

Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World

The Poetics of Community

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Introduction

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*"I have always heard
your voice in that sea, master, it was the same song
of the desert shaman, and when I was a boy
your name was as wide as a bay, as I walked along
the curled brow of the surf; the word 'Homer' meant joy,
joy in battle, in work, in death, then the numbered peace
of the surf's benedictions, it rose in the cedars,
in the laurier-cannelles, pages of rustling trees.
Master, I was the freshest of all your readers."*

DEREK WALCOTT, *Omeros*

Much as the narrator of Walcott's poem seeks to fashion a bridge between the canonical works of Western literature and the vibrant poetry of the contemporary Caribbean, this volume aims to provide an interdisciplinary dialogue between verbal art genres that have rarely been in dialogue: literary and oral epic. It presents the work of leading scholars of written and oral epic poetry, ancient, Renaissance, and contemporary, from a wide variety of disciplines, including anthropology, classics, Slavic studies, comparative literature, folklore, and English. Epic poetry now stands at the center of an intense debate concerning the relevance and cultural significance of the works that have helped to define Western culture. Using examples of epic poetry from *Gilgamesh* to Walcott's *Omeros*, and of performance traditions from places as different as the Central Himalayas and the Balkans, we propose a new way of considering the position of the epic in cultural and intellectual life in the United States (where many of these debates have been fought most fiercely), in Europe, and in many other areas with living epic traditions. The position of epic is especially vexed in those countries involved in postcolonial debates about the relation of their national literatures to the canons of Western and classical literature, which, as part of a colonial educational policy, often were imposed on school curricula.

The juxtapositioning of these disciplines reveals new and sometimes surprising connections between contemporary performed epic poetry from

around the world and epic of the traditional Western canon. It places the epic poetry of Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Spenser, Tasso, and Milton in the context of performances of epic poetry in contemporary Egypt and India, and it sets current fieldwork and ethnographic research about the political and poetic complexities of epic performance in the context of studies of the densely self-referential Western literary epic. We make these juxtapositions in the hope of accomplishing three ends: (1) to provide a new interpretive frame for the literary epic that will help to revitalize interest in the Western canon, though in a way that will require not the exclusion of other literary traditions but a stimulating connection to them; (2) to strengthen the links between studies of narrative, politics, and performance in both fields, and thus to place contemporary work in oral epic within a broader poetics; and (3) to provide a source for teachers, scholars, and readers that will make important work now being done in each of these areas of study accessible to those with training in only one. The epic has been an object of study for two millennia, in part because the great classical epics and their modern counterparts continue to inspire cultural definition and self-definition. The epic is also a vital contemporary art form, both in writing and in performance. With this volume we hope to reshape understanding of epic so as to keep both of these aspects of the epic in sight, and to inspire a greater degree of comparative understanding, both of the form and of the related cultures in which each individual poem is embedded.

What is the epic? This book compels its readers to grapple with this question. A first reaction of many scholars of the classical or Renaissance epic to an account of contemporary performed oral poetry might be to argue that it is not really the epic as they know it. Similarly, scholars doing fieldwork who can measure their epics by the number of days it takes to perform them might question whether strict formal limits can produce an adequate definition of the genre. Our working definition for this volume itself has a polemical or at least limiting edge: the epic is defined here as a poetic narrative of length and complexity that centers around deeds of significance to the community. These deeds are usually presented as deeds of grandeur or heroism, often narrated from within a verisimilitudinous frame of reference. We exclude from the arena of study myth and other kinds of tales that depend largely on magic (many epics include briefer magical episodes), and we also exclude epics in prose, although in historical perspective it is clear that the novel, for one example, is a form of the epic.¹ Emphasizing poetry helps to delimit the field of contemporary performance but does not signal that the issues posed by the contributors to this volume are disconnected from prose genres that have epic qualities. The epic also has a peculiar and complex connection to national and local cultures: the inclusiveness of epic—the tendency of a given poem to present an encyclopedic account of the culture

that produced it—also explains its political potency. This political explosiveness is evident in the charged contemporary performances of epic (several examples of which are described in this volume), in the intense reimagining of epic undertaken by most emerging European nations as a means of coming to self-knowledge as a nation, and in the bitterness of accusations today about the dangers of abandoning canonical study in the academy. We hope to show that knowledge of this traditional arena of cultural definition is extended, not limited, by the kind of cross-cultural context constructed here.

