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**MIRROR FOR CIVIC ETHICS: THOMAS
HOBBS ON EPIC POETRY**

ABSTRACT

Epic poetry has long served as a privileged forum for negotiating the interdependence of literary form and political power. Concentrating on Thomas Hobbes's mid-seventeenth-century contributions, his epistolary dialogue with Sir William Davenant surrounding *Gondibert* and the theoretical manifesto prefacing his English translations of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the present study reconstructs the philosophical scaffolding that informs Hobbes's poetics of the epic. Hobbes reconfigures the genre as a civic instrument whose fundamental aim is the fostering of virtue through pleasurable imitation. He articulates seven interlocking features: lexical transparency, syntactic perspicuity, architectural contrivance, disciplined fancy, ethical impartiality, meticulous description, and ample variety. Each functions as a component within an integrated didactic system designed to align the passions of heterogeneous readerships with the rational principles requisite for commonwealth stability. By situating Hobbes's aesthetic theory within its broader intellectual and political contexts, this study indicates that the epic, under his guidance, becomes a calibrated vehicle for shaping collective behaviour, thereby illuminating the genre's enduring capacity to accommodate shifting ideological climates without relinquishing its ethical function.

Keywords: Epic Poetics, Civic Virtue, Thomas Hobbes, Neoclassical Literary Theory, Didacticism in Literature

**SİVİL ETİK İÇİN BİR AYNA: THOMAS
HOBBS'UN EPİK ŞİİR ÜZERİNE
DÜŞÜNCELERİ**

ÖZET

Epik şiir, uzun zamandır edebi form ile siyasal iktidar arasındaki karşılıklı bağı irdelemek için ayrıcalıklı bir zemin sunmuştur. Bu çalışma, Thomas Hobbes'un on yedinci yüzyıl ortalarındaki katkılarına odaklanarak, Sir William Davenant ile *Gondibert* etrafında yürüttüğü mektuplaşma diyalogunu ve *İlyada* ile *Odyseia* çevirilerine eşlik eden teorik manifestoyu inceleyerek, Hobbes'un epik poetikasını şekillendiren felsefi temelleri tartışmaktadır. Hobbes, epik türünü taklit yoluyla erdemin pekiştirildiği bir sivil araç olarak yeniden tanımlar. Ayrıca, bu tür bağlamında birbirini tamamlayan yedi unsur öne sürer: sözcüksel şeffaflık, sözdizimsel açıklık, yapısal düzen, disiplinli hayal gücü, etik tarafsızlık, titiz betimleme ve zengin çeşitlilik. Bunların her biri, heterojen okur kitlelerinin tutkularını toplumsal düzenin istikrarı için gerekli rasyonel ilkelerle uyumlulaştırmayı amaçlayan bütünleşik bir didaktik sistemin bileşeni olarak işlev görür. Hobbes'un estetik kuramını entelektüel ve siyasi düşüncelerini içeren daha geniş bir bağlamda konumlandıran bu çalışma, epik şiirin Hobbes'un rehberliğinde kolektif davranışı biçimlendirmek üzere kalibre edilmiş bir araç haline geldiğini, böylece türün değişen ideolojik iklimlere uyum sağlama kapasitesini etik işlevinden ödün vermeden sürdürdüğünü ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Epik Şiir, Yurttaşlık Erdemi, Thomas Hobbes, Neoklasik Edebi Kuram, Edebiyatta Didaktizm

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Introduction

Epic poetry occupies a singular position within the literary canon due to its inherently political and culturally relevant nature. This genre, historically entwined with narratives of nation-building, heroism, and the collective aspirations or anxieties of societies, invariably compels its audience to interpret the text within the context of its socio-political, theological, and economic milieu. The epic form's unique position as a medium that both reflects and shapes societal values makes it a particularly fertile ground for theoretical analysis, offering insights not only into the literary conventions of its age but also into the underlying ideological, philosophical, and ethical tensions of the times. A rigorous analysis of epic poetry, therefore, demands an integrated understanding of the historical conditions that shaped its composition, dissemination, and reception. Accordingly, scholars have long developed theories of the epic that situate the form within its evolving generic lineage while interrogating its articulation of political, philosophical, ethical, and theological concerns across disparate historical epochs.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), the renowned seventeenth-century English philosopher, serves as a compelling exemplar through whom the intricate intersections of politics, philosophy, and the epic genre during this period can be critically examined. Although Hobbes modestly declared himself “[i]ncompetent, because I am not a Poet” (1971, p. 45) in his correspondence with William Davenant concerning epic poetry, his extensive commentary on the genre indicates otherwise. Far from being merely a detached philosopher, Hobbes was profoundly immersed in the literary milieu of his time, engaging deeply with the canonical epic authors and prominent literary theorists of both classical antiquity and the early modern era. Notably, Hobbes's scholarly contributions extend beyond theoretical discourse; he undertook substantial translations of Homer's monumental epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, into English verse, thereby actively participating in the literary culture he critically evaluated. Consequently, Hobbes emerges as an indispensable figure whose diverse engagements, philosophical reflection and keen political analysis, uniquely position him as an authoritative lens through which the convergences of politics, philosophy, and epic literature in the seventeenth century may be effectively explored.

