*), and for *The Complaint of Rosamond*, I have followed the text of *Poems and A Defence of Ryme*, ed. Arthur Colby Sprague (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930). Citations of Daniel's other works are to the following editions: *The Civil Wars*, ed. Laurence Michel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958); *The Tragedy of Philotas*, ed. Laurence Michel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949); *The Collection of the History of England*, in *The Complete Works of Samuel Daniel*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (London, 1885).

Michael Drayton: *The Works*, ed. J. William Hebel et al., 5 vols. (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1931-1941).

Phineas Fletcher: *Venus and Anchises*, in *Elizabethan Minor Epics*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

George Gascoigne: *Complete Works*, ed. John W. Cunliffe, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907).

Thomas Lodge: *Complete Works*, ed. Edmund Gosse, 4 vols. (1883; reprint ed., New York: Russell & Russell, 1963).

- Christopher Marlowe: *The Poems*, ed. Millar MacLure (London: Methuen, 1968).
- Shakerley Marmion: *Cupid and Psyche* (London, 1637). *The Short Title Catalogue* (STC #17444) notes differences due to press corrections among the extant copies. My citations are to the Newberry Library copy. The editions of Singer (1820) and Saintsbury (1906) are not reliable.
- John Marston: *The Poems*, ed. Arnold Davenport (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1961).
- William Shakespeare: *The Poems*, ed. F. T. Prince (London: Methuen, 1960). Citations of the sonnets and plays are to *The Pelican Shakespeare*, ed. Alfred Harbage, rev. ed. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969).
- Sir Philip Sidney: *The Poems*, ed. William A. Ringler, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).
- Edmund Spenser: *The Works*, ed. Edwin Greenlaw et al., 9 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1932-1949).

Metamorphic Verse

Metamorphic Verse

In the decade of the 1590s, Elizabethan poets took two great bodies of traditional materials, the classical myths and the English chronicles, and worked them into a rich and elaborate body of verse. The result was the minor epic, a genre consisting of about two dozen short narrative poems telling of amorous seductions and violent rapes and even occasionally of virtue triumphant. Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* (1593) is the best of them. Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *Lucrece* (1594) and Spenser's *Muiopotmos* (1591) are familiar to enough readers, while Thomas Lodge's *Scillaes Metamorphosis* (1589), Samuel Daniel's *Complaint of Rosamond* (1592), and Michael Drayton's *Peirs Gaveston* (1593) all were popular in their time.

If today the minor epic is the least read and least understood of the major types of Elizabethan verse, it was in its time a form of obvious importance. Except for Sidney, every major Elizabethan poet, and most of the minor ones, wrote minor epics. Our failure of understanding lies in separating the minor epic (as we do so much old art) from the culture that bore it, in order to search for its timeless values. By and large the poems of the minor epic genre have no great ethical import and little redeeming social value. They are by turns artificial, frivolous, arcane, even subversive, and so it is often hard for an age that has liked its poetry plain and confessional to see what all the fuss was about. But, restored to its place in the network of Elizabethan theory and practice, the genre of minor epic takes on a significance that its individual members lose in isolation.

This book is a study of the form of the minor epic. Inevitably, though, its foremost concern must be transformation.

Metamorphosis underlies the subject matter of the genre, its narrative principles, its mode of symbolism, its ability to combine and to remake other genres, and its power to transform the poet. Indeed, the study of metamorphosis within the poems leads one beyond them, so that Elizabethan literature as a whole can be seen, not just as an assortment of interesting texts, but as a literary system, dominated by the interplay of forms, changes of style, and the search for growth of the individual poet. The metamorphic qualities of the minor epic place it paradoxically at the center of this literary system, and, by corollary, may refashion our image of that system into something less static, more fluid, than such phrases as the "Elizabethan world picture" would lead us to believe. Like the world of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, it is a system where recurring instances of flux build toward a view of a world in process, a view that always threatens to break down into the chaos of its parts.