The essays in this volume argue strongly, then, for the value of comparative literary study and do so in the context of an intellectual climate in which study of traditional genres sometimes is seen as rather old-fashioned. The challenge to cross-cultural study of a particular literary form has come especially from those (whether old or new historicists) who emphasize the importance in literary study of historical and political particularities. This challenge has its base in an accurate and productive skepticism about both the idealizations of culture so characteristic of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century studies in myth and comparative religion (exemplified by James George Frazer's *Golden Bough*) and about the idealizations of form characteristic of the close poetic analyses put forward by the American New Critics and others in the middle decades of the twentieth century. One critique of both these idealizations is that they each in different ways obfuscate precisely the political effects of epic poetry—whether the potentially propagandistic effect of glorifying the current rulers or the more complex cultural imperialism evidenced in many epic poems. The work in this volume seeks to avoid some of the pitfalls of generalized generic comparison by rooting the analyses in the political culture of the societies at issue. Thus to look at the function of lament in classical and later Western epic, we include one broader cross-cultural study by a leading scholar of the epic who argues for the centrality of lament in most major Western epics from *Gilgamesh* to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and two more culturally focused studies of, respectively, Greek and Latin epics. Each of these examines the positioning of this female genre within a characteristically male form while considering the culturally distinct role of women (and of lament) in archaic Greek society and Roman culture. Similarly, the political role of epic performance is the central focus of several of the essays that rely on fieldwork in India. We propose, then, that comparative literary study can and should make the political and the culturally specific more visible, rather than hiding cultural contest and debate behind an idealized or essentialized mask. To look at the position of epic in the contemporary world is to pose, not to evade, the question of epic ideology and its relation to nationalism, national identity, and the politics of gender.

EPICS AND CONTEMPORANEITY

To those trained in the traditional canon of Western letters, any discussion of contemporaneity is virtually anathema in regard to epic poetry, which, as though it were a living organism, is said to experience birth, maturity, and death. One might argue that on numerous occasions, announcements of the death of Western epic have in fact been premature. Even though Francesco Petrarca, whose name is usually synonymous with the Renaissance, failed miserably in his own attempts to resuscitate classical epic, it was not long before Camões, Tasso, Spenser, and Milton succeeded. But in the twentieth century in particular, despite and perhaps partly because of the epic strivings of novelists such as George Eliot, Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, and of course James Joyce, the Western epic has been theorized as being, like the wicked witch in *The Wizard of Oz*, really and sincerely dead.

Two critics who have been extremely influential in the past several decades might be said to epitomize much current thinking about the trajectory of Western epic—a rubric that is often used as a facile substitute for epic itself. These are the Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin and the German essayist Walter Benjamin. Their writings reflect strains of thought that, though not entirely new, are certainly characteristic of much modern criticism of the literary epic and its tendencies to oppose the terms “modern” and “epic.”

On the one hand, Bakhtin can be said to have inherited the attitude of those Renaissance writers who busily rehabilitated epic in the name of a cultural and political privilege they were trying to claim for themselves. In a period that worried immensely about its origins, and one that was increasingly marked with the urgent need for a master discourse that could rival Christianity, Trissino, Ariosto, Tasso, Spenser, Camões, Milton, d’Aubigné, and again, Petrarca reinvented epic as a genre of and for the elite communities in which they not only wanted to partake but which they wanted to define—whether that community was the sophisticated court of Tasso’s Ferrara or the “fit audience though few” of Milton’s post-Cromwellian England. Bakhtin’s comments on epic in the first essay from *The Dialogic Imagination* likewise privilege the genre as of and for an elite. Bakhtin regards epic as the master discourse par excellence, which he opposes to the popular and open-ended novel that necessarily overtook the earlier genre, impervious as it was to change. For Bakhtin, the epic is monologic. It has only one word, one tongue, one point of entry: the aristocracy’s or ruling people’s, who want to maintain a status quo and idealize a past that is “utterly different and inaccessible.”² It is the novel that thrives on contemporaneity, on “contact,” on multiplicity; the epic is based on memory, on distance, and on an absolute unity that defies the act of questioning and communal participation.

Yet although Bakhtin adapts the Renaissance’s posture toward epic’s priv-

ileges, he fails to see Renaissance writers themselves as true epic writers, and in fact the only epic poetry that really fits his definition is—virtually by his own admission—Homer’s, and only the *Iliad* at that. The fact that the *Iliad*’s supposedly profound inimitability becomes a criterion for distinguishing an epic poem is thereby problematic, particularly given what we know now to have been the performative conditions for that work. Moreover, by denying to the *Iliad* the right to contemplate and question itself, Bakhtin denies to this splendid archaic Greek text its profound reflections about human agency and its only tentative attempts to articulate an ethos that might outlast the fragility of its own always impermanent performances. In effect, Bakhtin mistakes the belated *desires* for epic’s authority and canonical status—by fifth-century rhapsodes, by Virgil and his Renaissance imitators—for epic’s immediate *effect*. In so doing, he monumentalizes Homer before Homer has finished singing. But he also forces us to be attentive to the processes through which epic—which has typically claimed to narrate the recovery of an original identity of a group bound by linguistic ties (the Homeric epics), tribal bonds (the African poem *Sun-jata*), religion (the Pentateuch), nationality (Camões’s *Lusiades*), or empire (Virgil’s *Aeneid*)—is canonized and rendered necessarily authoritative over time.

