Epics for Students

Presenting Analysis, Context and Criticism on Commonly Studied Epics

Marie Lazzari, Editor

Meg Roland, Columbia Gorge Community College, Advisor

Foreword by Helen Conrad-O'Briain,
Trinity College, Dublin, University College, Dublin

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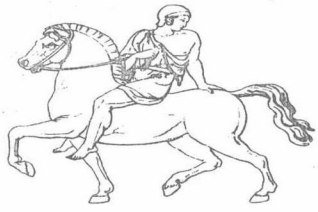

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Guest Foreword

The death of the epic, like that of Mark Twain, has been greatly exaggerated. Derek Walcott's *Omeros* and the still-living oral epic of Mali are neither its ghosts nor its last survivors. Closer to our own experience, *The Lord of the Rings, Star Wars,* and *Star Trek* prove that the epic, with its crowds of striking characters and sprawling action, is alive, vigorous, and popular.

How can we bridge the gap between these popular modern epics, often with special effects thrown in, and the older, more formal epics for a new audience? The epics themselves are their own best advocates. Unread, epics seem distant and difficult, the tedious doings of the dead. Read, the dead live again, and distances of time and space dissolve.

The epic has action and tension. It has passion and thought. Above all, it has men and women, facing circumstances and choices of their own and others' making. The epic plunges into the timeless struggle of the needs of the individual to be true to self and still reach some sort of equilibrium with society and what each perceives to be the universe and the divine. It celebrates human achievement and the human yearning for achievement. It celebrates human dignity as often in defeat as in victory.

The epic was meant not merely to be read, but to be heard. Read aloud short scenes from the epics covered in this book. Face their problems and their world and ask the people around you for a moment to do the same. Get into the skins of these characters. You will see that the skin is not so different from your own, and that the differences may be enriching. Transpose epics into your own world, and see the constants of human nature and societies. It is the form of the epic, rather than its content, which can put off a modern reader. Try rewriting an episode from any one of the following epics as a scene from a movie or television show. Try recreating for the screen the special effects that these men and women produced with words. Nothing will make you appreciate their talent and craftsmanship more. Casting even *Paradise Lost* (maybe especially *Paradise Lost*) is guaranteed to provoke rowdy discussion.

However elevated the language, however alien the setting, when you open one of the following epics you enter the human heart—and all the world is before you.

Helen Conrad-O'Briain
Trinity College, Dublin
University College, Dublin
Dublin, Ireland

Introduction

Purpose

Epics for Students (*EfS*) is designed to provide students with a guide to understanding and enjoying epic literature. Part of Gale's "For Students" Literature line, *EfS* is crafted to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers. This volume contains entries on the works of epic world literature that are most studied in classrooms.

Selection Criteria

The epics covered in *EfS* were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included literature anthologies; *Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges;* and textbooks on teaching literature.

The editor solicited input from an advisor, high school teachers and librarians, and from the educators and academics who wrote the entries for the volume. From these discussions, the final entry list was compiled, featuring the epic works that are most often studied in high school and undergraduate literature courses. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was noted as a possibility for a future volume. The editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

Coverage

Each entry includes an introduction to the epic and its author, when known, and discussion of authorship controversies or speculation in the case of anonymous works. A plot summary helps readers follow the often complicated series of events in the epic. Character sketches include explanations of each character's role in the epic and relationships with other characters. Separate essays provide analyses of important themes and of literary techniques.

In addition to this material, which helps readers understand and analyze the epic itself, students are provided with meaningful information on the literary and historical background of each work. This includes an essay on the historical context of the epic, comparisons between the time and place of the epic's setting and modern Western culture, an overview essay surveying the course of commentary about the work, and excerpts from critical essays on the epic.

Special Features

EfS includes a foreword by Helen Conrad-O'Briain, Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how teachers and students can use *EfS* to enrich their own experiences with epic literature.

A unique feature of *EfS* is a specially commissioned essay on each epic by an academic expert, usually one who has taught the work extensively, targeted to the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each epic, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Each entry also features illustrations, such as maps and depictions of key scenes. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional scholarly information on each work.

