The Epic Dimensions in Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews*  

and  

*Tom Jones*  

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Examination Committee

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To my devoted and supportive parents
and to my husband Amer, and son Obaida
who have always been my
source of inspiration
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Abstract

The Epic Dimensions in Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*

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Critics have established a connection between the epic genre and the novel. For example, Georg Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin observed many similarities between the epic and the novel. This study attempts to examine Henry Fielding’s two novels: *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *Tom Jones* (1749). In these two novels Fielding elevates the novel to what he has called a “comic epic poem in prose”. The purpose of this thesis is to examine *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* as comic epic poems in prose.

In these two novels Fielding brings literary experience gained in other writings such as, the classical epic, the picaresque novel, the romance and the mock-epic to bear upon the production of a new form, a form which constantly recalls older, well-tried forms and adapts them to the spirit and use of his own times. Fielding celebrated his own theory of the epic in which he redefined the classical epic producing a comic version of the epic. Interestingly enough, Fielding’s own conception of the epic breaks new ground in the novel genre with its blend of comedy and seriousness, its realism and eccentricity. In his two novels, Fielding successfully employs the mock-heroic style as a means of
ridiculing the romances popular in his age. The significance of this research resides in the fact that it explores the functions of the epic dimensions in Fielding’s two novels *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones*.

The thesis consists of an introduction and two chapters. The introduction presents a general review of the epic tradition, tracing the development of the epic from Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* through Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Milton’s *Paradise lost* and Pope’s use of the mock epic form in some of his poems. It also highlights the main features of the epic as outlined by critics such as Bowra, Lukács, and Bakhtin.

Chapter One deals with the epic features in *Joseph Andrews* with reference to Fielding’s famous preface to *Joseph Andrews*. Chapter Two introduces *Tom Jones*, Fielding’s masterpiece. This chapter examines the novel from the perspective of epic traditions, as regards, plot, structure, characterization, setting, style, and mock-epic technique.
Introduction

The Theory of the Epic

In their attempts to classify mankind in different types, the early Greek philosophers gave a special place to those men who live for action and for the honour that accompanies it. In his book entitled *Heroic Poetry*, Bowra argues that the Greek philosophers believed that,

[such men] are moved by an important element in the human soul, the self-assertive principle, which is to be distinguished equally from the appetites and from the reason and realises itself in brave doings. They held that the life of action is superior to the pursuit of profit or the gratification of the senses, that the man who seeks honour is himself an honourable figure (1).

The Greeks of the fifth and sixth centuries B.C. regarded the men whom Homer had called heroes as a generation of “superior beings who sought and deserved honour” (Bowra, 1). In Greece the conception of the heroic life began early and lasted long, and from it, more than from anything else, our own conceptions of heroes and heroism are derived. The concept of the hero and heroic prowess is widely spread, and despite its different settings and manifestations it shows the same main characteristics, i.e. – archetypal – which agree with what the Greeks say of their heroes.
An age which believes in the pursuit of honour will naturally wish to express its admiration in a poetry of action and adventure, of bold endeavours and noble examples. Heroic poetry still exists in many parts of the world and has existed in many others, because it answers a real need of the human spirit. Heroic poetry is the best medium through which the hero’s honourable life can be highlighted.

Heroic poetry is essentially narrative and is nearly always remarkable for its objective character. Tillyard asserts:

[i]t [heroic poetry] creates its own world of the imagination in which men act on easily understood principles, and, though it celebrates great doings because of their greatness, it does so not overtly by praise but indirectly by making them speak for themselves and appeal to us in their own right (28)

It wins interest and admiration for its heroes by showing what they are and what they do. What differentiates heroic poetry is largely its outlook. The full fruit of heroic poetry is to be found in the Homeric poems.

In discussing heroic narrative poetry, it is important to examine the longest, the most impressive, and the most complex of narrative forms, the epic. W. F. Thrall and A. Hibbard in A Handbook to Literature (1936) define the epic as: “a long narrative poem presenting characters of high position in a series of adventures which form an organic whole through
their relation to a central figure of heroic proportions and through their developments of episodes important to the development of a nation or race” (30).

Thus, an epic is a long narrative poem written in an elevated style. It is usually based on the exploits of legendary or divine characters, and deals with events significant to an entire society. Many critics distinguish between two kinds of epics: the traditional (or folk) epic and the literary (or art) epic. The so-called folk epic is the product of the oral transmission of shorter stories and lays welded into a unified whole in the course of time, typically focusing on the adventures of a hero who is important to or representative of a nation. For example in Homer’s *The Odyssey* (eighth century B.C) the narrative describes the wanderings of the Greek war hero Odysseus:

Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story of that man skilled in all ways of contending, the wanderer, harried for years on end, after he plundered the stronghold on the proud height of Troy.