A theory of the minor epic must account for this transformation in the genre and in the culture that bore it, the transformation in their meaning that takes place if we change our way of reading. Such a theory must describe the conditions by which the minor epic is understood to have meaning beyond (or even in) its surface triviality. Propounding such a theory is a prerequisite to understanding the minor epic, but there is no Renaissance critical discussion of the genre, and the general principles of Renaissance critical theory can be made to apply only loosely and indirectly. Any modern theory must finally be empirical, derived from an analysis of specific poems in the genre. In the studies that follow, I shall unashamedly combine close reading with Renaissance and modern theory to construct a poetics for the minor epic. Such a poetics may itself suggest new ways of reading the poems, ways of reading that on one hand reveal their formal artifice, and on the other define the meaning of that artifice in the Elizabethan literary system.

To begin at the beginning: the metamorphic qualities of the minor epic derive largely from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

The Elizabethans pillaged Ovid's poem for its erotic tales of Adonis, Narcissus, Ganymede, and the rest, and regarded him as the master rhetorician, the model for elegant artifice. Ovid was also to them a philosopher of change whose poem was thought of as a historical epic which described a world of flux from the creation down to the present, and which set forth its system of beliefs in the Pythagorean sermon of Book 15. Yet the metamorphic qualities of the minor epic are not solely due to the influence of Ovid. Indeed, its sources range from Musaeus, Vergil, and Apuleius to the English chronicles, with exotic and domestic materials frequently mingled, so that Shakespeare's Adonis shares the fields with Wat the hare and Greek Ganymede is ancestor to English Gaveston.

Nor is metamorphosis simply a matter of subject. In its remorseless alteration of the old stories, Elizabethan minor epic comes closest among the literary types of its day to revealing the pure play of form. A poem like Marlowe's *Hero and Leander* might be called, in Arthur Golding's phrase, a "philosophy of changed shapes," a series of transformations in narrative form, undertaken, it seems, for the sheer delight of transformation itself. Again Ovid is the master. His *Metamorphoses* is something of a catalogue of narrative techniques, and in its own transformation (and at times trivialization) of the form of Vergilian epic it defines the experimentation with form as the central task of the sophisticated poet.

One reason for the high formalism of the Elizabethan minor epic is its content, which is fictive much more than, say, the sonnet. Its mythical or chronicle tales are *istoria*, story or imagining, not history. The rise of a clear distinction between history and story was occurring at just this time in England, and its gradual impact on literature is a significant part of the subject. Tales of the pagan gods are about unreal things, and tales of people who may have existed in a dim past are unreal or invented in their details. The literal is dissolved nearly away, so that the importance of a tale is in its other senses, its allegory, that is, in the transformations of

meaning through which the poet puts it.¹ So while the minor epic can be thought of as a form of imaginative play, it nonetheless can make significant statements. *Serio ludens* was a proverb on the lips of more than one humanist. Above all, the common subject of the poems is mutability itself, and the poems' approach is often inquisitive and philosophic. The minor epic is particularly able to compare the erotic values of sonnet and pastoral with the heroic values of epic in a continuous interplay of the mutable and eternal qualities of life. Shakespeare's Tarquin must choose between royalty and rape; his Adonis must mount either Venus or his horse. These moral crises are sometimes nearly drowned in the flow of a poem's artifice and conceit, so that the philosophic content of a poem emerges not by direct statement but by implication. The ethical issues in Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, for instance, are so persistently undercut and sidetracked that the final significance of the poem may lie in the very inability of poet or reader to fix any pat moral to the events. The flux of poetry imitates the flux of the universe.