Furthermore, sustained engagement with Hobbes yields a more nuanced comprehension of the epic's seventeenth-century metamorphosis, a process driven by the genre's deepening entanglement with contemporary political theory and philosophical speculation. Hobbes's reflections are remarkable: they illuminate the evolving functions of heroic narrative and disclose how a pre-eminent political philosopher imagined its cultural and civic vocation. Yet scholarship has hitherto confined itself mainly to his correspondence with Sir William Davenant. The present inquiry moves beyond that narrow focus, examining Hobbes's entire corpus, from his philosophical treatises to the prefatory discourse framing his English translations of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and locating these texts within the intellectual and political currents of the age. In so doing, it aims to indicate that Hobbes transforms the epic into a rigorously engineered instrument of civic discipline, capable of modulating public passions, converting abstract doctrine into vivid narrative, and thereby safeguarding its ethical vocation amid the volatile ideological weather of early modern England.

The starting point to analyse Hobbes's views on epic poetry starts with his correspondence with William Davenant. Hobbes engaged with Davenant in extensive dialogues about the political function and theoretical foundations of the epic genre. These exchanges, later incorporated by

Davenant into the Preface of his epic *Gondibert* (1651), which was dedicated to Hobbes, vividly demonstrate how literary discourse and political theory were deeply intertwined during this period.

Although Davenant's epic *Gondibert* has faded from the literary canon and is now seldom consulted within academic circles, its Preface continues to command considerable critical attention. Indeed, "the Preface to *Gondibert* is a landmark in the history of English literary criticism, particularly in relation to the epic genre, as this is the first critical treatise devoted exclusively to this genre" (Alhas, 2024, p. 54). The Preface also exerted a marked influence on subsequent theoretical discussions and on the composition of later epics. As Connell observes, "[r]arely, indeed, has prefatory matter so completely overshadowed the reputation of the work it was intended to dignify" (2014, p. 64). Scholarly assessments have emphasised both its authority and its eclectic method; in this vein, Swedenberg remarks that it is "a curious amalgam of established theory and freedom of thought" (1944, p. 43). Taken together, these evaluations confirm that Davenant's prefatory essay offers a valuable insight into mid-seventeenth-century epic theory and reveals how literary discourse was inextricably interwoven with the political and philosophical debates of its time.

Crucially, Davenant's acknowledgement of Hobbes's close involvement during the composition of *Gondibert* highlights how significantly the philosopher influenced the epic's formation. In the opening section entitled "The Author's Preface to His Much Honor'd Friend, M. Hobbes," Davenant explicitly states, "you have done me the honour to allow this Poem a daylie examination as it was writing" (1971, p. 3). This admission indicates not only the intimacy of their collaboration but also the extent to which Hobbes actively guided Davenant's poetic and theoretical choices. Further emphasising the complexity of their literary and intellectual project, Davenant invokes Homer at the outset, characterising him as "like the eminent Sea-marke, by which they have in former ages steer'd" (1971, p. 3). This metaphor suggests Homer's authoritative position in the epic tradition, serving as a guiding beacon for subsequent poets. Yet, Davenant simultaneously expresses his intention "to sayle in untry'd Seas" (1971, p. 3), a declaration indicative of his ambition to depart from established Homeric conventions in pursuit of innovation. This tension between adherence to classical models and a commitment to literary innovation reflects broader intellectual currents in seventeenth-century England, highlighting how Davenant and Hobbes sought to renegotiate epic conventions within the context of contemporary philosophical and political discourse.