He saw the townlands and learned the minds of many distant men, and weathered many bitter nights and days in his deep heart at sea, while he fought only to save his life, to bring his shipmates home. But not by will nor valor could he save them, for their own recklessness destroyed them all.

(Robert Fitzgerald, trans.)
As is often the case in folk epics, the problems of the hero in The Odyssey are caused or exacerbated by the wills and whims of deities. Odysseus’s ten years of wandering, for instance, result in part from ill will borne against him by Poseidon, god of the sea, who seeks revenge for his son Polyphemus (a Cyclops), who was made blind by Odysseus. Other folk epics include Homer’s epic the Iliad and the English epic Beowulf.

On the other hand, the literary epic is the product of a single poet writing in accordance with certain literary conventions. Thus it is a conscious imitation of a folk or classical epic. The most famous of these is Virgil’s Aeneid (first century B.C.), which is clearly an imitation of the Homeric epics. Whereas Homer’s epics tell the tales of the tribe of the Greeks, Virgil’s Aeneid tells the story of the founding of Rome by Aeneas. The greatest literary epic after the Aeneid is Milton’s Paradise Lost (1667) in which he attributes to his villain Satan many of the characteristics of the old warring hero of epic tradition.

One of the distinguishing marks of the epic, then, is greatness of character, deed, total conception. Homer’s The Iliad and The Odyssey as well as Virgil’s Aeneid have influenced English epic poets. Albert Lord argues that “it is usually assumed that Homer represents the tradition” (7). Bernard Fenik asserts that in The Iliad “Homer’s particular excellence
lies” (Fenik, 8). Concerning Homer’s mastery of technique, Lord in *The Singer of Tales* says:

Both poems [The *Iliad* and The *Odyssey*] are too well done, show too great a mastery of technique (and by this I mean oral technique) to be by a young man in the stages of learning. To attain such mastery, Homer must have been a singer with a large repertory of songs (151).

What, then, are the conventional characteristics of the epic? Some recurring features of the structure and action of classical epics have come to be viewed as epic conventions. Structurally, the epic traditionally begins with a statement of a poem’s theme or subject matter either combined with or followed by an invocation to a Muse or divine source of inspiration. Thus *The Iliad* opens:

Achilles’ wrath, to Greece the direful spring
Of woes unnumbered, heav’nly Goddess, Sing!

(Alexander Pope, trans.)

and *The Aeneid* opens:

I sing of arms and the man who came of old, a fated wanderer, from the coasts of Troy to Italy and the shore of Lavinium …. Muse, tell me why, for what attain’t of her deity, or in what vexation, did the Queen of heaven urge on a man excellent in goodness to circle through all those afflictions, to face all those trials? Is anger so fierce in celestial spirits? (Robert Fitzgerald, trans.)
Similarly, Milton opens *Paradise Lost* with an invocation to the heavenly muse to sing “Of man’s first disobedience and the fruit/ Of that forbidden tree and announces his purpose as to assert eternal Providence,/ And justify the ways of God to man”. An invocation, then, is an appeal made by a poet to a Muse or deity for help in composing the poem. The invocation of a muse was a convention in ancient Greek and Latin poetry, especially in the epic. Thus, Homer begins the epic powerfully by stating the theme and invoking the Muse.

Another major characteristic of the epic is that the poem begins with the story “in the middle of things” (in *medias res* is the technical term). The action is carried forward for a time and then, at a structurally convenient point, the story from its chronological beginning of the epic is recounted. Reading a Greek epic from the beginning is comparable to turning in to a story already in progress. Homer could begin his poems in *medias res* because the general outline of the story and the main characters were already familiar to his audience. For example, The *Iliad*, like other epics, is a small fragment of a large body of legendary material that formed the cultural and historical heritage of its society.

In *The Odyssey*, Homer begins the story in *medias res*, at a point in the tenth year after the end of the War of Troy. In this way, Homer creates a two-way suspense. The readers are eager to know what happens
next, but they also want to learn what has gone before and how these characters have fallen into their present predicaments. The future is mysterious and unknown, but so is the past. The author then proceeds to unfold the story in two directions, to build up our excitement by moving back and forth across time. Still he produces not a sprawling story, but a tight yarn, for the events of ten years are narrated in the course of the last forty days of continuous action (Lall, 186).

An important feature of the narration is the fast pace of the narrative. Incident follows incident, and the reader goes through the narrative breathlessly. Although every important incident is described in detail, yet the reader “never gets a feeling of prolixity or superfluity” (Lall, 186). The interest of the reader is never allowed to diminish at any stage. In fact, the reader is all the time eager to know what happens next. Almost all the incidents are exciting, and most of them are sensational. Odysseus’s conflict with the ghosts of some dead people, his facing the grave dangers from Scylla and Charybdis, and his battle with his wife’s suitors are all unusually stirring events. Ramji Lall asserts that, most of the situations are highly dramatic and arouse in us a multitude of emotions. The variety of incidents is, indeed, amazing. The resourcefulness, the nimble wit, the daring, the spirit of initiative and the capacity to endure - all these qualities make Odysseus a hero who wins our
highest admiration and regard, and in whose fortunes we feel a deep interest (187).

