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Introduction
(Pushing) The Limits of Epic

Why Return to Greek Epic?

Greek epic has been done – copiously, variously, energetically – but at the same time it seeks to be un-done, re-done and done differently. In recent years, important work both specialist and introductory has continued to emerge on epic authors and texts and on the formal properties of epic more broadly.[1] And yet the time has come to put new and further pressure on Greek epic as a *concept*: a cultural object, a self-reflexive agent, or a wide-ranging affective experience. Throughout its long history, Greek epic has continued to delight and excite those who encounter it because of how compellingly it interrogates the boundaries of its own form. On the one hand, the 'quiddity' of Greek epic is readily definable: it can be described through the connected matrix of the terms ἔπος (in its most basic sense: 'word')[2] ἀοιδή ('song') and μῦθος ('authoritative

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[1] For the former category, see details in the subsequent sections of this Introduction. In the latter category, special mention must be made of Foley's 2006 Blackwell *Companion to Ancient Epic*, a wide-ranging compendium of both Greek and Latin material, and of the new resource edited by Christiane Reitz and Simone Finkmann (2019, in four volumes), discussed below.

[2] The closest ancient Greek verbal equivalent to the word 'epic'. Beyond its basic meaning 'that which is uttered in words', ἔπος was employed in a range of connected ways across archaic, classical and post-classical Greek literature, including to mean 'word', 'song', 'pledge' and 'oracle'. As early as Herodotus and Pindar, it could also be used to denote specifically epic poetry, mainly in specific opposition to μέλη, the term for lyric. Herodotus famously discusses the ἐποποιίη ('epic verse making' in his Ionic dialect form) of Homer (2.116.1) and describes 'the Cyprian epic verses' (τὰ Κύπρια ἔπεα) as not being the works of

utterance');[3] it is metrically marked by the dactylic hexameter; it is characterised by heroic themes and diction, or formal features such as length, recurring scenes and motifs;[4] and it occupied a firmly central place in (ancient) Greek education and culture.[5] On the other hand, the poems within this seemingly stable literary edifice, from the epics of Homer to Nonnus and beyond, have threatened to burst their own dams, finding inventive, disorienting ways to resist constructed taxonomies. These dynamics have long been recognised in certain individual poets, periods or groups. The present volume attempts a more holistic confrontation of what Greek epic is and does and takes into account a wide range of contemporary critical and theoretical developments in the field.

Epic studies have been pushed – and pulled – in new and exciting directions in the recent decades. In keeping with the broader trends in ancient literary scholarship, there has been a striking concentration of energy in a number of areas: notions of space and time; materiality; structural (re)-analysis; emotion and ethno-criticism. Within the spatial turn, work has focused on landscape, topography and ecology as well as vertical and horizontal movement.[6] Research on epic temporality has focused on how authors in the Greek epic tradition centralise and thematise time, viewing it both as a narrative force and as a poetic tool to reflect on their own position in literary history.[7] Further advances have been made in structuralist and poststructuralist readings, demonstrated most substantially in the recent monumental collection *The Structures of Epic Poetry*, in which fifty-seven scholars from different specialisms chart the scenes and arrangements of epic such as battles, journeys and rituals 'whose set forms, sequences and recognisable features mark them as a lasting part of the tradition'.[8] Stimulating

Homer, but someone else. ἔπος/ἔπεα could however also occasionally be used for poetry more generally, even lyrics: e.g. Pindar *Ol.* 3.8–9, with a strong musical emphasis (. . . βοὰν αὐλῶν ἐπέων τε θέσινl . . . συμμεῖξαι πρεπόν), where Pindar may be mobilising ἔπεα to emphasise the *non-epic* form of his 'arrangement'.

[3] Martin 2006: 11: 'the main difference between ἀοιδή and μῦθοι seems to be the presence or absence of music, and whether or not the performer is a professional bard'.

[4] See Martin 2006 for an excellent overview of some of these definitional properties (and Martin 1989 for the conception of μῦθος as an 'authoritative utterance'). For exactly how this present volume is defining 'Greek epic', see below: 'About this Volume'.

[5] See especially Richard Hunter's Chapter 17 in this volume on ancient readings of epic, and the contributions by Hanink (Chapter 20) and Christoforou (Epilogue) on modern Greek perspectives.