The action of minor epic, then, is too easily thought of as casual coupling and late lamenting, and its form too often passed off as trivial decoration. If, as Aristotle would have it, a work of art is an imitation of an action, action may be understood not just as what happened, but as mental event—a series of mind-states that make up a unified sequence. The form itself may be a significant mental action, a way of thinking about physical experience. While, loosely speaking, any metaphor is metamorphic, it is useful to define the metamorphic image more narrowly, as that which describes the transformation of one substance into another. The more familiar metaphysical image as defined by Dr. Johnson finds an unexpected likeness in two things that have no superficial

¹ My use of the term "allegory" is based on the derivation, common in the Renaissance, from "alla agoreuein," "to speak other (than you mean)." For a discussion of allegory in its etymologically correct derivation from "agora" as a "closed or hidden meaning," see Michael Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

resemblance. Donne's flea is like a marriage temple or a marriage bed. The metamorphic image, in contrast, sees their resemblance and gradually extinguishes all points of unlikeness: a woman is like a tree and becomes identical to that tree; her fingers grow into branches, her feet to roots. Even as the metamorphosis occurs in the story, it may take a symbolic or allegorical form. The tree-maiden with her rough-bark skin suggests the fear and loathing of the body and becomes, indeed, chastity itself. Flesh and tree are inseparable from their abstract concept. The metaphysical image emphasizes the unique qualities of each object; it is finally differential, while the metamorphic is integral, minimizing differences. It may suggest the ecstasy or terror of the flesh made free to move across the categories of substance, and of the mind to move across the categories of thought. Indeed, it may call into question our ability to categorize experience at all.

Literary scholars (especially Spenserians) have in the last several decades amply demonstrated that Elizabethan poets were as rational and intellectual as the Metaphysicals. Yet there is an irreducible core of truth to the old impression that they created a golden world of "ocean-dewy limbs and naked childlike souls."² It is, I suggest, the pervasive metamorphic image that reconciles this paradox, for it is at once allegorical and sensual. One might offer as an illustration Spenser's description in Book 3 of the *Faerie Queene* of the wounded Timias at the moment Belphoebe discovers him:

Shortly she came, whereas that woefull Squire
With blood deformed, lay in deadly swownd:
In whose faire eyes, like lamps of quenched fire,
The Christall humour stood congealed rownd;
His locks, like faded leaves fallen to grownd,
Knotted with blood, in bounces rudely ran,

² C. F. Tucker Brooke, *Essays on Shakespeare and Other Elizabethans*, ed. Leicester Bradner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), p. 196.

And his sweete lips, on which before that stownd
 The bud of youth to blossome faire began,
 Spoild of their rosie red, were woxen pale and wan.
 [3.5.29]

The transformation of Timias begins in a rhetorical trope: blood would merely cover him, not deform him, so "blood" must be metonymy for wounds. There follows a series of transferences in which objects are defined by their opposites: lamps of quenched fire, so no longer fiery; fair eyes like quenched lamps, hence no longer fair; the crystal humor (hence liquid) congealed, and so no longer liquid. The phrases contrast past and present states, and continue the liquid/solid play of "with blood deformed," especially since the liquid humor that "stood congealed" elots like blood. Lines 5-6 bring together the two major images of the stanza, blood and leaves, as the squire's hair, clotted with blood, is likened to faded leaves fallen from a tree (which is thereby deformed). Congealed with blood, the locks bunch, and hence, ironically, are also like the summer's leaves clustered on the bough. At the same time, the bunches "rudely ran"—as if they had become the blood (with a play on rudely/ruddy). Lines 7-9 link the vegetation image to the past/present contrast of "fair eyes, like lamps of quenched fire," and then link both to the blood image with "Spoild of their rosy red." This phrase inverts the image of his bloody locks, since what *should* be blood-red no longer is. In another inversion, "woxen" would be appropriate to the blossoming bud, and so heightens the pain of "pale" and "wan," with the whole figure underscored by the play on "wax" and "wane."