But if epic was rekindled by early modern writers as an “elite” genre, the nationalistic and romantic tendencies of Johann Gottfried von Herder and other late eighteenth-century figures wanted to find in it more of a “popular” spirit, and one sees in Herder’s “Origins of Hebrew Poetry” the attempt to locate in Greek and Hebrew writings the influence of the “Volk.”³ This is where Benjamin’s musings on epic in his classic essay on the Russian short-story writer Nikolai Leskov essentially fit. In “The Storyteller,” Benjamin envisions epic not as Bakhtin does, as an antiquated and outmoded form which of necessity yielded to the popular novel, but as itself a genre that reflects a “popular” spirit: it is the product of a community and is thereby ever-changing, insofar as it is told by a storyteller whose manner of presenting tales is oral and alive. Benjamin’s writing is strikingly contemporaneous with the work of Milman Parry, who demonstrated that the formulas in Homer attested to oral composition and who may have been inspired by the romantics’ formulation of epic and national origins. But unlike Herder and others who initiated the study of folklore in the late eighteenth century—many of whom, one is well reminded, were long taken in by the bogus poetry of Ossian—Parry was able to demonstrate epic’s oral roots philologically, given his close work with nonliterate South Slavic bards. For Parry and later for Albert Lord, of course, this contemporary phenomenon served largely to verify their theses regarding the performative dynamics of Homer’s poetry. For Benjamin, probably unaware of Parry’s work, the phenomenon of oral storytelling can provoke only a sense of nostalgia. Epic performance belonged to an irrecoverable past when tales were not distanced from their au-

dience and their sources, before art lost its “aura,” before it was hardened, congealed, into an object.⁴

Benjamin’s essay is essentially an act of mourning for the loss of a tradition that once gave communities their identity, a tradition no longer possible in an age defined by technology. Still, there is something paradoxical about “The Storyteller.” Its ostensible subject is not the days of Homer—as is the case in the opening pages of Gyorgy Lukacs’s *The Theory of the Novel*, likewise nostalgic for the organic wholeness of illiterate communities⁵—but the recent feudal, highly class-based society of late nineteenth-century Russia, supplanted in Benjamin’s own time by the classlessness of a Marxism with which Benjamin long flirted. He is also discussing a writer, one whose own highly nuanced sense of style was often laced with the kind of laconic irony that is also a hallmark of Benjamin’s prose. For both Bakhtin and Benjamin, there is the tendency for the categories supposedly so necessary to epic’s definition to weaken if not collapse, a tendency that is yet not so marked as to prevent the many literary critics who read them from insisting rather simplistically that the epic has no value for the contemporary moment. By the same token, despite the ultimate intermingling of supposedly opposed categories in the two essays, both writers fundamentally believe that epic is a legacy of the past because the circumstances that enabled or necessitated its production are no longer present.

In this volume, Bakhtin and Benjamin are challenged directly as the various pressures of the contemporary are brought to bear on a genre that they have declared is either a dead letter or a vital oral phenomenon that is simply no more. Indeed, the essayists in this volume directly address the contemporaneity of epic by taking into consideration one or more of the following: (a) contemporary performances and anthropological research regarding epics’ functions in communities, and the resultant attentiveness to stylistic innovations and audience, and thus to how epics shift in regard to political, social, and performative conditions; (b) contemporary theoretical stances deriving from feminism, psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and cultural studies that have resituated epics in their relationship to cultures and communities, forcing scholars to be more attentive to epics’ margins, their silences and acts of silencing; (c) contemporary discussions of what constitutes the canon, and the canon’s relevance to current heterogeneous classrooms in the United States. Such discussions have compelled many to question the assumption that epic is a purely textual phenomenon that began with Homer and ended with Milton, and to see epics existing in societies that have been denied the “right” to have epic (such as North African societies, as Joseph Farrell notes in his essay).

Yet the form in which this challenge is cast does not overlook Benjamin’s and Bakhtin’s readings and concerns. On the one hand, essayists in this volume who specifically consider the nuances of performance are attentive to

the impact not only of political and social pressures on the production of epic, but of technological developments as well. Although they might not embrace Benjamin’s nostalgia for an irrevocably lost communal *Geist* as embodied in oral poems, they are concerned with the “invasion” of the local by the cosmopolitan even as they are aware of the pressures that the local exerts on the cosmopolitan in turn. Such attentiveness necessarily extends to those contributors, such as Sheila Murnaghan, who consider the roles of ritual and that archaic form of storytelling known as the lament. Lament could consolidate community, but it could also threaten the other stabilizing bonds that held groups and epic poems together. On the other hand, the terminology invoked by Bakhtin regarding Homeric epic—its monologism, its closure, its authority—is likewise invoked by a number of scholars not so much in regard to single epic poems as in regard to an epic tradition and a desire found in numerous cultures to grant authority to epic tales of origins and political legitimation. Bakhtin’s version of epic has never existed—indeed, as a theory it ignores what has always been present in epic’s dialogic voices—but the desire for his version of epic have long existed, as attested by the allegorists whom Andrew Ford discusses.