[6] Skempis and Ziogas 2014 on landscape and topography; Purves 2010 on space (and time); and Hutchinson 2020 on motion. On the Latin side, Biggs and Blum 2019 on the epic journey; Armstrong 2019, on Virgilian plants and botany and Sissa and Martelli 2023 on Ovid's Metamorphosis and ecocriticism.

[7] E.g. Phillips 2020; Greensmith 2020; Goldhill 2020 and 2022: see further discussion below in this Introduction.

[8] Reitz and Finkmann 2019: 2.

studies have also emerged on materiality and object ontology, which, together with the achievements of ecocritical readings, have done much to emphasise how our encounters with the epic world must move beyond mortal heroes and anthropomorphised gods.[9] Perspectives on human themes have also significantly widened and deepened. There has been an intense appreciation of the psychological dimensions of ancient epic, and of the role played by emotions, affect and sensory-aesthetic experiences.[10] And important new anthropological and sociological lenses are being rigorously applied, most markedly to consider what ancient epic has to say (and it has a lot to say) about race, racecraft and ethnicity.[11]

Another palpable shift in epic studies since the turn of the century is in conceptions of what is meant by 'reception'. Greek epic is in a sense the ultimate reception genre. Techniques which later became central to modern theories of intertextuality and narratology – those of supplementation, competitive rewriting and creative imitation, which are all now key tools for analysing ancient poetics[12] – find ample expression in the earliest Greek hexameter texts. To take just two paradigmatic illustrations, consider Hesiod's self-correction at the start of the *Works and Days* ('so there was not just one birth of Strife after all', *Op.* 11, in contrast to the genealogy given at *Theogony* 225) and the delicate embedding of alternative strands of the Trojan story within the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, such as the 'quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles' mentioned obliquely in Demodocus' song (*Od.* 8.75).[13]

These markers of self-awareness, competitiveness and innovation in the early hexameter tradition strongly negate any simplistic binaries of oral 'primitiveness' versus literate sophistication which may once have held sway in conceptions of Greek epic.[14] But they should also make us wary of

[9] See e.g. Grethlein 2008 and 2019; Whitley 2013; Holmes 2015.

[10] See e.g. the body of work of Cairns (e.g. 2004, 2016, 2020); Cairns and Nelis 2017; and Butler and Purves 2013. Full references and further reading in Chapter 14 in this volume (LeVen).

[11] I use 'new' here only in the relative sense of the state of the field in ancient literary studies: see Andújar, Giusti and Murray forthcoming. Key works to contextualise this approach are Debrew 2022; Rankine 2006; and McConnell 2013. For how these interventions have now facilitated readings of race into ancient epic, see the superb and important piece by Giusti 2023 (on the *Aeneid*), and centrally, Murray's Chapter 12 in this volume.

[12] Championed most triumphantly in the *Roman Literature and Its Contexts* series on Latin poetry (Cambridge University Press, beginning in 1993 with the most recent publication in 2016).

[13] On allusive techniques in archaic poetry, see Tsagalis 2008; Currie 2016; and Nelson 2023. An alternative but influential position is found in the corpus of Nagy: see especially 1996, with further related theories in 1990 and 2009.

[14] On the background to this age-old debate, a summary of which goes beyond the remit of this Introduction, see for starters the succinct summary in Foley 2006.

separating older, 'canonical' Greek epic from later, 'derivative' responses to it.[15] There are many signs that a more capacious approach to Greek epic across time is beginning to take hold. The increased recognition of and appreciation for postclassical and especially imperial Greek epic is one of the most salient features of ancient literary studies in recent years.[16] The surge in scholarly interest in late antique poets such as Quintus, Triphiodorus, Colluthus and Nonnus, and in Jewish and Christian Greek versifiers, has meant that long-standing clichés surrounding these authors which deemed them aesthetically lacklustre, or tired knock-offs of Homer, are now truly a thing of the past, and their rich, culturally fascinating poems are being brought more definitively into the framework of Greek epic as a whole.[17] The creative self-awareness of Greek epic also extends well beyond the end of genre in a formal sense. After the move from quantitative poetry to syllabic stress poetry discernible from the sixth century CE,[18] epic still inspired new readers and thinkers. As Markéta Kulhánková discusses in Chapter 19, the concept, themes and authority of Greek epic were far from obsolete in the Byzantine era of Greek literature. These same hallmarks and

