Stories of Everything: Epics, Encyclopedias, and Concepts of _Complete‘ Knowledge

Seth Rudy

The Eighteenth Century, Volume 55, Number 4, Winter 2014, pp. 411-430 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press
DOI: 10.1353/ecy.2014.0034

Stories of Everything: Epics, Encyclopedias, and Concepts of "Complete" Knowledge

Seth Rudy
Rhodes College

Epic poetry has long enjoyed a critical association with various manifestations of encyclopedic learning. The reputation of Homer and Virgil's comprehensive knowledge in antiquity and the Middle Ages— a reputation neither always unchallenged nor entirely defeated, even as late as the early eighteenth century— helped make epic an enduring signi er of great magnitude and longevity, if no longer one of truly universal scope. Now, at a moment when Google seeks "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful," and when digital technologies have brought with them new modes and forms of knowledge production and transmission, scholars have again begun to look to epic as the ancestor of an emerging genre that similarly has the potential to rede ne the standards, value, and possibilities of complete knowledge. Database, as Ed Folsom writes in "Database as Genre: the Epic Transformation of the Archive," is gaining recognition as "the genre of the twenty- rst century," but in truth it "has been with us all along, in the guises of those literary works we have always had trouble assigning to a genre," and as Wai Chee Dimock claims, in the phenomenological life of epic.[1] The ancient commonplaces praising Homer and Virgil's more- than-human capacities connect epic and its history to everything fr om the Iliad, Odyssey, and Aeneid to Francis Bacon's *Great Instauration* (1620), and from the encyclopedias of the Enlightenment to the reputation of Google's PageRank as an "all-knowing" algorithm.[2] The genre has for centuries been a part of the discourse of the many projects, texts, and technologies that aspire to or indeed do surpass the limitations of a single mortal mind.

In 1710, the author and biographer Richard Ward summarized his thoughts on those limitations with a phrase he claimed to have borrowed from antiquity. "When a Man shall be join'd to Intellect, or Understanding," he wrote, "by a sort of Complete Knowledge of all things, then a God (or, as I would interpret it, an extraordinary Heroe) may be said to sojourn in a Human Body."[3] Ward's assess-

The Eighteenth Century, vol. 55, no. 4

of Bacon's The Great Instauration, for example, famously depicts a ship passing between the Pillars of Hercules; John Milton, whose genius readers would later compare to that of Bacon and Newton, wrote his epic while "with dangers compass'd round." [7] Alexander Pope enlisted as an author-soldier in the Battle of the Ancients and Moderns; Chambers shortly thereafter situated his very Modern Cyclopœdia as a successor to the Odyssey, Iliad, and Aeneid. While these writers frequently disagreed with one another, both implicitly and explicitly, about the proper pathway to complete knowledge, the best way to represent that knowledge, and even what completeness itself entailed, they are all connected by their involvement in the modeling and mediation of that concept—the realization of which we have searched for, if one takes Milton for a guide, since Creation, and which has continued to elude us since the Fall. [8] Each of their texts participated in the organization and hierarchization of the literary past and present, and each had a specific relationship to the future defined in part by its ability to continue to do that work. As this article will show, these authors' and editors' pursuit of completeness furthered a process of generic differentiation that resulted in the separation of encyclopedias from epic poems, literature from Literature, and the sciences from the humanities.

I. GENERIC CONVENTION: EPICS AS ENCYCLOPEDIAS

Any poet who aspired to write an epic poem in the late seventeenth contemplated a potentially heroic task. By 1667, the question of how much and what kinds of knowledge the classical epics truly comprehended had not been definitively answered—despite its having been asked and argued about since

misreading and distortion"; Plato "adopted an adversarial position with regard to the 'Homeric encyclopedia,' and the Ionian philosophical tradition before him had been actively hostile." [12] The astronomer, geographer, and mathematician Eratosthenes denigrated the epics as entirely frivolous entertainments, and though Strabo later argued that Homer truly had founded the science of

praise Paradise Lost received as "the story of everything"—a book in which "every Thing that is great in the whole Circle of Being, whether within the Verge of Nature, or out of it, has a proper Part assigned it"—the poem actually marks the ancient substance of that praise as impracticable in an age of modern knowledge production and opposed to Milton's understanding of the teleology of human learning in its postlapsarian state.[19] The world that lay all before Adam and Eve at the end of the poem and the new work of knowing that they would have to do are external to Eden and the possibility of complete knowledge as it had there existed. So too, Milton suggests, are they beyond the bounds of a literary genre that like Eden had once been a place wherein the mortal most closely approached the divine.