1. Hobbes's Criteria for Epic Poetry

At the very outset of his answer, Hobbes praises Sir William Davenant's poem for four interlocking excellences: the "choice of the argument," the "disposition of the parts," the "maintenance of the characters," and the "dignity and vigour of expression" (1971, p. 45). Together, these virtues amount to a serious and elevated subject, a coherently organised narrative, characters sustained in accordance with their natures, and a style whose loftiness and energy befit the epic genre. Although he modestly calls himself "not a Poet" (1971, p. 45), Hobbes manifests a precise grasp of classical and Renaissance poetics. His commendation of a "well-governed fancy" reveals a philosophical preference for imagination constrained by judgement: creative power must be disciplined by rational design. In the same spirit, he justifies the unconventional five-book structure of *Gondibert* by arguing that epic and dramatic tragedy share the same underlying architecture, differing only in their mode of presentation. Hobbes thus treats epic composition with

almost scientific rigour, measuring its parts against established standards and defending formal innovation through systematic reasoning.

Hobbes then deploys a striking cosmological analogy to classify the principal domains of poetic imitation. Philosophers, he observes, divide the universe into “Celestial, Aërial, and Terrestrial” spheres; by proportion, poets are said to situate their subjects in “the three Regions of mankind, Court, Citie, and Countrey” (1971, p. 45). The correspondence is not merely decorative but establishes a hierarchical taxonomy of genres that mirrors both natural order and social stratification. The courtly, or celestial, region comprises “princes and men of conspicuous power (anciently call’d Heroes),” figures whose “lustre and influence upon the rest of men” resemble the radiance of the heavens (1971, p. 45). This highest sphere furnishes the matter of heroic poetry: epics and tragedies that dramatise the actions of rulers and exemplary leaders. As the movements of sun and stars regulate terrestrial life, so do the deeds of kings and heroes irradiate the moral and political landscape. For Hobbes, therefore, epic occupies the summit of poetic endeavour, combining lofty theme with the capacity to shape civil values.

Beneath this exalted realm lies the city, aligned with the mutable atmosphere. Hobbes characterises urban society by “insincereness, inconstancie, and troublesome humour,” likening its volatility to the “mobilitie, blustering, and impurity of the Air” (1971, p. 45). This description, redolent of contemporary anxiety about the “mobile” populace, underwrites what he terms “Scommatique” poetry, satire or comedy that exposes civic vice and social hypocrisy. Although lower in status than epic, this genre retains a moral function: by ridiculing folly, it seeks to correct it. Hobbes thus admits a legitimate, if subordinate, poetic service to the policing of manners among the middling orders.

The countryside forms the terrestrial region. Rural labourers, Hobbes writes, possess “a plainness, and (though dull) yet a nutritive facultie [...] that endures a comparison with the Earth they labour” (1971, p. 45). Their honest simplicity inspires pastoral poetry, traditionally the humblest of genres. Though lacking the “lustre” of heroism and the acerbic edge of satire, pastoral offers nourishment through images of labour, continuity, and contentment. Even the lowest social stratum, Hobbes implies, merits imaginative representation, for the stability of the commonwealth depends upon every tier of the social hierarchy. Thus, by mapping Heroic, Scommatic, and Pastoral modes onto court, city, and country, Hobbes replicates in literary theory the tripartite order that seventeenth-century political thought often assumed.

Although Hobbes’s letter remains abstract and avoids explicit comment on England’s civil turmoil, its ideological import is plain. Written in the same year as *Leviathan*’s publication and in support of Davenant’s royalist *Gondibert*, the letter implicitly valorises aristocratic governance and chivalric virtue at a moment when both had been violently contested. Yet Hobbes differs from Davenant in rhetorical strategy. Whereas Davenant’s Preface advances frankly Machiavellian reflections on manipulating the populace, Hobbes “controls the imaginary” by prescribing a literary order that buttresses political hierarchy without overt polemic (Berensmeyer, 2012, p. 26). In doing so, he supplies a philosophy of poetic function consonant with his broader vision of authority: the highest poetry celebrates the sovereign virtues that stabilise society; lesser modes counsel or correct subordinate groups; and all are integrated within a cosmic and civic architecture that subordinates flux to order.

Thomas Hobbes anchors his aesthetic theory in the conviction that epic poetry ought to reform behaviour. Davenant, in his Preface, contends that the traditional pillars of government, namely religion, the military, policy, and law, fall short in moulding the character of the populace, necessitating an additional “collaterall [sic] help” from epic literature (1971, p. 37). In his letter, Hobbes responds to him by defining the poet’s task as “imitating humane life, in delightful and measur’d lines, to avert men from vice, and incline them to virtuous and honourable actions” (1971, p. 45). In other words, epic poetry is a poetic mirror: an artful representation of human conduct whose ultimate purpose is ethical correction.