The “contemporary,” then, is in fact immediately relevant to discussions of epic. The essays that follow alert us to the *ongoing* function of epics in various parts of the world today. They articulate how current theoretical initiatives and debates about the canon are critical for an understanding of the hold of epic on the imagination in antiquity as in the present.

At least part of the attraction of epic poetry consists in the skill and imagination of those who create, revise, and recite it. It is to this critical question that we turn next: What makes an epic poet?

THE EPIC POET

When oral epic or literary epic are examined, they are generally treated as separate and distinct verbal narrative art forms, each with its own concept of authorship and its own array of characteristics, both formal and thematic. Oral traditional epic is understood as orally composed and orally transmitted. It is, very importantly, a genre that is performed before an audience. While individual performers of epic (each with varying levels of creativity) are appreciated, anonymity and collective involvement surround authorship *per se*. Oral epic is typically marked by compositional devices that facilitate performance and transmission, as well as by content that is regarded as deeply traditional, at times even mythic (bringing with it an identification of oral epic with story patterns that are both ancient and widespread).

From the perspective of scholars of folklore, literary epic, unlike oral traditional epic, is usually seen as the creation of a single author, immersed in literacy and everything that literacy brings with it. Literary epic is created

with artistic perfection in mind, not expediency of performance. It is imagined as an art form crafted by someone with the leisure to chisel phrases, verses, and sentences, to develop and refine artistic expression with the author's best as the desired outcome. Furthermore, literary epic allows for (and even expects) the author's original and creative expression in narratives that adroitly challenge readers with their well-designed tropes and innovative uses of textual conventions and themes.

If the creative processes of the oral epic poet and the writer of epics thus remain significantly different, it is worth considering more specifically what defines the poetic work of the oral poet. Much has been written on the apprenticeship of oral epic poets.⁶ The art of the oral epic poet is not randomly developed nor casually perfected, for it is a complex art that entails years of training and practice. Furthermore, traditional performers of oral epic are often characterized by gender and are not only artistically and at times professionally marginalized within the larger community but also situated on the periphery ethnically and socially.

The art of oral epic singing is by and large—though not always—an art perpetuated by men for public performance. Customarily, young boys begin to cultivate the art of epic singing at a young age, first by learning to play an instrument. This is usually followed by mastering the art of singing and stringing metrically appropriate verses together. Finally, they assemble entire narrative songs and begin to perform in public. The instruction process is predicated on the young singer's knowledge of the repertoire, gained customarily through repeated attendance at epic performances. In some cultures, the art of epic singing is passed from older male relative to young boy, such that the child's mentor is typically from within his own family; thus the milieu for this learning surrounds him perpetually. Frequently, epic singing is also performed for remuneration (at traditional weddings, birth celebrations, at market or in cafés, and so on), such that it becomes a profession. In certain cultures, epic is even perpetuated by a "class" of singers who are effectively on the margins, both ethnically and socially, of the community. They are what Susan Slyomovics has called the "poet outcasts" in an example from the Egyptian oral epic tradition.⁷ A similar phenomenon is found among traditional Romanian epic singers, who are typically Gypsies—spurned within the context of mainstream society, yet highly venerated as verbal artists for the community.⁸

This way of highlighting the differences between the role of the poet in written epic and the performer's embodiment of a more or less collective voice helps to illustrate a central tension in the written epic as well. Like the oral epic poet, the writer of epic poetry has generally been male (though this has begun to change in the last two centuries) and is immersed in a tradition that takes years of training to master. The art of the epic poet depends centrally on imitation—on being able to reproduce, but in a new cultural

register or in a new language, images, events, plot motifs, and whatever other textual details give the form its generic authority. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom suggests that English poets who wrote after a Milton regarded as largely inimitable struggled in a variety of ways to master and usurp their great precursor. Yet in many senses, to begin with the romantics is to begin 2,000 years too late. Moreover, while the psychoanalytic vocabulary Bloom invoked is enlightening for our own era, it is not an essential theoretical rubric for understanding Virgil's wrangling with Apollonius Rhodius or Callimachus's challenge to archaic epic in writing an epic of fragments (or to go back even farther and to expand momentarily our definition of epic, Plato's attempts to have Socrates surpass Homer and the rhapsodes as an oral poet in his *Ion*). Indeed, written epic often twists uncomfortably on the dilemma of whether the poet should emphasize submersion in a collective voice or an individual poetic voice and authority. When Virgil writes "Arma virumque cano" (Of arms and a man I sing), his use of the first-person verb form stands out in contrast to the more anonymous invocations of the Homeric bard: "Sing, Muse . . ." The contrast with the living oral epic performances described in this book thus helps to expose a latent tension in the written epic. It also makes more apparent where the literary epic poet's immersion in tradition approaches a more collective voice and where the individual reshaping or challenge to tradition becomes most pointed.