Rather than offer a complete body of modern knowledge, Milton directs his readers' attention beyond the boundaries of the epic narrative and towards their own part in the heroic work of knowing that remained to be done in the world. Human learning does not stop at the end of Paradise Lost but begins anew under drastically altered conditions— conditions that continued to inhere in the seventeenth century but which had been joined with new standards and modes of knowledge production. Recent scholarship has provided insight into the in uence of Baconianism on Milton's thought and the place of the new natural philosophy in his Eden.[20] Before the fall, Adam's study of God and the natural world takes place in concert under the direction of Raphael, whom Milton describes "in terms that associate the archangel with the emerging sciences."[21] This association lends those sciences the esteem of divine authorization and adds them to the many other parts of human learning that had a recognizable if idealized presence in the garden as components of a complete body of knowledge.

The sciences retain their importance in the aftermath, but whereas in Eden Adam could fruitfully pursue and comprehend that value via direct individual effort, the fall necessitated the transformation of his singular endeavor into the

hensive approach to knowledge production. [25] Disobedience makes distinction rather than unity the principal mode of human comprehension. Satan speaks of the power given him by the tree, the "Mother of Science," to "discern things in their causes," and though he never actually eats of the fruit, in this much at least the devil speaks true: the tree does bestow the power to discern.[26] The rst knowledge of humanity's postlapsarian experience comes from understanding difference; Adam and Eve learn to know good and evil. [27] Their new power to discern—from the Latin discernere, literally "to separate"—divides one branch of knowledge into two and makes fragmentation the new basis of human epis - temology.[28] Discovering truth in the postlapsarian world, as Kathleen Swaim writes, "requires human beings to collect as many as possible fragments towards a total structure. Once fragments have been collected, they must be remembered, or re-collected, as the standard against which future options are measured and to which true additions may be made." This "shift from space to time and from established unity to progressive transcendence of divisions," Swaim continues, "is precisely the difference between the prelapsarian and the postlapsarian." [29]

Milton's Protestantism made the process of gathering fragments of Christian truth a matter of scriptural exegesis performed by the individual who must struggle to comprehend their unity. This vision of the fall establishes a course by which the advancement of human knowledge proceeds back to unity not despite division but through it. That process aligns Milton's religious methodology with that of the natural philosophers who likewise sought to undo the damage of the fall by collecting fragments of knowledge. Bacon had made fragmentary genres such as the essay and aphorism the new basis of knowledge production and progress; in The Great Instauration, he speci cally declared "compleat" bodies of learning and premature reductions of fragments into supposedly uni ed systems counterproductive to the search for truth. [30] Nearly half a century later, the Royal Society adopted a similar policy:

> The Society has reduc'd its principal observations, into one common stock; and laid them up in publique Registers, to be nakedly transmitted to the next Generation of Men; and so from them, to their Successors. And as their purpose was, to heap up a mixt Mass of Experiments, without digesting them into any perfect model: so to this end, they con n'd themselves to no order of subjects; and whatever they have recorded, they have done it, not as compleat Schemes of opinions, but as bare un nish'd Histories. [31]

Sprat's The History of the Royal Society (1667) appeared in the same year as the rst edition of Paradise Lost, and with respect to the methods of mediating completeness they describe or perform, the positions de ned by each neatly divide the concept along what they helped to de ne as the boundaries separating the sciences from the humanities and literature from Literature. Even the greater

magnitude of the epic could not contain the whole circle of the arts and sciences as they appeared to readers in the latter half of the seventeenth century, and to those who had rede ned the terms of understanding and advancing them any attempt to do so was either bound to fail or likely to be superseded. Paradise Lost could not offer the comprehensive knowledge valued by the practitioners of the new science while attempting to represent how such knowledge might ultimately cohere, and the un nished histories and essays of the Royal Society could not provide the coherence of epic while remaining open to the process of correction and expansion. When read against the critical history of the epic and within the context of contemporary knowledge production, Paradise Lost suggests that the mediation of complete knowledge as a function of literary representation nally demanded a division of labor in which the modern epicist prioritized the presentation of a limited unity and left the production and collection of different kinds of knowledge to other writers and genres unburdened by the other conventions of epic composition and completeness.

