Epic

Paul Innes

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EPIC

This student guidebook offers a clear introduction to an often complex and unwieldy area of literary studies. Tracing epic from its ancient and classical roots through post-modern and contemporary examples this volume discusses:

- a wide range of writers including Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Dante, Chaucer, Milton, Cervantes, Keats, Byron, Eliot, Walcott and Tolkien
- texts from poems, novels, children's literature, television, theatre and film
- themes and motifs such as romance, tragedy, religion, journeys and the supernatural.

Offering new directions for the future and addressing the place of epic in both English-language texts and World Literature, this handy book takes you on a fascinating guided tour through the epic.

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THE NEW CRITICAL IDIOM

SERIES EDITOR: JOHN DRAKAKIS, UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING

The New Critical Idiom is an invaluable series of introductory guides to today's critical terminology. Each book:

- provides a handy, explanatory guide to the use (and abuse) of the term;
- offers an original and distinctive overview by a leading literary and cultural critic;
- relates the term to the larger field of cultural representation.

With a strong emphasis on clarity, lively debate and the widest possible breadth of examples, *The New Critical Idiom* is an indispensable approach to key topics in literary studies.

Also available in this series:

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Critical Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

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EPIC LITERARY HISTORY

Epic was once considered to be the highest literary form, a poet's greatest achievement. Its cultural importance was such that entire societies could be defined by and through it. Ancient Greece produced Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; Rome had Virgil and the *Aeneid*. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the first five books of the Old Testament could be considered to be an epic. Later books that deal with the establishment of the Kingdoms of Judea and Israel could additionally be defined as variants of historical epic. The Bible differs from the classical Western lineage in not being consciously poetic and in not being supposedly written by one person, but the two traditions have one major defining feature in common: status. The epic in this view is an identifiable literary form with a crucial cultural prominence. Its scope lends itself to grand narratives that incorporate various myths of origin intermingled with memories of historical events and personages. It passes through various stages, with particularly critical resonance for English poetry as it accompanies the development of a nascent British Empire. Spenser and Milton both, in their own ways, seed their work with a peculiarly Protestant epic *ethos*. Recent modern writing such as Walcott's *Omeros* and

Atwood's *Penelopiad* revisit this long history through their respective post-colonial and feminist intertextual retrospectives.

However, it should not be forgotten that the epic developed out of a communal impetus to cultural memory before it became a written form. The verbal and performative elements play off against the literary in different ways for different cultures, and therefore historical precision needs to be applied to individual epic texts in order to avoid generalisation. For example, the *Aeneid* is conceived and executed as a purely literary form, one that is engaged in conversation with its Homeric predecessors, in addition to other considerations. It is not produced by and for an oral/aural community in and through performance. Even so, much of its reworking of the myths of Roman origins is derived from folk traditions. Many more examples could be adduced of the ways in which different epics work through the relationship between the oral and the literary, something that is a main concern of the present volume. Jack Goody points to the inherent difficulties in unravelling how epic relates to the society that produces it, especially when that society is almost entirely non-literate. His chapter on Africa, Greece and oral poetry in *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Goody 1993: 78–109) is of particular value in relation to this issue. He characterises the processes of composition and performance of oral African works and he then uses these as a point of departure, producing a comparative methodology by which he is able to draw analogies with Homer's Greek-speaking culture. Goody's point is that there is no straightforward or clear-cut distinction between a purely oral culture and its epics on the one hand, and a purely literate one on the other. Instead, there is a series of possible combinations between the two extremes.

It is tempting to articulate the relationship between the oral and the literate in terms of a classic binary opposition. However, it is perhaps much more fruitful to see the relation as dynamic, a productive tension between two extremes of the same logic, albeit differentiated culturally and historically depending on which particular epic is being discussed. This is an important caveat, because for most of us in the twenty-first century epic in the traditional sense has become an unfamiliar form. In popular usage,

in a return to the communal roots of the term, 'epic' is an adjective that is applied to any grand sweeping narrative in a multitude of possible forms: film; television; the novel; role-playing and computer games, all have their own epic productions. Range, scope and sheer size define what can be described as epic. This element of ancient and classical epic has served to become its most significant defining feature.