Hobbes’s principle is firmly embedded in a long critical tradition that had, by the mid-seventeenth century, become a virtual commonplace. From classical antiquity onwards, theorists insisted that epic poetry is written *ut doceat*, to teach. Italian Renaissance critics, whose ideas permeated both French and English letters, elevated this didactic aim to the defining criterion of the genre (Spingarn, 1938, pp. 108–24; Werner, 1974, pp. 27–33). The consensus was equally explicit in England. In his celebrated letter to Sir Walter Raleigh of 23 January 1589, prefixed to *The Faerie Queene*, Edmund Spenser declares that the “generall end [...] of all the booke, is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline” (1966, p. 1). Sir Philip Sidney, in *The Defence of Poesy* (1595), likewise maintains that epic poets “doth not only teach and move to truth, but teachet and moeth to the most high and excellent truth” (30). John Milton, reflecting on his own epic ambitions in *The Reason of Church-Government* (1642), insists that “there ought no regard be sooner had, than to [...] instruction of my country” (1966: YP I: p. 810). Hobbes, therefore, enters a well-established theoretical environment in which the epic’s instructional office is considered axiomatic.

Yet Hobbes adds a crucial refinement: the epic poet, he argues, “must not onely be the Poet [...] but also the Philosopher” (1971, p. 50). For Hobbes, the philosopher is not a cloistered speculator. In *Leviathan*, ch. XLVI, he defines philosophy as “knowledge acquired by reasoning [...] to the end that we may produce [...] such effects as humane life requireth” (1926, p. 518). In *De Cive* he goes so far as to claim that, were moral philosophy as certain as geometry, “the strength of avarice and ambition” would wither and humankind would enjoy “immortal peace” (1949, p. 3). The philosopher’s mission is therefore civic and remedial: to teach princes and subjects alike the rational principles that secure justice, order, and material welfare. When Hobbes insists that the epic poet must also be a philosopher, he is assigning the poet that same public responsibility. Poetry, because it shapes imagination and passion more powerfully than syllogistic prose, must carry the weight of true moral science lest it degenerate into empty ornament.

Hobbes makes the point explicitly to Davenant: “If the precepts of true Philosophy... fayle, as they have hitherto fayled in the doctrine of Morall vertue, there the Architect (Fancy) must take the Philosopher’s parte upon herself” (1971, pp. 49–50). When rational precept alone proves ineffectual, the poetic imagination must step in as the more persuasive teacher. The epic poet wields a dual authority: by embedding philosophical truths within “delightful and measur’d lines,” he converts abstract doctrine into vivid, memorable examples that move the audience to virtuous action (1971, p. 45).

This pedagogical power rests on imitation, not direct instruction. As Hobbes observes, “the subject of a Poem, is the manners of men, not natural causes; manners presented, not dictated; and manners feigned (as the name of Poesie imports) not found in men” (1971, p. 46). Epic poetry teaches through narrative embodiment. By staging fictional deeds, both admirable and

blameworthy, it guides readers to emulate virtue and shun vice without resorting to overt sermonising. The passions aroused by a compelling story do what abstract maxims cannot: they habituate the mind to moral judgments and incline the will towards honourable choices.

This discussion of poetry's capacity to instruct its audience leads naturally to another significant topic: verisimilitude. In his correspondence with Hobbes, Davenant makes plain that verisimilitude is, for him, the governing principle of epic composition. He repudiates the inclusion of supernatural agents, gods, goddesses, and other marvels, because such devices conflict with human reason. Davenant maintains that Homer and Virgil employed divine machinery solely because of their own pagan milieu; when transplanted into a different intellectual climate, the improbable, he argues, diminishes both the pleasure and the didactic force of the poem (Alhas, 2024, p. 62). He likewise rejects allegory, contending that hidden meanings obstruct the epic's instructional purpose. As Dowlin observes, "poetry becomes most instructive when it is true to nature and to probability" (1934, p. 17).

The centrality of verisimilitude in Davenant's theory thus derives from his conviction that it constitutes the finest pedagogical instrument available to the poet. Hobbes concurs, replying that "[r]esemblance of truth is the utmost limit of Poeticall Liberty" (1971, p. 51). This remark confirms their shared belief that verisimilitude is indispensable to the didactic mission of epic poetry. Aikin and Barbauld perceptively trace this principle in *Gondibert*, noting that "[h]uman agency is employed to achieve human objectives" (1792, p. 149). Rational action, rather than reliance upon Christian or pagan divinities, or upon any supernatural intermediaries, therefore emerges as the proper remedy for human dilemmas.