[15] It is interesting to compare the initial response to *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (originally published in 1997) which took the innovative move of beginning with reception ('Part I: Receptions'), reversing the conventional structure of handbooks which leaves modern readings to the end, in what is perhaps an implicit reflection of the perception that such readings are postscripts or supplements to the core corpus of epic works. As the editors note in the preface to the second edition, this structure, and the volume's generally strong focus on reception, 'upset' some reviewers, but they admirably retained it in the revised version, noting that 'since 1997 the importance of classical reception studies has been widely acknowledged; and the way Virgil is read today depends in large part on the responses of earlier ages.' (Mac Góráin and Martindale 2019: xiii). This example shows on the one hand how far we have come; however, on the other, a fully integrated approach to ancient works and modern reception is still a work in progress.

[16] This mirrors the similar explosion in interest in Apollonius Rhodius in the last decades of the twentieth century and beyond. See Phillips' Chapter 9 in this volume for further bibliography.

[17] Recent studies, commentaries and monographs are too numerous to be listed here, but the ongoing project of commentaries on Nonnus' *Paraphrase of St John* (the most recent English edition by Spanoudakis, 2014) and the mammoth *Brill Companion* to Nonnus (Accorinti 2016); Miguélez Cavero's 2013 commentary on Triphiodorus; Lightfoot's edition of the *Sibylline Oracles* 1–2 (2007); Kneebone 2020 on Oppian; Greensmith 2020; Maciver 2012; Bär, Greensmith and Ozbek 2022 on Quintus; and the much anticipated new series of English translations of many imperial Greek poems (Whitmarsh et al., forthcoming), can serve as some illustrative examples. All of this work builds upon and was made possible by the huge advances made in imperial Greek epic scholarship in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, especially through the work of Vian on Quintus and Nonnus (respectively 1959–66 and 1969; 1976–2006), Shorrock on Nonnus (2001 and 2011) and Maciver and Bär on Quintus (e.g. Maciver 2007; Bär 2009, 2010); as well as the field-changing volume on the *Posthomerica* (Baumbach and Bär 2007).

[18] On this shift and its complexities, see Whitmarsh's Chapter 18 in this volume.

features of epic storytelling, Johanna Hanink demonstrates in Chapter 20, also became deeply integrated into modern Greek and Turkish poetry and nation-building; and, as Panayiotis Christoforou stresses in his Epilogue, they have a persistent and renewed relevance in notions of selfhood in the Greek lands today.

The current popular appetite for Greek mythological epic is also striking and significant. In the Anglophone sphere, the British Museum's 'Troy' exhibition (2019–20), Stephen Fry's series of books (most recently at the time of writing, the very epic-centred *Troy*, 2020), the new musical 'EPIC: The Troy Saga', with an EP album which passed three million streams on its first day of release,[19] Emily Wilson's much anticipated translation of the *Iliad* (2023) and the ardent media attention surrounding it,[20] and the cascade of novels on Trojan mythology such as Madeleine Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011) and *Circe* (2018), Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and *The Women of Troy* (2021), Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* (2019) and the trilogy by Emily Hauser (2016–18),[21] a contributor to this volume, as well as ventures on the big and small screen, all suggest that Greek epic is having a particular cultural moment.[22] This should not surprise us. Themes of war and dislocation, journeying and nostalgia, and emotions on an individual scale, set in and against vast topographical, environmental and cosmic perspectives, have all spoken to multiple different movements of the 'now'. They have a stark relevance to a society which is grappling with a new European war, navigating the interminable 'aftermath' of a pandemic, working to confront multiple new regimes of power, and attempting to find new, better ways to self-express and communicate in a rapidly changing social

[19] The musical (yet to be released at the time of writing) is set to be an off-Broadway adaptation of the *Odyssey*, and the original concept EP (released on Christmas Day 2022) consists of the opening five songs from the musical, which begins with the first lines of the *Odyssey*.

[20] This follows Wilson's acclaimed and controversial translation of the *Odyssey* in 2017.