The stanza, in sum, has only a few concrete details about Timias: his eyes are dull, he lies still, his hair is congealed with blood, his lips are pale. The force of the stanza is directed toward analyzing a series of transferences, inversions, and identifications. Pale things become bloody and red things pale; liquids become solids; the past and present define each other. Timias himself is transformed into withered veg-

etation and then, by recollecting the beauty which has been deformed, into the pristine state of that vegetation. The transformation of Timias is then set into a larger frame, for Spenser is describing what Belpheobe sees, and our reaction is also hers: "Saw never living eye more heavy sight" (3.5.30). The situation is an inversion of a conventional setting in Petrarchan sonnets, where the lover marvels at the lady's beauty and is astonished by her golden hair and ruby lip. Unlike the haughty and disdainful Petrarchan mistress, Belpheobe is moved to charitable solace, and her reaction is itself placed by the structure of the narrative into an even larger frame as an analogue to the Garden of Adonis. In the Garden, forms undergo continual metamorphosis, as Time, like Timias's wounds, cuts them down, and Venus, like Belpheobe, brings new life. The human pathos of the scene is set against the superhuman forces which Spenser sees at work in it, and the reader's involvement with these particular characters is balanced by the intricate conceptual shifts which he must undergo to grasp that all creation is one.

The example of Timias might seem inappropriate, since Spenser is not writing minor epic. However, one could just as well analyze passages from Shakespeare or Marlowe, such as a sentence describing Hero's tears:

Forth from those two tralucent cisterns brake
 A stream of liquid pearl, which down her face
 Made milk-white paths, whereon the gods might trace
 To Jove's high court.
 [1.296-99]

The image of Hero's eyes weeping liquid pearl treats literally a number of Petrarchan conceits: the mistress's tears are pearls; her eyes are stars; to see her is to glimpse heaven itself; she is just divine. While the passage mildly parodies such verse, Hero herself is elevated, placed on a level of fantasy equal with Jove or the constellations. The Milky Way as a path to heaven (recalling perhaps its association with

terrestrial pilgrimages to Campostello) places Hero in the position of the supreme deity, or his shrine, and recalls the poem's opening assertion that young Apollo courted her, as well as the description of Leander praying to her that has just preceded these lines. Hero is momentarily the mistress of the cosmos, subjecting man and god to her rule (as does the nectar-quaffing country maid in the Mercury digression), until we think that this may be poetic hyperbole, vain aspiration, and false worship.

The passages from Marlowe and Spenser alike mingle Petrarchan imagery with epic elevation. Spenser amplifies the heroic proportions of his subject by working parallels to English chronicle history throughout the book (Timias is, after all, Arthur's squire, and Belphoebe stands for Elizabeth), while Marlowe adds a countermovement of ironic deflation that is characteristically Ovidian.³ The irony of *Hero and Leander* has been enough to cause several writers to see Spenser and Marlowe as exemplars of opposed tendencies in Elizabethan poetry. As Roger Sale puts it, the *Faerie Queene* is undramatic, suppressing intellectual conflict in the name of an inherited view of the universe "that was still harmonious and still able to engender a common culture which gave him all the materials he needed."⁴ *Hero and Leander* (like Donne's verse) is dramatic, revealing conflicts and ironies, and avoiding dogmatic positions in favor of an awakening skepticism.

³ For an incisive discussion of Ovidian irony, see William Keach, *Elizabethan Erotic Narratives* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1977), chap. 1.

⁴ Roger Sale, *Reading Spenser* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 27; his position is endorsed by Keach, *Elizabethan Erotic Narratives*, pp. 219-22. Paul Alpers attempts to contrast the two poems, but cautiously concludes that Spenser's poetic language "should be regarded as a specialized development of characteristics and potentialities that belong to Elizabethan English and Elizabethan verse" (*The Poetry of the Faerie Queene* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967], p. 90). Those who feel sure of themselves in measuring the irony in *Hero and Leander* should be sobered by Rosemond Tuve's discussion, in *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), pp. 216-17, of the passage I have cited.