2. Preface to the Translations of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*

Hobbes articulates his poetics most explicitly in the prefatory essay "To the Reader, Concerning the Vertues of an Heroic Poem," appended to his 1675–76 English translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. In this short manifesto, he distils epic excellence into seven interlocking "virtues": (1) lexical transparency, (2) syntactic perspicuity, (3) architectural contrivance, (4) elevated yet disciplined fancy, (5) ethical impartiality, (6) meticulous description, and (7) ample variety. Each virtue advances a single pedagogical aim: to render the heroic poem an instrument of civic instruction by ensuring that aesthetic delight never compromises moral intelligibility. Hobbes's sequence therefore supplies the conceptual scaffolding for the detailed discussion that follows, moving from the smallest unit of language to the overarching amplitude of subject-matter. When analysed alongside his earlier "Answer to Davenant," it reveals a consistent programme: poetry must educate a common readership, women and men alike, through clarity of speech, rational design, and just portrayal, thereby mirroring the ordered plurality of the Hobbesian commonwealth.

Thomas Hobbes opens his catalogue of poetic indiscretions with diction, asserting that "the first indiscretion is the use of such words as to the readers of poesy [...] are not sufficiently known" (Vickers, 2007, p. 619). As in *Leviathan*, ch. 4–5, clarity of terms is for Hobbes the pre-condition of sound cognition; in an epic, obscurity is not merely an aesthetic defect but a moral impediment, for the poem's purpose is "to raise admiration [...] for three virtues: valour, beauty, and love" (2007, p. 619). If those virtues are to instruct, the language that conveys them must be universally intelligible. On the same page, Hobbes insists that an epic address "women no less than men," rejecting the prevalent assumption that Latinisms and ornate neologisms are marks of learning.

His demand for vernacular accessibility thus reflects both his civil-humanist politics, poetry should serve the commonwealth, and his gender-inclusive conception of literary taste.

This programme of linguistic clarity extends to the exclusion of “the names of instruments and tools of artificers, and words of art” (2007, p. 619). Such technical jargon, Hobbes argues, belongs in didactic or georgic verse, not in a heroic poem whose chief business is to celebrate courage and nobility. A protagonist may “delight in the arts,” yet his fame derives from natural virtues and command over others, not from artisanal expertise. He indicates that the point is illustrated by Homer, who never praises Achilles, nor censures Alexander, for their facility with the cithara. In stipulating that a hero’s words must possess “property and significance” while avoiding “the malice and lasciviousness of a satire,” Hobbes also affirms a moral taxonomy of genres: satire traffics in scorn and licentiousness, whereas epic must sustain an elevated ethical tenor. Clear and decorous diction, therefore, functions as the linguistic bedrock upon which the entire Hobbesian edifice of epic virtue is erected (2007, pp. 619-20).

Thomas Hobbes’s second stylistic criterion, “the perspicuity and the facility of construction,” amplifies his lexical strictures by attending to syntax and prosody, those aspects of form that make language transparent in motion as well as in meaning. A well-made epic, he writes, should exhibit “a natural contexture of the words, so as not to discover the labour but the natural ability of the poet” (2007, p. 619). The aim is classical *claritas*: the order of words “carries a light before it whereby a man may foresee the length of his period, as a torch in the night shews a man the stops and unevenness in his way” (2007, p. 619). When, by contrast, they are “placed unnaturally,” the reader endures “unexpected checks” and must “go back and hunt for the sense,” a discomfort Hobbes likens to a coach jolting over a furrow. Redundant inversions, choked parentheses, and showy archaisms therefore undermine the poem’s civic purpose by obstructing moral contemplation.

Hobbes next confronts the perennial defence that obscurity is an inevitable consequence imposed by the constraints of metre and rhyme. Greek and Latin poets are “bound [...] to a number of feet and quantity of syllables,” while English poets are fettered by “number of syllables and rhyme;” nevertheless, these constraints never excuse syntactic darkness. Possessing “liberty to depart from what is obstinate,” the poet must select language “no less fit for his purpose” yet fully obedient to formal law (2007, p. 620). Genuine artistry, therefore, lies not in baroque ingenuity but in negotiating prosodic discipline without sacrificing semantic clarity. Finally, Hobbes grants a narrow pardon to the translator, who may plead necessity when fidelity to a source clashes with the demands of English metre. This caveat illuminates his own Homeric practice: he occasionally relaxes rhyme or accent to preserve narrative perspicuity, thereby privileging the ethical over the ornamental. Perspicuity and facility, then, are not optional graces but moral imperatives. Epic poetry must conduct its audience, unimpeded, towards the virtues of “valour, beauty, and love;” strained syntax or contorted rhyme inserts friction where illumination is required (2007, p. 619). Hobbes thus subordinates poetic technique to his larger political project: the preservation of civil peace through disciplined, immediately intelligible speech.