This volume seeks to trace the history of this shift while at the same time making the various texts and forms accessible. The process of change is very uneven, much more so than the schematic history initially laid out here. But it should be possible to chart the various ways in which the standing of epic forms is affected. There are two major considerations. The first is the relationship between a given epic form or work and the culture within and for which it was produced. The second is the subsequent history of that same work when it is appropriated, reinvented, subsumed, consumed or even ultimately marginalised and forgotten by later cultures.

ANCIENT AND CLASSICAL EPIC

The earliest literary culture for which we have any evidence at all, and not only in relation to the epic, is that of the Sumerians. Their rise to prominence during the fourth millennium BCE in what is now southern Iraq led to the emergence of a literate class of nobles and priests, along with a subset of travelling merchants. However, very little remains of their writing except in fragmentary form, although what does exist gives a sense of an emerging set of literary traditions. These are available not just in authoritative forms. Stories, including the epic, act as templates to be varied according to local reinterpretations. Right from the beginning of the history of the epic, then, there is interplay across culturally defined notions of authority as these narratives migrate and are reinvented. A.E. George discusses the variant versions of *Gilgamesh* written in the later Old Babylonian language as follows:

> Altogether these eleven Old Babylonian manuscripts provide several disconnected episodes in a little over six hundred lines of poetry.

> Some of these lines are from passages that describe the same
> episode slightly differently, so it transpires that the eleven manu-
> scripts are not witnesses to a single edition of the poem, but to at
> least two and probably more. There is not enough shared text to
> determine how extensive the differences are, but it is already clear
> that we can speak both of distinct recensions (where the differences
> are minor) and of distinct versions (where the differences are major).
>
> (George 2010: 4)

George's analysis accounts for multiple textual variants across
the region, so much so that it makes little sense to assume an
originary, unitary source. There is plenty of room for manoeuvre
as elements of oral narrative intertwine with written forms;
George reminds us that the literary forms are not themselves
entirely fixed. In the introduction to her collection of Mesopota-
mian texts for the Oxford World's Classics (Dalley 2008: xv–xix),
Stephanie Dalley provides an accessible overview in which she
emphasises that the written forms we have are the result of a
two part inter-related process. She discerns the emergence of
a conception of textual authority, albeit one that is still relatively
fluid. She also notes that there are culturally and socially sanc-
tioned scribal variations. This produces a situation in which later
writers are expected to play with the traditional stories, although
still broadly within the parameters of a mostly oral culture.

We know about the Sumerian antecedents mostly from their
influence upon their successors, the Akkadians. They came
from the more northerly parts of Mesopotamia and took over the
territory of their southern cousins. We are on much firmer ground
here and enough survives in tablets using cuneiform writing for
scholars to reconstruct entire stories, including epics. Fragments
from various sites enable us to build up a picture of how literary
fluidity comes into existence. The evidence demonstrates that
traditional stories in both oral and written forms were expected to
be reworked and reworded. As an oral form in the first instance,
later written versions of epic will be historically specific, marked
by contingency in the form of local variations on a theme, in
much the same way that diverse versions of a myth can be found
in different places. Also, and equally important, has been the

discovery of multiple copies of exactly the same texts in several locations, enabling reasonably accurate transcriptions to be produced by piecing together a particular narrative. What is missing from one version can be supplemented by a fragment from somewhere else.

Dalley describes the overall contextual dynamic between oral and written forms as "inventive competition" (Dalley 2008: xv). It is clear that two overlapping cultural imperatives are at work here: poetic innovation and (at the same time) faithful textual transmission. She provides several instances of the process at work in her notes to the various texts. The overall narrative is reconstituted from these versions into the form that is recognisable in most modern editions. For example, the emergence of the wild man Enkidu to challenge the great hero-king Gilgamesh is followed by their friendship and quest. After Enkidu's death Gilgamesh goes on his solitary journey to discover the secret of immortality, in the course of which he meets the legendary survivor of the great flood. Eventually he returns home without immortality, but content to live out his life as the founder of the Sumerian city of Uruk. Diverse texts are put together to produce the standardised version of *Gilgamesh* and Dalley is careful to note the divergences:

> [...] at this point the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is that of master and servant, as in the Sumerian stories of Gilgamesh, whereas in the rest of the Akkadian epic they are equal comrades. However, later in this tablet Gilgamesh is called Enkidu's brother.
>
> (Dalley 2008: 134, n.150)

In an early section, therefore, Gilgamesh is Enkidu's social superior. Later on, however, the same 'text' represents them as equals. The precise nature of the bond between Gilgamesh and the epic's other main hero Enkidu is open to multiple interpretations. Such textual variation even on the same tablet may well seem alien to a later culture, but it should be remembered that it takes a great degree of sophistication for such a wide range of possibilities to be produced.