Organization

Each entry in *EfS* focuses on one work. The heading lists the title of the epic, the author's name (when known), and the date that the epic first appeared. In some cases, this date is known; in others, a range of dates is provided. The following elements appear in each entry:

- **Introduction:** A brief overview which provides general information about the epic, such as its place in world literature, its significance within its national culture, any controversies surrounding the epic, and major themes of the work.
- **Author Biography:** Includes basic facts about the author's life. In the case of anonymous works, speculative scholarship about the anonymous author or authors is summarized here.
- **Plot Summary:** A description of the major events in the epic, with interpretation of how these events help articulate the primary themes.
- **Characters:** An alphabetical listing of the epic's main characters. Each character name is followed by a description of that character's role, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and motivations.
- **Themes:** A thorough overview of how the principal themes, topics, and issues are addressed within the epic.
- **Style:** This section addresses important stylistic elements, such as setting, point of view, and narrative method, as well as literary devices such as imagery, foreshadowing, and symbolism. Literary terms are explained within each entry and can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical and Cultural Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the epic was created. Descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written are provided here.
- **Critical Overview:** Supplies background on the critical and popular reputation of the epic. Offers an overview of how the work was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over time.
- **Criticism:** This section begins with an essay commissioned for *EfS* and designed to introduce the epic work to the student reader. This section also includes excerpts from previously published criticism that has been identified by subject experts as especially useful in explicating each work to students.
- **Sources for Further Study:** Alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry and other critical sources useful to the student who wants to read more about the epic. Full bibliographical information and descriptive annotations are provided for each source.
- **Media Adaptations:** A list of film and television productions of the epic, as well as information about stage adaptations, audio recordings, and musical adaptations.
- **Compare and Contrast Box:** "At-a-glance" comparison of some cultural and historical differences between the epic's time and culture and late twentieth-century Western society.
- **What Do I Read Next?:** A list of works that complement the featured epic or serve as a contrast to it. This can include works by the same author and works from other authors, genres, cultures, and eras.
- **Study Questions:** Questions designed to spark classroom discussion or research paper topics. This section includes questions related to other disciplines, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, and psychology.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author/Title Index** lists the authors and titles covered in the volume.

A **Nationality/Ethnicity Index**lists the authors and titles by nationality and ethnicity.

A **Subject/Theme Index** provides easy reference for users studying a particular subject or theme

within epic literature. Significant subjects and themes are included. Boldface entries in this index indicate in-depth discussion of that subject or theme.

Each entry features **illustrations,** including author portraits, depictions of key scenes, and maps.

Citing Epics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from *Epics for Students* may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style. Teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed.

When citing text from a section of an *EfS* entry, the following format should be used:

> *Aeneid, Epics for Students.* Ed. Marie Lazzari. Detroit: Gale, 1997. 11–13.

When quoting the signed commissioned essay from an entry in *EfS,* the following format should be used:

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We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editors of *Epics for Students* welcome your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest epic works to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor at:

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Literary Chronology

1250 B.C.–1184 B.C.: Traditional (approximate) dates during which the Trojan War, chronicled in the *Aeneid* and alluded to in the *Odyssey,* probably took place.

850 B.C.–700 B.C.: The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were probably composed during this span of time, as part of a long tradition of bardic composition.

c. 500 B.C.: Approximate date of the setting of *Beowulf.*

400 B.C.-300 B.C.: The development of literary criticism in Greece, typified by Aristotle's *Poetics,* features frequent references to the works of Homer.

70 B.C.: Publius Maro Vergilius, known as Virgil, born at Andes, near Mantua in northern Italy.

60 B.C.: Formation of the First Triumvirate: Julius Caesar, Pompey, and Crassius.

44 B.C.: Assassination of Julius Caesar on the Ides of March (March 15).

43 B.C.-42 B.C.: Civil war breaks out between Caesar's heirs (Octavian, Antony) and his assassins (Brutus, Cassius).

42 B.C.: Brutus and Cassius are defeated at the Battle of Philippi.

37 B.C.: Publication of Virgil's *Eclogues.*

29 B.C.: Publication of Virgil's *Georgics.*

19 B.C.: Publication of Virgil's *Aeneid.*

19 B.C.: Virgil dies at Brindisi.

1 B.C.-1 A.D.: Approximate range of dates of the composition of the *Mahabharata.*

735: Traditional dating of the composition of *Beowulf.*

757–796: Reign of King Offa of Mercia, proposed by some scholars as a possible alternate era for the composition of *Beowulf.*

778–803: Period of historic unrest between Emperor Charlemagne and Suleiman ibn-al-Arabi of Spain which provides some historical foundation for events in *The Song of Roland.*

c. 1000: Approximate date of transcription for the only extant copy of *Beowulf.*

1098–1100: Probable range of dates for the oral composition of *The Song of Roland.*

1130–1170: Probable range of dates for the manuscript of *The Song of Roland.*

1201–1207: Estimated range of dates during which *El Cid* was probably composed.