Thomas Hobbes’s third poetic virtue, “contrivance,” shifts the discussion from verbal clarity to the deliberate architecture of narrative. A prose history, he observes, “is wholly related by the writer,” whereas in an epic “a great part of the narration is [...] put upon some of the persons introduced by the poet” (2007, p. 620). This delegation of storytelling duties not only diversifies perspective but also licenses the poet to begin in medias res. Homer, Hobbes notes, omits the

abduction of Helen at the outset of *The Iliad*, allowing Menelaus to rehearse the grievance “very briefly, as a thing notorious” before the Trojan council; likewise, *The Odyssey* withholds the hero’s wanderings until Odysseus himself recounts them to Alcinous “in the midst of his poem.” Such postponement, Hobbes maintains, is “much more pleasant and ingenious than a too precise and close following of the time” (2007, p. 620), because it arrests attention with immediate crisis while reserving causal exposition for a moment of heightened curiosity.

This strategy yields narrative economy and psychological depth. By compressing back-story into embedded speeches, the poet spares the reader a prolix exordium and simultaneously reveals character: Menelaus’s succinct indignation and Odysseus’s artful self-presentation disclose temperament as vividly as they convey fact. The technique also aligns with Hobbes’s broader epistemology, which warns against “insignificant speech” (*Leviathan*, chs 4–5); a reader invited to evaluate the reliability of a first-person account turns from passive reception to critical scrutiny, thereby exercising the judgement that Hobbes deems essential to civil concord.

Contrivance further reconciles temporal freedom with causal intelligibility. Although causal origins are deferred, they are not omitted; when finally disclosed, they complete a coherent chain of action while having already generated suspense and emotional engagement. In effect, Hobbes upholds Aristotle’s unity of action by redefining it as unity of intelligible causation rather than mere chronological sequence. The poet’s art lies in selective disclosure, ordering events for maximal affective impact without sacrificing explanatory clarity. Thus, contrivance perfects the movement from lexical precision to syntactic facility by showing how words and sentences are subordinated to a larger architecture of suspense, characterisation, and moral instruction. In Hobbes’s poetics, the epic plot is not an exhaustive chronicle but a strategically articulated design that guides readers toward the contemplation of valour, beauty, and love, all the while training them in the critical discernment necessary for political stability.

Hobbes’s fourth criterion for epic excellence in his Preface to the translations of Homer’s epics centres on the faculty he calls “fancy,” the imaginative power that elevates verse beyond the mechanical arrangement of diction, syntax, and plot. Although Hobbes recognises the irresistible allure of vivid association, what his contemporaries labelled wit, he insists that such exuberance must remain under the guidance of rational discretion. This tension between imaginative flight and regulatory judgement typifies Hobbes’s broader intellectual project, which consistently seeks equilibrium between dynamic energy and stabilising order.

Hobbes observes that “[m]en more generally affect and admire fancy than they do either judgment, or reason, or memory” (2007, p. 620). In *Leviathan*, ch. VIII, he elaborates: “In a good Poem [...] both Judgment and Fancy are required: but the Fancy must be more eminent; because they please for the Extravagancy; but ought not to displease by Indiscretion” (1926, p. 54). This remark cuts in two directions: Hobbes concedes that poetry must dazzle, yet he insists that delight cannot license disorder. Fancy supplies the “extravagancy” modern readers may prize as the sublime; discretion ensures that sublimity remains intelligible and morally sound. Left unconstrained, fancy devolves into incoherence. Accordingly, Hobbes indicates that discretion operates as an indispensable sieve that safeguards three forms of decorum. First, it secures fitness to character, time, and place, preventing Achilles from indulging in comic tropes and excluding domestic similes from scenes of counsel. Second, it enforces moral propriety by rejecting “indecent” allusions that would diminish heroic gravity. Third, it maintains generic purity: “sharp and extraordinary” metaphors may animate forensic oratory, whose aim is immediate persuasion,

yet epic requires a steadier grandeur appropriate to long-term didactic and commemorative ends (2007, p. 620). Thus, fancy aligns with invention and discretion with judgement, reiterating the classical Ciceronian pairing so central to Renaissance poetics.