To embrace the learning of his day meant to embrace the incompleteness of that learning and the limitations of a single human mind. Raphael's conversation with Adam speci cally addresses those limits and dramatizes the challenges of epic encyclopedism in its modern context: the same speech in which the angel necessarily avoids giving a de nitive answer to the still- unsettled question of heliocentrism discourages Adam from seeking knowledge above his station

even “more complete” record of the relevant information. That phrase, ubiquitous in the title pages, dedications, and prefaces of such texts, indicates the compromise that the limitations of time and intellect generally compelled writers and readers to make—a compromise that treats completeness as a continuum rather than a binary and carries the implicit promise of continued growth, comprehensibility, or usefulness.

The Augustan poets writing in Milton’s wake famously did not attempt to keep pace with the rapidly expanding horizons of literary knowledge production by composing epics of their own.[33] To encourage epic generativity with original contributions might have authorized legions of Blackmores unknown to publish additional unwelcome variations that would only further diminish the high status of a genre already under threat by modernity.[34] Instead, the Augustans largely suspended epic production altogether. Despite Pope’s having thoroughly infused his translations of the Iliad and Odyssey with his very eighteenth-century English sensibilities, they did not technically add to the total number of epics considered by his contemporaries to constitute an already “complete” generic body.[35] They functioned instead as updated versions of the classics that theoretically maintained their purchase on modernity while providing Pope with a means to attach his own fortunes to works of proven durability.[36]

Pope’s translations, then, rather than problematically expanding a canon to which his cultural and literary conservatism would scarcely suffer additions, folded the classics into a larger program of literary mediation that attempted to carry on the work of the epic without it. Though poems could not contain the complete knowledge of their time in the comprehensive sense championed by the Moderns—the apparatus of Pope’s *Dunciad Variorum* clearly demonstrates the inelegance and futility of such projects—they could be used to de ne both what kinds of knowledge should count in the futur e and how that knowledge should be understood.[37] If in Paradise Lost humanity emerged from the gar den dependent on their powers of discernment to know good from evil, then under the Augustan conservatorship of taste and judgment, discernment became the critical faculty by which the fragments of knowledge worth keeping would be separated from those better left to what Harold Weber has described as the “‘garbage heap’ of memory.”[38] Improving, advancing, and demonstrating the powers of discrimination that would de ne and delimit knowledge of permanent value rather than completely comprehend knowledge in its temporally unstable entirety became in Pope’s poetry the new prestigious work of authorship.

The idea that one good epic could replace or render entire libraries unnecessary remained a trope of literary criticism and epic paratexts, and among the highest compliments one could pay a poet whether living or dead was still a remark upon that poet’s comprehensive capacities. At the same time, however, the scope of Homer and Virgil’s knowledge was increasingly understood to be relatively narrow in comparison to that collectively possessed by modernity.

articulation. The essay places its nal focus on the greater work of the epic poet and it literally ends in failure.

It also raises the question of precisely what kind of needs could be answered so completely by reading Homer that almost all other books would be rendered super uous. The space between the supposedly universal utility of the classical epics and the necessarily limited learning they contained implies a decoupling of epic and archival values linked by Mulgrave to the likewise interrelated phenomena of progressive knowledge and expanding volume. This decoupling

> be understood at large, as if he had included the full and regular Systems of every thing: He is to be consider'd professedly only in Quality of a Poet; this was his Business, to which, as whatever he knew was to be subservient, so he has not fail'd to introduce those Strokes of Knowledge from the whole Circle of Arts and Sciences, which the Subject demanded either for Necessity or Ornament.[47]

Pope would hardly have needed to clarify that which had already been established by common consent. Set against his previous claims, then, these lines must function either as a limited concession to those who dismissed the completeness of Homer's knowledge or as a suggestion to those readers who still looked to Homer for absolutely everything that for some things they had better look elsewhere.

Though the passage clearly demonstrates an attempt by Pope to promote the autonomy of poetry as a superior form of knowledge, his appeal to readers to make a qualitative distinction between the Poet and other, unnamed kinds of knowledge-producers contains language that links it to the burdens of quantity. We find "little" of the arts and sciences in Homer's poems; they do not include "full" systems of "every thing"; he drew from the whole circle only those "strokes" of knowledge that served or supplemented the greater inventive power of his poetic imagination. Whatever the actual depth and breadth of Homer's knowledge of the arts and sciences, the poetry took precedence. The "quality of a poet" to which Pope restricted his readers' consideration of Homer, then, did not entail the obligation to contain in one's poems the complete circle of arts and sciences in what some other discourse of knowledge production might define as a comprehensive sense.[48]