1265: Dante Aligheri born (probably in May).

1289: Dante fights in the Battle of Campaldino.

1300: Dante becomes a Prefect, or civic governor, of Florence, Italy. His *Divine Comedy* is set in this year.

1307: Dante probably begins writing the *Divine Comedy* this year.

1321: Dante dies at Ravenna, 14 September.

1481: Publication of the Christophoro Landino edition of the *Divine Comedy,* including Antonio Manetti's detailed maps of Hell based on Dante's descriptions.

1488: The first printed edition of Homer's works appears.

1596: Only extant manuscript of *El Cid* is copied by Juan Ruis de Ulibarri y Leyba.

1608: John Milton is born on 9 December in London, England.

1628: Publication of John Milton's poem "On the Death of a Fair Infant Dying of a Cough."

1641: Publication of Milton's anti-episcopal pamphlets as *Of Reformation in England, of Prelatical Episcopacy, Animadversions upon the Remonstrant's Defense.*

1649: In the year that rebels execute King Charles I of England, Milton publishes his *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates,* which defends the rights of citizens to kill tyrant rulers. This same year, Milton is appointed Latin Secretary of Foreign Affairs in Oliver Cromwell's interregnum government.

1652: In February or March, Milton becomes totally blind.

1658: Milton probably begins writing *Paradise Lost.*

1660: Milton is imprisoned for his role in the overthrow of King Charles I.

1667: Milton's *Paradise Lost* is published in a 10–volume edition.

1671: Publication of Milton's *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes.*

1674: John Milton dies in London. Later this year, *Paradise Lost* is published in its final form in 12 volumes.

1802: Elias Lönnrot, the folklorist who compiled the *Kalevala,* is born in Sammatti, Finland (then Sweden).

1815: First printing of an edition of *Beowulf.*

1833–1834: Lönnrot prepares an early manuscript version of the *Kalevala* (published as the *Proto-Kalevala* in 1929).

1835: Publication of *Kalewala, taikka Wanhoja Karjalan Runoja Suomen kansan miunosista ajoista (The Kalevala; or, Old Karelian Poems about ancient Times of the Finnish People).*

1837: Francisque Michel publishes *La Chanson de Roland ou de Roncevaux (The Song of Roland).* This is the first published edition of the epic, although it has been known for more than 700 years.

1849: An enlarged second edition of the *Kalevala* is published.

1871: Archaeological excavations near Hissarlik, Turkey, reveal what may be the ruins of Troy.

1884: Elias Lönnrot dies.

1929: Publication of the *Proto-Kalevala.*

1930: Derek Walcott is born on the island of St. Lucia, the site of his later epic poem *Omeros.*

1939: Archaeological dig at an Anglo-Saxon burial site from approximately 625 B.C. at Sutton Hoo, England, yields armaments that resemble those mentioned in *Beowulf.*

1990: The poem *Omeros,* one of a few twentieth-century works in the epic form, is published.

Acknowledgments

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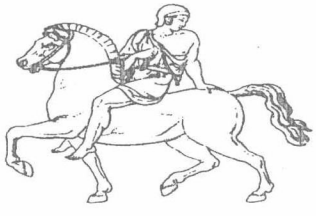

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Aeneid

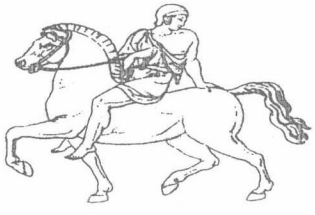
Virgil

c. 29 B.C.-19 B.C.

When Virgil was dying in 17 BC he asked for the unfinished *Aeneid* to be destroyed. The emperor Augustus refused the request. This decision affected the course of literary history and the development of western culture. Even in his own lifetime Virgil's poetry had become a school text. Early Christian writers who attempted to reject Virgil could escape neither his style nor his attitudes. Christian thought assimilated them both. The *Aeneid* and the Bible were probably the two most consistently read books in Western Europe for two thousand years.