[21] These Greek-mythology-inspired fictions are appearing at such a rapid rate that an attempt to list them all will undoubtedly seem outdated by the time of publication: I have included here the most well-known novels and those which receive discussion in this volume (see Hauser's Chapter 13 and a brief but pertinent mention in Murray's Chapter 12).

[22] See especially Macintosh and McConnell 2020, who trace these developments through turning points such as the 2005 production of Logue's *War Music*, Alice Oswald's poetry and other epically inspired narrative theatre. As they rightly stress, the range of modern narrative dramas (broadly conceived) which merge myth, history and oral-aural elements to emerge as 'new epic storytellers of the twenty first century' (ibid. 11) is vast, and it defies easy compartmentalisation (cf. e.g. their interesting discussion of the cult-hit podcast documentary *S-Town* which deploys some specifically epic tropes, ibid. 11, 56–8). See also Winkler's Chapter 21 for the diverse range of epic tropes in an equally diverse range of film productions.

world. This modern spotlighting of Greek epic themes sharply underlines the fact that we must also resist drawing firm lines between scholarly accounts of epic and salient popular trends: to do so would be limiting and misleading. Epic has inspired and *continues to inspire* radical interpretation and reworking, as the inbuilt antiquity and uncanny familiarity of the foundational Greek genre offers itself so readily as a vehicle to negotiate, celebrate and challenge our own visions of the world.

About This Volume

The volume has arisen from this charged and energising environment and aims to engage with some of these themes and approaches head-on, by centralising the ideas and concerns which drive Greek epic production across time and configuring epic as a mode constantly in conversation with itself. It has therefore been constructed with two connected aims. The first is quite simply to provide a thematic account of the Greek epic genre.[23] The second is to approach Greek epic synchronically, to make extensive connections with other ancient genres and traditions (such as Latin epic and Near Eastern poetry), and especially (one of the most adamant intentions of the volume) to continue to move beyond the conventional canon of Greek hexameter poets and pay ample attention to imperial Greek mythological epic, late antique Christian poetics, and modern adaptations and retellings.

The *Companion* is divided into six major parts, each chosen to reflect one of the major developments in the world of epic studies highlighted above.[24] In light of its two driving aims, it does not follow an author-by-author, chronographic approach, nor does it cover every introductory topic pertaining to the epic mode. Rather, the material has been selected and parameters have been drawn so as on the one hand, to cover as wide a temporal remit as possible, and on the other, to focus on close readings, with a particular emphasis on juxtaposing the best-known works of epic poetry with more unfamiliar or unexpected poems, passages and literary periods.[25] As a result, there are necessarily areas that go unaddressed, and the volume's panorama is chiefly

[23] 'Epic' is therefore defined in this volume as narrative poetry composed in hexameter on heroic or mythological themes, *and/or* later poetry which marks itself out as centrally and self-reflexively engaging with this tradition. On didactic hexameter and/ as epic, see Kneebone, Chapter 3 in this volume.

[24] The contents of these parts are detailed in the synopses below.

[25] 'Unfamiliar' and 'unexpected' in terms of their lack of presence in the traditional canon of classical epic – see especially the discussions of this issue in the chapters by Verhelst (7), Goldhill (8), Greensmith (10) and Whitmarsh (18), as well as the initial remarks in the above section of this Introduction.

textual rather than visual or archaeological.[26] Readers looking for overviews of, for instance, heroics and characterisation, type scenes, similes and ecphrasis, or the oral tradition are very well served by existing literature, and there is little to be gained from retracing the same territory in another collection.[27] Instead, each contributor was asked to write a piece for one of the Part themes, and to explore their topic in an epic text or texts of their choosing, to pursue the rich connections that are available between different Greek epics, and produce new and exciting readings and combinations. Some chapters take up familiar and influential ideas in epic scholarship (such as religion or the role of women) and interrogate them from a new angle; others represent the first stand-alone discussions of their subject (e.g. epic racecraft, the poetics of the diminutive, and Trojan temporality) or constitute the first forays into a subject in an introductory format (such as affect in postclassical epic). In all cases the pieces here represent new research, thoroughly grounded in the context of the relevant scholarly debates.