Sale's portrayal of the intellectual milieu of Spenser—who was, after all, a Protestant and imperial apologist in a Europe torn by Reformation—is too patently inaccurate to require comment. More importantly, his thesis overlooks the fact that Spenser can be ironic, and Marlowe harmonious, *when their subjects require it*. A particular poetic form does not intrinsically express a particular ideology; a metamorphic image may, in different context, evoke either the underlying stability or the instability of the universe. The violent, ironic metaphors that make metaphysical poetry seem so “skeptical” and “dramatic,” and hence so modern, are examples of the figure catachresis (which “expresses one matter ‘by the name of another which is incompatible with it, and sometimes clean contrary’ ”).⁵ It is a figure that deprecates its subject and is appropriate to satire and epigram, while Spenser’s metaphors are more persistently elevating, in accordance with the primary goal of epic: to praise the good. Marlowe, writing minor epic, inevitably both praises and blames, elevates and deprecates. The different uses of irony among our poets, then, seem to have more to do with what genre they are writing than with their *Weltanschauung*. The epic of Spenser and the minor epic of Marlowe are different kinds of poems, but written from the same poetic. The relationship of minor epic to epic will be explored further in Chapter 6, which examines in detail the connection between Spenser’s *Muiopotmos* and Book 3 of the *Faerie Queene*; suffice it now to say that Book 3 is something like a minor epic writ large. The passages examined above suggest that the central qualities of the Elizabethan minor epic are indeed qualities of the epic, and of Elizabethan poetry generally.

The metamorphic character of subject matter, narrative technique, and imagery in the minor epic presages the metamorphic character of Elizabethan poetic forms, and of the poet himself. The lyric poet of the 1590s felt the whole weight of his great predecessors, from Petrarch to Sidney,

⁵ Tuve, pp. 130–33.

while the epic poet bore the added burden of an elaborate critical theory hammered out in the long debate between the partisans of Ariosto and Tasso. No critical theory at all existed for the minor epic, and its precursors, especially Ovid and Chaucer, were varied and flexible poets. The poet of minor epic, then, had a relative freedom to try out new forms, to recombine the elements of lyric and epic in new ways. The minor epic's lack of a great didactic burden left the poet free to make formal experiment his primary purpose, to make minor epic into the true avant-garde poetry of the Elizabethan period. The minor epic was, in effect, the proving ground for lyric and epic, the experimental laboratory from which new ideas of both emerged.

Marking the time between the publication of Books 1-3 of the *Faerie Queene* and the completion of Books 4-6, Spenser addressed to a series of noble patrons his 1591 volume of *Complaints*, including *Muiopotmos*, his slender Ovidian fable. After Samuel Daniel caught the public eye in 1591 (when his sonnets were printed with Sidney's), Spenser himself urged Daniel to "rouze thy feathers quickly" to "tragick plaints and passionate mischance."⁶ Daniel's next poem, *Rosamond*, was both an appendage to his sonnet sequence *Delia* and a prelude to his Senecan tragedies and historical epic. When Shakespeare turned from the stage in 1593 and set his hand to polite poetry, he called *Venus and Adonis* the "first heir" of his invention and followed it with the "graver labour" of *Lucrece*. The two poems stand at the watershed between his apprenticeship and early maturity as a dramatic writer. By the very fact of its identity as a "mixed" genre (combining the features of high and low genres), the minor epic was the medium by which the poet could transform himself from ephebe to high priest. It was a genre for young poets ceasing to be young, a form somewhere above the pastoral or sonnet and below the epic, the transition between the two in the *gradus Vergilianus*.

⁶ Edmund Spenser, *Colin Clouts Come Home Again*, ll. 424-27.

This sense of order among the forms of literature and the varieties of poetic behavior can itself be seen as the fundamental constituent of the Elizabethan—or indeed of any—literary system. The emergence of a literary system, however fluid, is a defining characteristic of the Elizabethan Renaissance. English literature in the sixteenth century becomes an autonomous realm of intellectual endeavor, endowed with a past and a future, with virtuoso practitioners and a trained audience, and with a body of general principles and standards of performance. Such a network of people and ideas existed in the courts, universities, monasteries, and guildhalls of Henrician England, only to disintegrate in the violent last years of Henry's reign. The rapid expansion of court, university, and Inns of Court and the establishment of permanent theaters in London provided the settings and personnel for a new literary culture in Elizabeth's reign. Simultaneously, a wave of intellectual novelties from the Continent in the last three decades of the century provided its ideas: the third-generation Petrarchism of the Pléiade; the interest in emblems, *imprese*, and other symbolic devices; the systematic poetic theory of the "Age of Criticism" in France and Italy; humanist art theory; the new historiography of Patrizi and Bodin—the list could as well go on to logic, law, philosophy, and theology. All shared a common linguistic base and all testified to the power of language to order the world.