The *Aeneid* was composed at least in part to celebrate "truth, justice, and the Roman way" and to promote the rebirth of the Roman way of life under Augustus. The *Aeneid* also universalises Roman experience, ideals, and aspirations. The *Aeneid* represents a pivotal point in western literature: Virgil drew on the whole of Greek and Latin literature to create this epic. He expanded the range of the Latin epic, using elements from most types of late classical literature, while refining the linguistic and metrical possibilities of the epic genre. Because of its generic inclusiveness and linguistic brilliance, the *Aeneid* spread its influence across every form of written discourse for centuries.

In the last two thousand years the *Aeneid* has been a pagan bible, a Latin style manual, a moral allegory, a document of European unity, a pacifist document—and one of the most-read and studied



works of world literature of all time. Entering its third millennium, the *Aeneid* can still speak immediately to the reader.

Author Biography

Virgil, full name Publius Vergilius Maro, was born near the village of Andes not far from Mantua in northern Italy on October 15, 70 BC. He died on September 21, 19 BC at Brindisi on the heel of Italy. The earliest biography of the poet, written by Suetonius, in the second century AD, says that he was from a poor and obscure family. It is clear, however, that Virgil was a Roman citizen. Circumstances pieced together from contemporary sources and from Suetonius make it seem likely that his family was at least of the landowning class. Further, Virgil was given an excellent and expensive education, including training for the Roman bar. This suggests that he might have been of the equestrian (middle) class and that his family was ambitious for political and social advancement. In fact he was preparing for the same sort of career which earlier brought Cicero, the great master of Roman oratory and Latin prose, from a country town to the consulship. Virgil gave up legal practice after pleading one case and began to study philosophy with an Epicurean master

Virgil was described by Suetonius as "tall, raw-boned and dark, always rather countrified in his manners." He was sickly and so shy that he was nicknamed "the maiden." At least one modern biographer has suggested that he was invalided home from the army of Brutus and Cassius before the battle of Philippi.

Virgil's family property was confiscated to help settle war veterans. He had friends in high places, however, who intervened with the young ruler Octavian Caesar (later called Augustus) to restore the property. Virgil's *Eclogues,* were written between 42 and 37 BC, partially in gratitude to his friends and the young Octavian. He followed with the *Georgics,* written between 36 and 29 BC, a long poem on farming and the country life. Virgil lived most of his later life near Naples. He became ill on a trip to Greece and returned to Italy only to die there. Suetonius suggests that Virgil was acutely concerned with leaving behind an unrevised *Aeneid.* He asked his friend Varius to burn the work if he died before it was finished. Varius emphatically refused. Augustus, who had heard parts of it read, ordered its preservation. He delegated Varius and another of Virgil's friends, Tucca, to edit the poem for publication.

Virgil was a painstaking writer. He described his method as "licking the verses into shape." Suetonius records that Virgil wrote out the whole of the *Aeneid* in prose and then worked it up into verse.

Plot Summary

Book 1

Aeneas and his Trojans are seven years into their journey home from the Trojan War to Italy when Juno, queen of the gods and arch-enemy of the Trojans, has Aeolus, god of the winds, blow up a violent storm which drives their ships off course. Aeneas, with some of the Trojan fleet, lands in North Africa. Aeneas is a nearly broken man, but he pulls himself together and encourages his people.

The scene switches to the home of the gods on Mount Olympus. Aeneas's mother, the goddess Venus, begs Jupiter, her father and king of the gods, to aid her son. Jupiter replies with serene optimism. He promises the Trojans, through their descendants, not only empire, but a new golden age. Venus departs from Olympus and, disguised as a huntress, meets her son. She sends him to Carthage. There he finds the Trojans who were separated from him in the storm and meets Queen Dido, the founder of the city. Dido takes pity on the Trojans. Meanwhile, Juno and Venus, each for their own purposes, scheme to have Aeneas and Dido fall in love.

Book 2

At a banquet given in his honor, at Dido's request Aeneas narrates the story of Troy's last day and night. He tells the famous story of the Trojan Horse, left outside the city gates when the Greeks were supposedly departed, but actually filled with Greek warriors. The Trojan priest Laocoon warned "I fear the Greeks even when bearing gifts." When Laocoon and his young sons were crushed by two enormous serpents who came out of the sea, the Trojans took this as a sign from the gods and brought the horse into the city during their celebration of what they thought was the Greek withdrawal. That night the Greek warriors emerge from the horse and open the gates to their returned comrades.