It is in going back to Homer and the tangled origins of written epic in the West that one finds potentially similar circumstances to those present in the shaping of oral poetry, and arguably they have impinged on the production of written epic itself. And it is also in Homer that we find the image of the marginalized poet, subject to the whims of patronage (such as Phemius, who is told now by Telemachus, now by Penelope, and now by the suitors, what to sing) or physically marked by the sign of his outcast and yet privileged status (such as the blind bard Demodocus, who performs for Odysseus and the Phaiakians).⁹ It is perhaps only historical accident, but again and again one encounters poets in the tradition of literary epic who likewise write from the margins and whose poems thereby hinge on the thematics of exile and estrangement: Dante writing his *Commedia* in exile from Florence, Milton writing *Paradise Lost* during the Restoration, the composer of the *Chanson de Roland*—perhaps—in figurative exile at the English court. In such ways, the social and economic vulnerabilities to which oral poets continue to be subject have left their mark, however mediated, on the legacy of written epic as well.

WRITTEN VERSUS ORAL

It is with such crossovers and concerns that we now engage more directly in the questions of orality and literacy that have been so central to the issue of

epic in the past century or so. Walter Ong has been, perhaps, the most eloquent spokesperson for the impact of literacy on culture and literature, tracing various developments from orality to literacy and mass dependence on the printed word. Along with others, Ong has argued persuasively for a recognition of the profound changes that literacy has engendered in human history. Indeed, polemics surrounding orality and literacy among scholars of oral poetry frequently focus on texts that are not unquestionably either oral or literary, or on transitional texts—those that fall somewhere between oral and literary for any number of reasons. Similarly, the role of literacy in the creative process of oral poets (and determining which features point to either orality or literacy in their poetry) has been a matter of controversy. Nonetheless, it is rare when critical readings of oral and literary verbal art are truly exchanged; the distinction between “us” and “them” still tends to dominate scholarship, from whichever perspective.

The essays in this volume challenge the current understanding of orality and literacy as opposed categories. By putting aside strict boundaries of genre and methodology, they enable an exchange between literatures and between scholars that confronts the very idea of what epic is and how it can be read. And this exchange proves effective because, put simply, those who study oral epic and those who study literary epic have much to learn from each other. Epic conceived as a poetic narrative of length and complexity that centers around deeds of significance to the community transcends the oral and literary divide that has long marked the approach to the genre. In transcending that divide, epic emerges as a larger genre within which comparative study becomes more dynamic and broader in scope. By addressing authorship, readership (or “listenership”), form, and meaning in the “other” (be it oral or literary epic), scholars in this volume have been challenged to see how they have constructed the “other” as opposed and separate, and are thus encouraged to reexamine the epic tradition they know best.

Because of their “literary” nature, written texts have engendered a level of theorizing that cannot yet be assumed by scholars of oral literature. The tangible written text in itself generates complex theoretical systems of approaching literature—systems that can also provide exciting tools for the understanding of oral literature. For instance, readings of ambiguity in poetic language and studies of the literary poet’s manipulation of metaphor and allegory suggest powerful models for ways in which figurative language might be examined in oral epic. Philip Hardie’s treatment of rhetoric in Latin epic and Andrew Ford’s essay on early Greek allegoresis are particularly evocative in this regard.

From the literary side, the ethnographic criticism of oral epic also furnishes means by which the study of literary epic may be given a sharper political and cultural focus. Emphasis on the performativity of oral epic poets, who compose and transmit their art before an audience and who function as discrete

figures wielding a type of mythic knowledge within the community, provides a challenge to students of written epic, where concerns about performance and performative genres have recently taken the forefront. The essays by Susan Slyomovics and Dwight Reynolds on Egyptian oral epic poets provide especially rich examples of this detailed analysis of performativity. The immediate politics of oral epic performance—how a traditional genre can be interpreted, say, as a potent political statement to the community—is explored in the essays on the Indian epic by Joyce Flueckiger and William Sax. It is precisely through the juxtaposition of oral and literary epic in cases like these—and the recognition of a larger concept of epic that transcends orality and literacy—that a more complex sense of the interactions of form, genre, politics, and culture may be brought to the interpretation of the genre.