The role of the minor epic as a vehicle for the assimilation of the new learning into England gave it a particular importance to the practitioners of the new culture. In Petrarchism the minor epic poets found a suitable diction and imagery and, what is more, a profound speculation on the place of the poet's private experience in the social order. From the emblematisers they learned intricate modes of symbolism; from the theorists of art came ideas about representation of the passions and audience response; from the historians came new arguments about the origins of mythological and chronicle materials and speculation about their appropriate forms of narration. Above all, the French and Italian literary theo-

rists provided justifications for experimentation and the mixing of genres. Nowhere is this more visible than in the theory and commentary surrounding Ovid, who provided a particular challenge to Aristotelian ideas of epic in the Renaissance. The new learning accounts for many odd details in the minor epic; more importantly, it provides a set of structural principles by which the Elizabethans made their startling transformations in traditional materials. Above all, it is the basis for the unique place of the minor epic in the Elizabethan system of literary forms.

Talking about a historical system of forms poses some delicate problems for scholarship. Merely by considering any work as part of a group one risks violating the unique identity of that work in the search for characteristics that it shares with others. But to see a work in isolation is to see it as mere words. It is the fit between the work and its culture that makes the choice of each word a critical decision for the poet. The study of genre is the level of investigation midway between the individual work and its culture. It gives us access to that fitness between the minor epic and the environments of Elizabethan society, of Elizabethan literature as a whole, and of the developing mind of the individual writer.

Such fitness points up a second danger of genre history—that in tracing the historical changes of a literary form, it ignores the conditions of literature at each moment in history, its manifold connections to other genres and to other works by the same authors. The minor epic presents the literary historian with peculiar opportunities to overcome these dangers and to write a full literary history that reveals both the literary moment and the direction of change. Its identity as a mixed genre makes it a *summa* of the literary forms of its day, while its function as the transitional form by which a minor poet becomes a major one thrusts both poet and poem back into the world of flux.

The chapters that follow are approaches to minor epic poetry through a series of aspects, each of which has already given

form to the material before the individual artist sets his hand to it. Hence each is a part of both the mixture that makes up the genre and the larger system of Elizabethan literature. My aim in each case is to read a major work or works in a way that will simultaneously illuminate the wider dimensions of the genre and the system. The first of these aspects is the idea of genre itself, which is explored in Chapter 1. Subsequent chapters examine particular genres that formed the minor epic and were re-formed by it. Chapter 2 deals with sonnet and satire in relation to poems by Lodge, Daniel, and others. Chapter 3 looks at Marlowe's and Chapman's *Hero and Leander* as primeval poetry. Chapter 6 examines Spenser's *Muiopotmos* and Book 3 of the *Faerie Queene* as Ovidian epics. The intervening chapters take up the neighboring disciplines of painting and historiography: Chapter 4 deals with pictorial elements in Shakespeare's poems and Chapter 5 traces the role of the minor epic in forming the historical vision of Daniel and Drayton. Together the two chapters illustrate how the sister arts used the same narrative materials in different ways and to different ends. If there is a defect in this organization, it is in the omission of pastoral as a separate concern. Something of a mixed genre itself, the pastoral is discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 amid satiric, Petrarchan, and primeval poetry. This is the unavoidable result of the second principle of organization, whereby the chapters constitute an informal poetics for the minor epic. In addition to the discussion of genre in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 analyzes the relationship between the work and its audience; Chapter 3 examines the figure of the poet and the nature of inspiration; Chapter 4 looks at imagery; Chapter 5 examines the idea of fictionality; and Chapter 6 is intended as a synthesis of them all, by way of looking at the overarching problem of system-building itself. Each may be read independently, but loosely they move, like the minor epic itself, between context and text, from the rhetorical to the iconic, and from small forms to large ones.

