**Epic Form and Conventions**

**by Prof. Richard Kroll, adapted by Alfred J. Drake**

**Form:** “The epic is a long narrative poem involving heroic figures in the performance of heroic deeds, usually extended over a wide geographical area; it is written in a heroic or grandiose manner” (Norton and Rushton). The epic is “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 development of episodes important to the development of a nation or race” (Thrall and Hibbard).

**Major Conventions:**

1. Hero: a mythical or historical figure, usually national.

2. Subject matter: heroic deeds, battles, long journeys.

3. Verse: elevated, lofty, “heroic”; the best known device is epic simile -- see PL I.331-343, 351-355, 761-798.

4. Action: an intermixture of supernatural elements or figures with human characters.

5. Place: world-wide, even cosmic, scale.

6. “Comic,” not “tragic”: the hero is successful in his exploits.

7. “Objective” poet: but consider the “Miltonic aside.”

**Minor Conventions:**

1. Invocation to the muse: PL I.1-26 and elsewhere.

2. Epic statement: PL I.1-5.

3. Epic question: PL I.28-33.

4. “Epic answer”: PL I.34-39.

5. in medias res.

6. Narrative of events that transpired before the beginning of the poem; the “flashback.”

7. Processions of characters: PL I.376-505.

8. Set or formal speeches.

9. Continuous verse form.

**Miltonic Conventions:**

1. Miltonic inversions (“he seemed for dignity composed, and high exploit”).

2. Omission of words (“And [we] regain the blissful seat”).

3. Parentheses, appositions: PL I.34-44; II.552-54.

4. Use of one part of speech for another (“The great consult began”).

5. Latinizing of diction: expatiate, justify.

6. “Miltonic vagueness”: PL II.666-73, 1048.

7. Avoidance of “simple” sentences.

8. Allusions: PL I.573-97.