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THE NON-EXISTENT CLASSICAL EPYLLION

By WALTER ALLEN, JR.

In the January, 1958, issue of this journal P. W. Miller on pp. 31-38 based his paper on "The Elizabethan Minor Epic" on the thesis of the influence of the Classical epyllion. In footnote 4 he quotes as his main source for Classical philology M. Marjorie Crump, *The Epyllion from Theocritus to Ovid* (Oxford, 1931), a frequently cited book which was a D. Lit. thesis in the University of London. I know nothing of the English poems under discussion, but I fear that Mr. Miller has caught a tiger in his Classical comparison. It is my opinion that there never was such a literary genre as the epyllion, and that the name and the genre are errors on the part of comparatively recent Classical philology.

The fault in this instance must rest with professional Classical scholars, for our studies repose in a morass of publications in which even the specialist cannot always find his way. This note is by way of an apology to Mr. Miller, who was engaged in the praiseworthy attempt to work with more than one literature at once. He cites in his footnote 2 H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Literature*, but he could hardly have been expected to be put adequately on his guard by Rose's wary statement on p. 321 about the *Hekale*: "In form it was not exactly an epic, but an episode of epic, such as we now generally call an *epyllion*." In his footnote 19 Rose continued, "Ἐπίλλιον is passable Greek for 'little epic,' but does not seem to have been used in this technical sense by any ancient."

In 1940 I published "The Epyllion: A Chapter in the History of Literary Criticism," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, vol. LXXI, pp. 1-26. I examined the term, the quarrel between Callimachus and Apollonius Rhodius, and the characteristics ascribed to epyllia. My conclusion was that there is no evidence, even of common characteristics among several poems, for the existence of such a genre.

My paper was the starting point for an undergraduate prize essay, in which I had a hand, by L. Richardson, Jr., *Poetical Theory in Republican Rome: An Analytical Discussion of the Shorter Narrative Hexameter Poems Written in Latin During the*

First Century Before Christ (New Haven, 1944). His book, as the title indicates, is not the study of a finite genre in the standard fashion.

J. F. Reilly published "Origins of the Word 'Epyllion,'" *The Classical Journal*, XLIX (1953/54), 111-114, in which he endeavored to be more precise than I as to the time when the use of the word became general. He found that it was employed in the mid-nineteenth century, and very possibly earlier, but that it seems to have become common at the end of the nineteenth century.

My objections do not necessarily vitiate Mr. Miller's paper, for he could probably arrive at much the same conclusions by using for comparison only one Classical poem, as Catullus LXIV, instead of a literary type. It is simply that it seems unwise to employ the word epyllion as if it were ancient and to regard as settled the characteristics of this highly dubious genre.

At least two Classical scholars have followed the procedure I recommend to Mr. Miller, for, although each writes of the epyllion as a genre, he seems to describe a genre which suits only the poem he is dealing with, or a genre which could include almost any kind of hexameter poem. Professor Linforth¹ called Theocritus XXV an epyllion, gave only one title of bibliography on the genre in footnote 1, and went on with the topic of his article which was concerned with other matters. Yet he also introduced a striking modification on p. 79, where he describes Theocritus XXV as an epyllion, by declaring that the poem fortunately refrains from treating the mythological subject with the erudition generally characteristic of the genre!

The second Classical scholar, Professor Mendell,² went so far as to write, without documentation except for a reference to my article, "of the lack of general agreement on what the epyllion was," and then he proceeded to discuss the influence of epyllion technique on the *Aeneid*. Professor Mendell's definition of an epyllion on p. 206 of his article is "a short poem in hexameter verse which tells a story." On the same page he immediately takes back his definition by stating: "That it has certain qualities such as emphasis on the picturesque rather than on the narrative, or a

¹ I. M. Linforth, "Theocritus XXV," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, LXXVIII (1947), 77-87.

² C. W. Mendell, "The Influence of the Epyllion on the *Aeneid*," *Yale Classical Studies*, XII (1951), 203-226.

sentimental love interest, or Alexandrine devotion to obscure erudition, or a heroine rather than a hero, or that it contains a lament—these are qualities of particular times or particular poems, qualities that appear in many other types of literature.” A reviewer commented³ that “the subject of the paper is really the influence of Cat. 64 on the composition of various portions of the *Aeneid*.”

Certainly, if seven or eight Classical poems are supposed to belong to a distinctive minor genre, it is not too much to ask that they should have some recognizable qualities in common. The individual classicist appears to have difficulty in discovering qualities which fit more poems than the one he is discussing. A less tolerable situation arises, moreover, when, as sometimes happens in the bibliography on this subject,⁴ we are treated to lengthy discussions of lost or fragmentary poems, or when we are instructed to accept as epyllia parts of longer poems, as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. If an epyllion is a short poem, it can hardly be part of a longer poem, and there are limits to what we can conclude about lost or fragmentary poems.

A. M. Duff gives the whole show away in his article “EPYLLION” in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* with his opening remark that it “was a narrative poem of about 100 to 600 hexameters. . . .” He continued: “The distinctive feature is the digression; this occurs in all extant epyllia except Theocritus' *Hylas* and the majority of the legends in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Usually introduced as a speech, less commonly as a description of a work of art, the digression makes a contrast to the main plot in either subject or details.” Duff's main bibliographical reference is to Crump's book.

I close with the remarks by E. A. Barber in Chapter VIII on “Hellenistic Poetry” in M. Platnauer (ed.), *Fifty Years of Classical Scholarship* (Oxford, 1954), who on p. 216 writes of the

³ W. C. Helmbold, *American Journal of Philology*, LXXIV (1953), 313.

⁴ Part of the reason for this little article has been to put at the disposal of scholars the bibliography on the question of the epyllion. My article in *Transactions*, with the addition of these other items I have mentioned, will serve to lead the reader back to the most essential publications, if he cares to pursue them through the footnotes. I should also add the review by B. Otis of the chapter by Barber which is mentioned in the last portion of my present paper; Otis' review appeared in *The Classical Weekly*, XLIX (1955/1956), 149-152. On p. 151 Otis disagreed with me on the quarrel between Callimachus and Apollonius.

“*epyllion*, the modern term for a short epic narrative.” On p. 228, with respect to Crump, Barber emphasized that the term’s “employment to mean a short poem written in hexameter verse is wholly modern, but has been generally adopted for its convenience. This does not imply that the Alexandrians invented a definite genus of short narrative poetry which they insisted should conform to certain rigid rules of composition. In such matters each poet enjoyed complete liberty of action.”

In short, an indeterminate genus, without a local habitation and a name.

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