It should be noted here that the aesthetic logic of regulated fancy mirrors Hobbes's political thought. As repeatedly emphasised in *Leviathan* and *De Cive*, just as unrestrained private judgement threatens the integrity of the commonwealth, so too does unchecked imaginative excess reduce the epic to a state of disordered magnificence. The epic poet must entice readers with marvels while modelling the disciplined passions essential to civic stability. Only a "disciplined sublime" can cultivate the orderly sensibilities demanded of citizens in Hobbes's ideal polity; a decorous yet vivid epic becomes, in effect, a lesson in political as well as aesthetic moderation.

Hobbes's fifth criterion shifts the focus from aesthetic craft to ethical responsibility, insisting that the epic poet, like the historian, "writeth only (or should do) matter of fact" ("To the Reader" 621). Praise or blame is legitimate, he argues, only when it rests upon demonstrable truth; any defamation grounded merely on rumour or conjecture is "below the dignity not only of a hero but of a man" (2007, p. 621). Hobbes's insistence that characters be judged on verifiable evidence imports the procedural safeguards of common law into poetics: just as no citizen may be condemned without a hearing, no figure in an epic may be stigmatised without factual warrant. By equating literary misrepresentation with juridical injustice, Hobbes forges a distinctive nexus between decorum, civic equity, and due process. Narrative omniscience does not confer judicial authority; instead, the poet must present context and, in effect, allow characters to "plead for themselves" before issuing moral verdicts (2007, p. 621). Even antagonists require proportionate treatment, for the poet who rushes to condemn without such balance risks reducing complex individuals to caricatures. Hobbes thereby discourages personal libel and the thinly veiled contemporary lampoons common in post-Jonsonian satire, lest the epic forfeit its heroic vocation and descend into partisan invective. A measured narratorial voice, inviting readers to weigh evidence rather than dictating sentiment, becomes essential to the poem's moral authority.

This aesthetic discipline mirrors Hobbes's political philosophy as articulated in *Leviathan*, ch. XXVIII, where he condemns "private revenges," observing that "neither private revenges, nor injuries of private men, can properly be stiled Punishment; because they proceed not from publique Authority" (1926, p. 239). Unfounded literary defamation threatens social concord by inflaming factional passions; conversely, a scrupulously just epic models the disciplined evaluation of virtue and vice that sustains civil peace. Justice and impartiality thus perfect Hobbes's preceding poetic virtues, lucid diction, orderly syntax, artful contrivance, and regulated fancy, by orienting them toward an ethical telos. In framing representation as a quasi-legal proceeding, Hobbes extends his jurisprudential commitments to the realm of art: language, whether in the forum or on the page, must never jeopardise the commonwealth through reckless injury to reputation.

Hobbes's sixth poetic virtue, the "perfection and curiosity of Descriptions", moves from the architectonics of plot and moral balance to the micro-poetics of epic representation. He equates the poet with a painter whose canvas must satisfy both the distant spectator and "they that stand near, and look upon it with the oldest spectacles of a critic", thereby fusing technical precision with aesthetic pleasure and moral credibility (621). For Hobbes, the descriptive image (εἰκὼν) forms the ground of a poetical comparison: the poet first furnishes a concrete tableau, then completes the analogy with a brief comparative tag: Virgil's oak-simile in *Aeneid* (II.624-31) exemplifies the method: labour, axe-strokes, and creaking fibres are inventoried before the final,

illuminating comparison is released. The “grace,” Hobbes writes, “lieth in the lightsomeness, and is but the description of all, even the minutest parts of the thing described,” a level of detail that withstands the severest scrutiny (2007, p. 621).

Such lightsome exactitude imposes two obligations. First, the poet must supply tactile particulars, battlefields, storms, or banquets rendered with enough verisimilitude to persuade both ordinary readers and “hostile critics.” Secondly, those particulars must be conveyed in “the most decent words,” much as a painter chooses only the choicest colours; wounds may be graphic yet never grotesque, tempests violent yet never confusing (2007, p. 621). By imagining the severest readerly gaze in advance, the poet anticipates commentary, gloss, and scholarly debate, crafting episodes that reward close, even microscopic, inspection. The cabinet picture—small in scale yet perfect in finish—becomes Hobbes’s model, deflecting the temptation towards sprawling exuberance and maintaining compositional focus on the principal action. This insistence on vivid yet disciplined description integrates Hobbes’s earlier criteria. Clear diction and syntax convey the image; elevated fancy supplies striking particulars, which discretion then orders; justice ultimately relies on such credible images to ground fair praise or blame. Description, therefore, functions as a hinge that converts the epic’s ethical and structural aims into sensory immediacy.