Studies of oral epic similarly suggest that interpretation of written epic could be directed more toward study of the tension between the local and the national or universal. Oral epic continues in general to be more attuned to the indigenous or local traditions that inform epic poetry. This focus can be a productive one for scholars of written epic. Jane Tylus explores the cultic resonances that inform Virgil’s and Tasso’s “universalizing” poems. And in their feminist reappraisals of Greek and Roman epic, Sheila Murnaghan and Elaine Fantham demonstrate how the oral tradition of female lament threatens to subvert the heroic functions of literary epic. Students of oral epic can be more attentive, in turn, to ambiguity, linguistic nuances, and the extent to which oral texts, like written texts, construct themselves as theoretical systems. Several of the essays in this volume that give detailed accounts of performances suggest the virtues of this approach. Dwight Reynolds’s study, for example, is a bracing account of the multivalent strategies and variety of speech acts to which the poet has access in any given performative situation.

In the exploration of various forms of verbal art, there is a point at which one can speak of a larger aesthetic that embraces both the oral and the literary. In so doing, one is liberated to speak of language elevated from the pedestrian to the realm of higher poetic diction, not only among the “lettered” poets, but among the “unlettered” as well. Ultimately, epic poets, be they oral or literary, all create. They all manipulate devices and techniques by which their art is revealed, whether those devices are orally transmitted or rooted in literacy. They all seek to tell a good story: to relate a narrative that, it is hoped, will light a fire, touch a soul, entertain for an evening (be it with book in hand or grouped around a singer), or even change the destiny of a nation.

CROSSING BOUNDARIES

The thematic kernel of this volume is the idea that the dynamics of epic, both oral and literary, are created and sustained through the challenging of

boundaries—boundaries of genre, gender, locality, and language. The intellectual inquiry undertaken in most of the essays presented here turns on questions of genre, gender, and trope. Moreover, the volume is organized to cross and re-cross that most fundamental of boundaries, namely, that between oral and literary epic. Gregory Nagy's comparative reading of genre in oral and literary epic and Joyce Flueckiger's argument for the role of regional and social identity in Indian epic both complicate and challenge the concept of genre. Genre definitions are similarly challenged and expanded in discussions of the boundaries of epic and the interplay and overlapping of genres, both in oral performances (explored in Egyptian and Indian epic) and in literary works (Joseph Farrell's discussion of Walcott's *Omeros* and Susanne Wofford's consideration of Native American tales alongside the "classical" works of Ovid and Spenser). Lament, deeply embedded in the genre question, provides striking examples of the prominence of genre within genre, or countergenre within genre, once again challenging the boundaries of epic.

The appropriation of gender roles or crossing of gender boundaries in epic is examined also as it reflects regional, cultural, and political concerns. Tracing the role of Balkan epic in the development of nineteenth-century literature, Margaret Beissinger illustrates the use of an oral genre for political purposes, revealing how gender is appropriated in literary epic as an instrument of nationalism. Sheila Murnaghan also theorizes the role of gender boundaries and the crossing of those boundaries in epic in her study of the role of lament in Homer. She argues that female laments are more subversive of the epic than laments spoken by men, not just because they dwell on grief and suffering attendant upon heroic action, but because they ignore the death-defying *kleos* that provides compensation for heroic sacrifice, a major function of epic. Elaine Fantham explores in Roman epic a similar problem—how much does lamentation disrupt the capacity of a poem to function as an epic? She sees the balance as tipping from public lament (with its typically male response of provoking desire for revenge) to the more disruptive private laments (often spoken by female characters) in the course of the development of Roman epic.

Another kind of boundary crossing at issue in many of these essays concerns the crossing from one meaning to another achieved by verbal ambiguity. The concern in written epic with wordplay, image, and trope is matched in the oral epic (such as in the Egyptian genre) by the marked use of punning, as well as the interplay between overlapping levels of verbal performance. Punning and linguistic ambiguity are linked to other modes of language play found in literary epic, such as the use of allegory and metaphor as strategies for subverting boundaries, in the essays by Hardie and Ford.

The essays in this volume are divided into five sections. The volume's organization speaks to the shared concerns of scholars of oral and written epic, as well as to the methodologies and strategies that distinguish the two forms. Appropriately, the book opens with an essay by the noted classicist and folklorist Gregory Nagy, one of very few scholars whose work marks out the interface between performance and scribal traditions that the volume as a whole aims to expand. The first section, entitled "On the Margins of the Scribal: From Oral Epic to Text," is devoted to the examination of what happens in the lively process of transforming an oral poem into a written text, and in interrogating the etymologies and contexts of several words used consistently in epic poetry. Nagy begins by critiquing the dominance of generic norms established by written epic. Drawing on the important work of Richard Martin on the relation of speech act theory to the theory of oral performance, Nagy argues that our concepts of performance can be rendered more complex by understanding what is performed by the spoken or sung words.