Readers find a number of descriptive passages in the course of the narration, but these passages are neither too long nor irrelevant. These descriptive passages do not hinder the onward movement of the story and in fact, add to the interest by vividly presenting to the reader’s eyes the particular place where an incident takes place.

In the epic, gods and goddesses take active part in the affairs of human beings and in working out the destinies of the characters. The gods seem to have almost the same qualities, good and bad, as human beings. The gods experience the same emotions of love, hatred, revengefulness, jealousy, antagonism, etc., as human beings. The only difference is that the gods are all-powerful, while human beings possess only a limited power to control the course of events. One could say that the gods in whom the Greeks believed were created by human beings in their own image. The gods play a large part in The Iliad, and the Odyssey contains a pure lay of the gods in Demodocus’ song of Ares and Aphrodite. In Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry (1980) Hatto maintains that the gods and goddesses look and behave like human beings and enter easily into the pattern of the narrative. Though they have moments which are beyond any human capacity as when Homer’s Zeus


ملخص
الأبادع الملحمية في روايتي فيلدنج"جوزيف اندروز" و "توم جونز"

إعداد
نادية غازي محمد

المشرف
الأستاذ الدكتور توفيق يوسف

لقد ربط العديد من النقاد بين الملحمية والرواية من أهم هؤلاء النقاد ناير جورج لوكاش والناقد ميخائيل باختين حيث أدركنا وجود عوامل مشتركة بين هذين النمطين الأدبيين و من هذا المنطلق، فإن هذه الرسالة تعد دراسة روايتين هنري فيلدنج "جوزيف اندروز" و "توم جونز" حيث تظهر أبادع الملحمية جليا في هاتين الروايتين اللتين قام فيلدنج فيها بالابتكار من دراسته للأعمال الأدبية الكلاسيكية الأوروبية والرومانية ما قدما بذلك نوعا جديداً بريعاً

أسماء"القصيدة الملحمية النثرية الهزلية"

لقد درس العديد من النقاد روايتين من زاويات مختلفة لكنهم لم يبدوا اهتماما كافياً في دراسة الأبادع الملحمية في هاتين الروايتين والتي إذا ما درست بعناية فإنها تؤثر على طريقة قراءتنا للكاتبين الروائيين من منظور ملحمي مما سيسهم في توسيع فهمنا لهما. إن هذه الرسالة تهدف الى تعميق فهمنا للروائيتين كقصائد ملحمية نثرية هزلية.

و من الجدير بالذكر أن فيلدنج قام بالابتكار من التجارب الأدبية لأعمال كلاسيكية معتبرة موجودا بذلك نوعا أدبيا جديدا يحيى أمثال كلاسيكية قديمة أخذا بهم اعتباراً و أهواه العصر الذي عاش فيه. و هكذا فإن فيلدنج قام بإبداع تعريف الملحمية بطرقه نسخة هزلية للملحمية. و من هذا المنطلق، فإن أهمية الرسالة تكمن في دراسة أبادع و خصائص الملحمية في روايتين فيلدنج الأثنتين الطريق. و تقوم الدراسة أيضاً بدراسة تأثير استخدام هذه الأمثلت الكلاسيكية القديمة على نشوء و تطور الرواية في القرن الثامن عشر. و أخيراً، فإن الدراسة تبين كيف استطاع فيلدنج أن يقدم شكلا جديداً من أشكال الفن القصصي باعتماده على التراث الملحمي الكلاسيكي.

تتلاقى الرواية من مقدمة و فصولين حيث تتناول المقدمة استعراضا عاماً للتراث الملحمي و تطوره عبر العصور منذ عهد الإلياذة و الأوديسة لهوميروس مرورا بالأتيتاك ليفيرجيل و
Joseph Andrews is a wonderful story, up there with Fielding's Tom Jones in many ways. Abraham Adams is one of the most lovable characters in fiction. Read more. To begin with, Fielding wrote JOSEPH ANDREWS when novel writing was still very nearly a brand new genre. The only models he had were from classical antiquity and a few more recent innovators like Swift and Samuel Richardson. Fielding felt that his efforts were so new that he had to justify them, which he did in the often overlooked and unread “Preface” to the book. Reading this preface sheds some much needed light on the genesis of his novel. Fielding notes here that he wrote JOSEPH ANDREWS according to what he saw as the models first used by the classic ancient poetry writers.