It should be noted also that during the Renaissance, issues of poetics, aesthetics, and visual representation stood at the centre of humanist inquiry. Horace’s *ut pictura poesis* from the *Ars Poetica* remained influential among Elizabethan and Jacobean theorists, who treated poetry and painting as allied arts founded on a standard “mirror” theory of truth. The metaphor was upheld by historians and rhetoricians from Lucian, Quintilian, and Cicero to Raleigh, Spenser, and Sidney. In *How to Write History*, Lucian urged historians to adopt the stance of impartial spectators, presenting images “in no way displaced, dimmed or distorted.” Gerhard Vossius later echoed the idea in 1623, defining history as a *speculum vitae humanae*. This mirror concept also shaped the political handbook known as the “mirror for princes” (*speculum regum*) and stimulated broad reflections on the relation between history and truth, the role of judgement in historical writing, and the interplay of history and memory (Springborg, 2008, pp. 249–250). In this respect, the sixth criterion is also indirectly linked to the instructional value of the epic poetry, which is a topic that finds itself a great place in the Davenant and Hobbes exchange, once again indicating the gravity of this topic for Hobbes’s views on epic poetry.

Thomas Hobbes concludes his catalogue of epic virtues with “the amplitude of the subject,” which he defines as “nothing but variety, and a thing without which a whole poem would be no pleasanter than an epigram, or one good verse; nor a picture of a hundred figures better than any one of them asunder, if drawn with equal art” (2007, p. 621). Amplitude, then, is the principle that transforms isolated brilliance into sustained grandeur. By multiplying episodes, characters, settings, and moods, the poet prevents monotony and mirrors the restless yet ordered motions of fancy; diverse perspectives on courage, piety, or prudence also advance the earlier criterion of justice, for balanced moral judgment presupposes a broad *dramatis personae*.

Hobbes reinforces his point through a painterly analogy, just as seventeenth-century connoisseurs prized cabinet pictures whose many figures were held together by compositional unity, so an epic must weave myth, dialogue, simile, and catalogue into a single intelligible action (2007, pp. 621–22). Variety without unity degenerates into sprawl, whereas unity without variety lapses into tedium; amplitude mediates between these extremes by offering complexity disciplined by contrivance. It is for this reason, he adds, that critics should deploy the seven virtues,

“especially” amplitude, when comparing Homer with Virgil, or Virgil with Lucan, for only amplitude reveals how each poet sustains interest across the full sweep of martial and domestic life, national history, or rhetorical set-piece. Interestingly, amplitude completes the scalar logic of Hobbes’s poetics. Clear words enable orderly syntax; orderly syntax supports coherent contrivance; contrivance provides a field for elevated yet governed fancy; fancy adorns impartial justice; justice demands exact description; exact description flourishes only within ample variety. The seventh virtue, therefore, crowns the preceding six by multiplying their effects without dissolving them into chaos.

Conclusion

Thus, epic poetry emerges, in Hobbes’s schema, as a civic medium: a disciplined exercise of imagination designed to reform conduct and fortify political order. By prescribing clarity of diction, syntactic lucidity, architectural contrivance, regulated fancy, scrupulous justice, vivid description, and ample variety, Hobbes builds a poetics whose every element converges upon one overriding telos—the cultivation of virtue in a turbulent commonwealth. The epic poet is required to be philosopher as well as artist, transmuting rational precepts into emotionally resonant narratives that “avert men from vice and incline them to virtuous and honourable actions” (1971, p. 45). Moral efficacy, therefore, becomes the measure of aesthetic success; where instruction falters, no brilliance of language or design can compensate.

Hobbes’s correspondence with Davenant and the later Preface to his Homeric translations reveal a consistent strategy: epic imitation must remain verisimilar, inclusive, and publicly intelligible so that its lessons may penetrate beyond the court to the city and the countryside. Heroic models inspire rulers, satiric portraits chasten urban inconstancy, and pastoral scenes nourish the labouring populace, together composing a literary mirror of the tripartite polity. In defending these hierarchies, Hobbes simultaneously reinscribes and rationalises them, for the epic poem that harmonises imaginative extravagance with philosophical discretion rehearses, in miniature, the balance between passion and reason upon which civil peace depends. Attention to Hobbes’s seven virtues thus clarifies the seventeenth-century transformation of epic from a celebration of martial prowess into an instrument of moral pedagogy. Where earlier theorists proclaimed that epic should teach, Hobbes articulates how it must teach: through accessible language, orderly design, and impartial judgment embodied in credible, affective episodes. The epic, thus, becomes, under his guidance, not simply a monument to past heroism but an active mechanism for shaping future citizens, showing virtue both admirable and intelligible, and aligning private sentiment with public good.

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