Similar comments could be made in relation to the construction of the Sanskrit epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Joshua T. Katz compares these poems with the Western epic tradition in much the same way that Jack Goody evaluates the epic productions of Homeric Greek culture by means of comparison with African oral storytelling traditions (Katz 2009: 20–30). Such a comparative methodology suggests useful points about the oral traditions that lie behind literary epic texts. In the case of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, John Brockington indicates how they comprise much more than literary texts that are underpinned by their oral predecessors in a direct linear and stable inheritance. Both are subjected to a long process of rewriting, and in the case of the *Mahabharata* in particular, massive expansion (Brockington 1998: 130–58). The situation of the *Ramayana* is slightly different, partly because its text reaches a relatively stable form earlier than the *Mahabharata* (Brockington 1998: 377–97).

The Indian epics provide a useful point of comparison with the two major narrative strands of Sumerian and then Akkadian epic. The much earlier Mesopotamian stories comprise a series of themes, some of which are better known than others. For example, although *Gilgamesh* makes reference to the traditional story of a great flood, that event is represented as having taken place at some unspecified point in the past. However, the narrative of *Gilgamesh* is now less well-known than the story of the flood, due to its dissemination through the much later Hebrew Bible and beyond into Christian tradition. The basic *motif* is that of the divinely inspired survival of the one true man and his family, and the result of this cataclysm is effectively a second creation. The earliest version we have, in Old Babylonian, comes from around 1700 BCE and it already demonstrates themes that are well-known from the much later Old Testament *Book of Genesis*. It incorporates a creation myth, human overpopulation, a God's decision to wipe out humanity, the saving of one wise man (Atrahasis) and his family, and a second creation of humanity via the descendants of Atrahasis. Two main differences from the more familiar Biblical story of Noah need to be noted. The first is that in the *Atrahasis* the catastrophe does not come about as a direct

result of the concept of original sin. The second is that as a reward for his piety and wisdom, Atrahasis is blessed with outright immortality. He represents the pinnacle of human achievement and is rewarded accordingly. Stephanie Dalley notes that an alternative view might be that when humanity was initially created, it was not only able to breed prodigiously, but was also immortal (Dalley 2008: 2–8). The resulting overpopulation led to a divine decision to send the flood as a means of correcting an error in creation, but that the sole survivor of antediluvian humanity, Atrahasis, remains naturally immortal. In this reading, the second creation of humanity rectifies the original error by making all subsequent humans mortal. During his wanderings, the hero Gilgamesh meets with the same personage, although in that poem he goes by the name Utnapishtim. This allows some of the flood story to be incorporated into *Gilgamesh* as the recounting of prior events by one of the participants (Dalley 2008: 4–6).

Between them, these two stories supply us with early evidence of major epic *motifs*, as well as literary techniques such as the internal story or sub-narrative. In this way, elements that are perhaps more familiar from the Greek and Roman classics can be discerned in their predecessors. The salient features include struggle and battle, the achievement of great deeds, the perilous journey, the appearance of supernatural and divine elements, the semi-divine importance of the great hero, and the importance of emulation between heroes that leads both to friendship and conflict. Stylistic aspects include tropes such as epithets, extended similes and the threefold repetition of dreams. In John Miles Foley's *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, Richard P. Martin fully discusses such defining generic traits in ancient epic in his essay "Epic as Genre" (Martin 2009), as does Jack M. Sasson in his essay "Comparative Observations on the Near Eastern Epic Traditions" in the same volume (Sasson 2009). Both accounts include the identification of poetic form and the establishment of typological categories in their definitions of epic and their analyses of how epic works for a given culture. In their different ways both insist upon the integral nature of the relationship between an epic and its culture, as opposed to a universal formal and