Chapter 1

Minor Epic as Genre

The formalism of minor epic is not simply a matter of line lengths and rhyme schemes. As Sidney said in his *Defence*, verse alone does not make a poet, and an orator in arms is no soldier. The definition of any single literary form must involve an understanding of the general notions of form by which a work was written and by which it was and is read. Such a definition requires as well an understanding of the critical choices available to a poet when he opted for one form over another. What specifically was at stake in the choice between minor epic and some other form such as sonnet or epic?

This question is especially important in defining the genre of minor epic, for in its close relations with sonnet and epic it has seemed at times to be not a distinct type at all but a poor mixture of these other kinds of poetry. The poems of minor epic have, indeed, traveled under far too many names. Some have been labeled "romance," "verse romance," "Ovidian verse," "erotic narrative," "mirror," or just "narrative verse." Most often, they have been divided into two major categories on the basis of subject matter: the epyllion or minor epic, dealing with classical mythology; and the historical complaint, drawing on the English chronicles. Hallett Smith arranges them this way in his chapter "Ovidian Poetry" in *Elizabethan Poetry*, without, regrettably, explaining at any length why he put them together.¹ C. S. Lewis has used the

¹ "Because of the special nature of the new complaint poems, their concern with love and chastity, the Ovidian tradition had an opportunity to influence and color the complaint. . . . So eclectic was the Elizabethan mind that it could find satisfaction in a piece which combined the stern and sober

category of epyllion, or minor epic, for poems like *Hero and Leander* and *Venus and Adonis*, and Elizabeth Story Donno has endorsed the term, though with reservations.² The fruit of their work, especially that of Smith, is a description of each kind as a cluster of motifs.³ Epyllion, characteristically following Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a model, relates a sexual consummation by young lovers in a witty narrative enforcing the lessons of *carpe diem*. The historical complaint, modeled on the *Mirror for Magistrates*, uses dramatic monologue to tell of a female protagonist who confronts seduction (or rape) and death, as a solemn and moral warning against lust.

As clear and useful as this distinction is, one might ask if it reflects the poets' own sense of their materials and accounts for the full range of their practice. Donno and Smith both recognize such genre divisions as uneasy compromises between utility and accuracy, and that uneasiness suggests that new grounds might be sought. The generic distinction based on subject matter must be questioned unless Renaissance po-

warnings of the old wheel of Fortune and the titillating, decorative, luscious matter from the Italianate Ovidian tradition" (Hallett Smith, *Elizabethan Poetry* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952], pp. 103-4).

² C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), pp. 486-89; Elizabeth Story Donno, ed., *Elizabethan Minor Epics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 6; see also Louis R. Zocca, *Elizabethan Narrative Poetry* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1950); M. C. Bradbrook, *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Poetry* (London: Chatto, 1951), pp. 51-74; Paul W. Miller, "The Elizabethan Minor Epic," *Studies in Philology* 55 (1958):31-38; Elizabeth Story Donno, "The Epyllion," in *English Poetry and Prose, 1540-1674*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Longmans, 1971), pp. 82-100; and William Keach, *Elizabethan Erotic Narratives*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1977), pp. xvi-xvii.

³ "Perhaps I should explain my attitude about genres. The book does not use the word much, or emphasize it. Instead it talks about Conventions, . . . commonplaces, ideals, values. Even though my chapters could be called essays on Pastoral, Ovidian, Sonnets, Satire, The Lyric and The Epic, and these could certainly be called literary genres, I was clearly shying away from this classification" (Hallett Smith, "An Apologie for *Elizabethan Poetry*," *New Literary History* 1 [1969]:36).