Aeneas is warned by the ghost of his cousin Hector, the greatest of the Trojan warriors (killed by Achilles in the *Iliad*), who tells him to flee the city. As this section ends, Aeneas watches helplessly as Pyrrhus kills King Priam's youngest son before his father, and King Priam himself in front of his daughters and wife, Queen Hecuba.

Aeneas returns home to persuade his father to leave the city. He carries the crippled Anchises. Ascanius, his son, holds his hand while his wife Creusa and the servants follow. When Aeneas reaches the refugees' meeting point he finds Creusa has been lost in the confusion. He rushes back into Troy frantically looking for her. Finally he is met by her ghost. The ghost tells him that the mother of the gods (Cybele) has taken her under her care.

Book 3

Aeneas continues the story of the Trojans's wanderings. Slowly Anchises and Aeneas learn more about the promised land of Italy and the future that the gods predict for them there. The book ends with the death of Anchises. Aeneas is left alone with his young son to carry out the will of the gods as best he can.

Book 4

Aeneas's story is done. Dido, under the influence of Venus, is now hopelessly in love with him. Her sister Anna persuades her to forget her vow of fidelity to her dead and dearly beloved husband, Sychaeus. She loses all interest in governing her city. The ongoing construction of Carthage comes to a halt. Juno and Venus arrange for Dido and Aeneas to have to shelter together overnight in a storm-bound cave. Jupiter sends Mercury, the messenger of the god, to remind Aeneas of his duty to travel on to Italy. Aeneas is miserable, but accepts that he must follow the will of the gods. Dido begs him not to leave her, and ultimately commits suicide as the Trojans set sail, cursing them with her last breath and vowing her people to eternal war with those of Aeneas.

Book 5

The Trojans land in Sicily and hold commemorative games. Aeneas relaxes briefly, but disaster strikes again. Juno, in disguise, leads the Trojan women to burn the ships. At Aeneas's prayer Jupiter quenches the fire, but four are destroyed. Aeneas is broken by this blow. He wonders whether he should give up trying to reach Italy. The ghost of his father appears. He tells him to continue and to visit him in the underworld. Leaving behind four boatloads of families who have decided to settle where they are, the remains of the Trojan fleet again sets sail.

Book 6

At this halfway point in the epic the Trojans reach the promised land of Italy. This book falls into three parts: the preparations for the descent into the land of the dead, a tour of the land of the dead, and the meeting between Aeneas and the ghost of his father Anchises. In the first part, Aeneas seeks out the Sibyl of Cumaea, a priestess-prophetess of Apollo who will be his guide into the underworld. He finds her at Apollo's temple. There she gives him instructions. He must first bury his comrade Misenus who has just died. Then he must find a talisman, the golden bough, to present to Persephone, Queen of the Dead.

In part two, Virgil sends Aeneus through the traditional geography of the underworld. Aeneas and the Sibyl enocunter the three-headed guard dog Cerebrus, the river Styx, the boatman Charon, Tartarus, the abyss of hell for the vilest souls, and finally the fields of Elysium, where he meets the ghost of his father. On the way he meets three recent ghosts: Palinurus, Dido—who refuses to speak to him and pointedly returns to the ghost of her husband—and Deiphobus, his cousin who was killed on the night of Troy's fall. These meetings fill Aeneas with sorrow, guilt, and remorse for what his mission has already cost in human terms.

In part three Aeneas meets Anchises. His father explains to Aeneas how the souls of all but the very evil and the very good are purified of their sins and reincarnated for another chance. Those who have lived lives of exceptional goodness and benefit to humanity are allowed to remain forever in Elysium. Finally he shows Aeneas the souls who will return to the upper world to become the great figures of Roman history. It is for these souls and what they represent that Aeneas has suffered and will continue to suffer.

Book 7

This book opens peacefully, building to an incident of tragic reversal of fortune. The Trojans are welcomed by King Latinus, who sees their arrival as the fulfilment of a prophecy that foreigners will come to intermarry with the Latins and found a great empire. Latinus promises his daughter Lavinia to Aeneas in marriage. Juno, however, stirs