hensive capacity of Homer's mind that "he would go near to renounce the Society of any Man, who should deny Homer to have been Master of the whole Cyclopedia of Arts and Sciences."[49] Marygold (or his erstwhile biographer) may not have had Ephraim Chambers's work speci cally in mind when he made (or almost made) this proclamation, but contemporary readers could not have overlooked the connection between Homer's poems and the new encyclopedias. Though the word "encyclopedia" had graced the covers of compendia since the sixteenth century, Chambers's proposal had begun to appropriate the shortened version of the term in 1726, and the Cyclopædia itself had enjoyed a successful debut only the year before the Tribune's brief run at the end of the decade.[50] Indeed, few texts published after 1728 used the term to refer to anything other than the Cyclopædia.[51]

To some extent, its very had ETm (50)tu3(Cyclo ETm * [(s)Tj T* (cade.)Tj 5.247 0 0 5.247 10

The relationships between several major Augustan authors and their Ancient models had more to them than veneration and imitation. To Pope, Britain was not yet but might one day be better than Virgil's Rome; the classics were perfect in Greek and Latin, but might be made even more so when rendered in English couplets re ective of English values. Chambers seemed to think that a new and improved Augustan age would more likely result from reactivating Ancient aspirations as well as artifacts. Such a philosophy left plenty of room for modernity and the destabilization of traditional generic hierarchies that came with it. Neither Chambers nor any other editor of an eighteenth- century encyclopedia explicitly declar ed himself the Homer or Virgil of his day, but the plans for and prefaces to their works make clear that several had precisely such pretensions.

To Chambers, the title of "Augustan" might more properly have belonged to the Moderns—or at least, to Modern works like the Cyclopædia, which while including Ancient knowledge as part of a whole "course of learning" still remained dedicated to recording its latest developments. In the dedication of his work to the king, Chambers writes that the time when Rome would envy England's Augustan age nally seemed to be at hand. As Greece was under Alexander and Rome under Caesar Augustus, he insists, so would Britain be under the newly crowned George Augustus; but "even this," he continues, "were to under- rate our Hopes."[53] If the reign of Augustus established new foundations for a stronger Roman Empire than the Emperor himself would live to see, then that of George II would do as much and more for Britain. The rst Cyclopædia, like the Aeneid before it, would mark a starting point for the new age: the initial edition circumscribed the current boundaries of the "Republick of Learning." Later editions would record its continuing expansion.

The forward- looking stance adopted by Chambers and the encyclopedists that followed him constitutes a critical counterpoint to the contemporary neo - classical perspective on literary achievement. A new Augustan period would begin with a work not only destined but also designed to be surpassed; an age does not begin at its height, and an enlightened (or Enlightenment) Virgil would welcome the coming of his betters. The epic poem might therefore once have been the pinnacle of the Virgilian triad, and Homer, as Chambers writes, might still have been the best poet in world, but in his opinion the Cyclopædia would eventually become "the best Book in the Universe."[54] Chambers did not qualify the remark with generic distinctions. The Cyclopædia would not merely be the best book of its kind, but the best of all kinds and for all times.

Other encyclopedists would make the same or similar claims about their own texts. Chambers, as well as Jean le Rond D'Alembert and Denis Diderot (who took the Cyclopædia as the starting point for what eventually became the Encyclopédie), followed Bacon in debunking some of the accolades attached to the classical epics and went on to appropriate others. Chambers names Homer ve times in his preface, and his discourse on the place of poetry in the system

of arts and sciences runs throughout the rst sixteen of its thirty pages. The most purely inspired and nearest to Heaven, poetry cooperated so closely with Nature that people mistakenly deemed poets the inventors of all subordinate arts, and they thought Homer— in whose works all Natur e could supposedly be found—the inventor of poetry . “Thus it is,” Chambers explains, that “Homer is often complimented with being the Father of all Arts.” He continues:

less cycle of generic self-reproduction.[59] As James Creech writes, “an encyclopedia must fix the totality of knowledge in one moment, like an image of the

volume of writing would continue throughout the eighteenth century: by the 1750s, the “complete” knowledge of the epic poet existed entirely within the bounds of artistic or imaginative enterprise and without the broadening circle of arts and sciences as de ned and represented by the universal dictionaries; by the 1790s, the standards of poetic achievement had become such that genres

their present names" (54). In either case, the poems contain (or were believed to contain) more knowledge than their narratives super cially suggest.