The other essays in the first section of this volume likewise interrogate ways in which performative content has been either obscured by the scribal tradition or compromised by the exigencies of catering to increasingly elite audiences. In an essay on the origins of allegoresis in ancient Italy, Andrew Ford discusses how the horizons of an epic genre once invoked to define a people (*laos*) were gradually narrowed so as to accommodate only "initiated" audiences who became the preeminent users of a new cultural construction of literature. Despite the fact that Susan Slyomovics is dealing with a radically different narrative tradition, the oral epic of northern Egypt, she nonetheless offers a strikingly similar reading of the transformation of epic poetry into a genre that indulges an increasingly selective audience—primarily, in the case of the Egyptian poetry she is discussing, because of the epic performer's subtle negotiations of his outcast status. Her reading of epic puns, which float, like the poet, "between acceptability and rejection," becomes a way of reading epic itself as a negotiation between popular and elite culture. Finally, Margaret Beissinger analyzes the interconnections between oral epic and orally inspired literary epic in Balkan culture as she interprets gender roles in the different traditions and exposes the way in which they were appropriated for political and nationalistic purposes, particularly within the developing "scribal" tradition of the nineteenth century. While women play significant roles in South Slavic oral epic, their relevance to the written epic that mirrored the oral genre and defined the beginning of national literatures in the Balkans was radically diminished. She argues that this occurred because the male-dominated political climate of nineteenth-century nations emerging from centuries of Ottoman rule found the female voice effectively unnecessary to the political statements expressed in their burgeoning literatures.

Whereas the first section largely focuses on the gradual canonization of epic as it veers between the popular and the elite, the second section of essays, entitled "Epic and Authority," explores the challenges to epic's presumed canonicity as embodied within the process of epic making itself. Jane Tylus's essay examines the cultic resonances in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* in light of what T. S. Eliot condemned as the provincialism that "true" masterpieces of Western literature, beginning with the *Aeneid*, have supposedly managed to escape. Tylus suggests that far from escaping from the provincial, epic must necessarily contend with the authority that local customs and traditions can grant, even when epic is written in the service of an imperial agenda that presumes to be universal. Particularly in classical and medieval epics, the leap from the provincial or local to the universal was facilitated through allegory. The essay by Philip Hardie nonetheless exposes the instability and often unintentionally subversive function of allegoresis. Focusing on Virgil and Ovid, Hardie demonstrates that allegory in fact threatens the rigid classificatory system that had been at work in Homer, challenging the important distinctions between human and animal, the winners and the losers, a monumental text and a permeable, amorphous text that changes over time. Joyce Flueckiger also focuses on the destabilizations evident in epic texts, particularly the destabilizations of gender categories, in her study of regional performances of northern Indian epics. Her fieldwork suggests that local pressures result in very different epic poems, and whereas one region faithfully produces epic as an authoritative, unchanging tale of origins and legitimation, another performs an epic poem in ways that reflect the diverse and changing communal and social realities within it.

This attentiveness to performative variabilities is especially apparent in the third section, "The Boundaries of Epic Performance." Both essays in this section consider contemporary epic performances and question how performance itself challenges notions of canonicity and generic boundaries. In an essay that will interest readers of books 9–12 of the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus tells his own heroic tale to the avid Phaiakians, Dwight Reynolds shows how the performer of Arabic oral poetry makes his own speech act equivalent to that of the hero. Incorporating the audience into the story's plot in what Reynolds suggestively terms a kind of "Russian roulette," the epic poet moves fully into the role of the hero by the end of his performance, thereby exaggerating his own function and in effect diminishing that of the hero and the tradition that he supposedly serves. William Sax's essay on the epics of northern India discusses, like that of Reynolds, the participatory nature of contemporary epic. For Sax, however, the recent changes in performed epics are due largely to the ongoing pressures of nationalism and the disappearance of the "local"—a reading that suggests both that the dynamics of individual communities are not necessarily apparent in epic per-

formance and that the poet is not so much the shaper of his performances as he is shaped by larger political forces beyond himself. Like Tylus's account of Virgil and Tasso, then, Sax's study of epic exposes powerful antagonisms between the more local and the national or imperial impact of the form.

This nexus of concerns—the extent to which epic poets perceive themselves or can be perceived as the makers of their songs—defines the next section, "Epic and Lament." Moreover, in many ways, the essays in this section bring together the issues of performance, authority, and the transition from oral to written poems broached in the first three sections by looking specifically at a public, largely female-centered tradition that has had an ambivalent relationship with epic since its inception. As she traduces the ground between Greek and Roman epic, Elaine Fantham charts the uncomfortable dynamic between lament and heroic action. With the Latin poet Statius, this struggle ends with the "triumph" of the former, as the bitter world of civil war renders heroic action finally incapable of attaining the level of glorification. Sheila Murnaghan produces a more explicitly gendered and theoretical reading of lament, seeing in it (like Fantham) a subversive element that challenges the epic ideology of Homer, predicated on fame untainted by suffering. Murnaghan suggests that the laments by women in the *Iliad* offer a different reading of the origins of epic from those commonly rehearsed: *kleos* begins with grief for one's friends and enemies before it is converted into the "pleasant song" celebrated by the Phaiakians in the *Odyssey*. Finally, Thomas Greene's magisterial reading resolves what Fantham and Murnaghan would unsettle, in his exploration of the extent to which epic tears are in fact the true Aristotelian *telos* of the genre. Weeping becomes a constant and necessary element of epic from *Gilgamesh* through *Paradise Lost*, after which the act of lament becomes a private rather than a public affair. For Greene, there is no dissonance between the lament proper—shared by women and men alike—and the goal of the epic poem; the tragic ritual is that which leads us to "shared stillness within tremendous ruin," a stillness that is valuable as a marker of cultural identity and integrity.

The essays in the final section of the volume—"Epic and Pedagogy"—ask directly what many of the other essays imply. If we are to accept the interdisciplinarity of so many of the pieces, with their challenges to a highly traditional epic canon and its separation of the scribal and the performative, then how do we go about teaching epics in the here and now? The poet on whom Joseph Farrell focuses, the contemporary Caribbean writer Derek Walcott, himself asks such questions in the course of his own contentiously epic poem. In *Omeros*, the narrator travels, like Walcott, from the isle of Santa Lucia to Portugal, to Boston, and back again, only to meet up with the ghost of Homer himself when he returns to his beloved island. Farrell's sensitive treatment of Walcott's poem, which hovers between dialect and "canonical" English and thereby asks difficult and unanswerable questions about epic's

roots, insists that the debate concerning what is meant by the word *epic* must be an ongoing one. Farrell demonstrates how the reading experience of *Omeros* is a challenge both to critics who deny the experience of epic poetry to non-European people (relevant here is an assertion of V. S. Naipaul's that the Caribbean can only mimic, never create anew)¹⁰ and to critics who insist that taking up the epic canon at all is an insult to a native people for so long enslaved by those who professed the ideology of that canon. The political issues of multiculturalism that Farrell—and Walcott—raise are also addressed by Susanne Wofford, who proposes that the canonical Western epic might best be taught in the context of living oral traditions of heroic song and tale, including most notably Native American traditions. She takes as her case in point the use of the origin tale in Virgil, Ovid, and Spenser, contrasting the political and poetic functions of these short narratives with “epic” and reexamining the political telos of “epic” in an effort to define a New World reshaping of the canon.

Taken as a whole, the essays in this volume challenge us to think about epic as a genre that is an ongoing attempt to tell the stories of things past in such a way as to make them relevant and even necessary to the present. It is precisely epic's—and epics'—subscription to the principle of contemporaneity that makes it such a powerful art form for us to grapple with today, as we not only come to understand more fully but are ourselves caught within the very social, political, and cultural forces that at once influence the production of epics and are shaped and directed by them.

NOTES

1. As Cervantes, often described as the author of the first novel, has his Canon of Toledo in *Don Quixote* explain, “La épica tambien puede escribirse en prosa como en verso” (“The epic, moreover, can be written in prose as well as in verse”). The date of this comment, with which many Renaissance writers would have been in sympathy, is 1605.

2. Bakhtin 1981, 14. For Bakhtin's most definitive statement on epic's refusal of contemporaneity, see pp. 13–14: “In its style, tone and manner of expression, epic discourse is infinitely far removed from discourse of a contemporary about contemporary issues addressed to contemporaries.”

3. “Vom Geist der ebraischen Poesie” (1782); English translation available in Simpson 1988.

4. See both “The Storyteller” and, for Benjamin's comments on a work's “aura,” “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Benjamin 1969, 83–110; 217–254.

5. Lukacs 1971, chap. 1.

6. See Lord 1960, chap. 2 (“Singers: Performance and Training”).

7. See Slyomovics 1987.

8. See Beissinger 1991. Indian oral epic is also performed typically by men who

are from the lower strata of society and are even untouchables in many cases; see Blackburn et al. 1989.

9. See Ann L. T. Bergren's suggestive essay (1983), particularly her comment on p. 93 on “blindness and mutilation (with the suggestion of castration) as marks of the male poet” in Greek epic.

10. See Derek Walcott's response to Naipaul's criticism (which he quotes in full) in “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?” (1974), reprinted in Hamner 1993, esp. pp. 52–54.

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