12. Robert Lamberton, introduction to Homer's Ancient Readers, vii–xxv, xvi. Lamber ton notes the Pythagoreans as a possible exception.

13. Strabo,Geographica

humanity further contributes to the partially nished and partially incomplete nature of Milton's epic: as individuals, Adam and Eve see their plot to its end within the poem; as the representatives of all humanity, their plot continues without it.

26. Milton, Paradise Lost, 9.681–82. Satan speaks in the language of division from the very outset: discernment, disdain, and dislike appear in his actions and thoughts upon his arrival in Hell and in his rst speech (1.78, 1.98, 1.102). The pre x "dis- ," which occurs frequently in his rhetoric throughout the poem, re ects the devils' own state of separation from God and adumbrates the division he will visit upon Eve and Adam. See Neil Forsyth, "Of Man's First Dis," in Milton in Italy: Contexts, Images, Contradictions, ed. Mario A. Di Cesare (Binghamton, 1991), 345–69.

27. "It was called the tree of knowledge of good and evil from the event; for since Adam tasted it, we not only know evil, but we know good only by means of evil" (Milton, "The Christian Doctrine," in The Complete Poems and Major Prose, ed. Merritt Hughes (1957; reprint Indianapolis, 2003), 900–1020, 993.

28. Oxford English Dictionary Online s.v. "discern, v."

29. Kathleen Swaim, Before and after the Fall: Contrasting Modes in Paradise Lost (Amherst, 1986), 23.

30. Bacon, Novum Organum, ed. and trans. Peter Urbach and John Gibson (Chicago and La Salle, 1994), 9.

31. Thomas Sprat, The History of the Royal Society of London (London, 1667), 115.

32. Milton, Paradise Lost, 8.192, 8.200.

33. John Dryden had contemplated a poem on Arthur and the Black Prince but never undertook it, and Alexander Pope destroyed all but a few fragments of his adolescent effort on Alexander. At the end of his life, he thought of Brutus for a subject, but he did not live long enough put the thought into verse. See, for example, Walter Jackson Bate, The Burden of the Past and the English Poet (Cambridge, Mass., 1970); Harold Bloom, The Anxiety of In uence (New York, 1973); Alistair Fowler, "The Life and Death of Literary Forms," New Literary History 2 (1971): 199–216; and Dustin Grif n, "Milton and the Decline of Epic in the Eighteenth Century," New Literary History (1982): 143–54.

34. The rst part of a long note to 2.268 of the Dunciad Variorum lists the number of books contained by each of Blackmore's "no less than six Epic poems" (a total of 58) and sneers at the existence of "many more" texts besides Blackmore and his "indefatigable Muse," according to Pope, threatened to devalue the currency of the genre ("The Dunciad Variorum," in The Poems of Alexander Pope, ed. John Butt [New Haven, 1963], 2.268n). Valerie Rumbold points out that "as described by Blackmore in their titles, only Prince Arthur, King Arthur, Eliza, and Alfred qualify as epics" (The Dunciad in Four Books, ed. Rumbold ([New York, 1999], 187).

35. In the Dunciad in Four Books, William Warburton (problematically writing as Bentley/Aristarchus) ponders whether "we may not be excused, if for the future we consider the Epics of Homer, Virgil, and Milton, together with this our poem, as a complete Tetralogy, in which the last worthily holdeth the place or station of the satyric piece?" (77–78). Aristarchus, of course, is not to be trusted, and the Dunciad does not really qualify as epic.

36. Pope's effort to maintain Homer's permanence ironically came at the cost of changing his poems in order to better align classical epic values with "the superior human values of [Pope's] own age and its preference for a culture united by the bonds of an at least tentatively rational society" (Howard Weinbrot, Britannia's Issue: The Rise of British Literature from Dryden to Ossian [New York and Cambridge, 1993], 303). As a result, several critics of the time pointed out, Pope's Homer contained at least as much of the former as the latter, if not more. Richard Bentley famously (and perhaps apocryphally) objected to Pope's calling it Homer at all. See Roger Lonsdale, ed., Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets (New York and Cambridge, 2006), 4:314, 285n.

37. Harold Weber directly compares what he describes as the "archival impulses" of Chambers's Cyclopædia and Pope's Dunciad Variorum as well as their authors' apparent

53. Ephraim Chambers, “Dedication” in Cyclopædia, 2 vols. pædia