The volume is therefore decidedly, and proudly, kaleidoscopic. The chapters are united by their interest in six central themes and engage in multiple ways with one another (as will be detailed below), but they vary and sometimes even diverge in stance, approach and scope, and it has been my intention as editor to preserve and encourage these variations. However, many steps have also been taken to orient readers as they make their way through the diverse discussions in this book. The first chapter in each section aims to give an overview of the theme on a larger scale, in a fashion that paves the way for the more zoomed-in analyses which follow.[28] The volume is accompanied by a free downloadable web resource (Cambridge.org/9781316514696) which contains plot summaries of all the poems featured in the chapters.[29] At the end of the volume there is a timeline of all surviving Greek epic and a set of chapter abstracts, where the key epics discussed are highlighted in bold to aid those searching for discussions of a particular author or text. All features of this structure seek to draw together the different perspectives offered by the chapters into a coherent new look at the epic world, and to draw together the equally

[26] Material culture receives discussion in a number of individual chapters, especially those of Sekita (5) and Hanink (20), and visuality takes a central role in my own chapter (10), where I discuss ecphrasis as it is inherited and remastered by Triphiodorus to produce surprising temporal effects.

[27] Examples of existing studies on these areas are referenced where relevant throughout the chapters and listed in the collected Bibliography at the end.

[28] With the exception of Part I, which treats epic engagements across three different traditions: see the part summaries below.

[29] These online summaries are designed to be used alongside the chapters and have therefore taken the place of extensive plot summarising in the chapters themselves.

diverse audiences of the companion genre, from specialist scholars to new or general readers, and to offer them multiple ways of approaching the ideas found within these pages.

The Parts and the Whole

The final section of this Introduction surveys the main tenets of each part and draws attention to some of the key points of dialogue between the chapters. Each chapter has been designed to be read individually, but the contributions also form part of the wider ethos of the book and thus reward connected reading.

Part I, 'Epic Engagements', investigates the interrelations between Greek epic and other regions, genres or modes, forging extensive comparisons with Near Eastern poetry, lyric and didactic material. Bernardo Ballesteros explores connections between early Greek and Near Eastern narrative poetry and demonstrates how the Eastern Mediterranean context can help situate early Greek epic in an ancient cross-cultural framework. Henry Spelman then examines the relationship between epic and the unruly genre of lyric. He begins with brief historical orientation and then focuses on more theoretical questions of genre, and ultimately examines how and whether lyric works out a definition for itself in contradistinction to epic, and whether such a definition can offer a more nuanced understanding of what epic itself is. Emily Kneebone takes a related approach to the didactic tradition and analyses the interplay and boundaries between ancient heroic and didactic epic poetry, particularly in the Hellenistic and imperial periods. All three of these chapters draw attention to the complexity surrounding considerations of historical context, chronology, genre and classification, and show how these authors and traditions overlap and engage with epic material, and reveal not only their affiliations to heroic epic conventions, but also their divergences, distinctions and modes of adaptation.

Part II, 'Epic Space', considers the ways in which space, broadly conceived, is thematised and problematised in Greek epic. Building on the growing interest within many specialisms of literary studies in geography, topography and ecology,[30] the section explores space from a number of angles: narrative conceptualisations of place and plot, vertical movements and journeys, travel and dislocation. It also examines the more formalistic notions of size and scale – the verbal, material or structural 'space' that epic *takes up*. Christos

[30] See note 6 above for examples in classics. For the ecocritical and spatial turn in humanities more broadly, see Garrard 2011 and Clark 2019 for two different reflective overviews and introductions.

Tsagalis analyses the presentation of space in relation to the story narrated in the two Homeric epics. The chapter locates and highlights for the readers the similarities and differences between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* with respect to categories of space and suggests the ways in which these categories could be taken up and manipulated by later proponents of the genre. Karolina Sekita moves us onto a vertical axis, providing a wide-ranging account of epic *katabases* (journeys to the underworld) and treating the underworld as both a theme and a location in early hexameter poetry. Alexander Loney moves from Sekita's vertical axis to a horizontal perspective, focusing on the epic return journey (the *nostos*) and the physical and emotive experiences which such a journey produces – dislocation, nostalgia and homesickness – in an analysis which connects the more structural aspects of epic's physical geography with its temporal, social and psychological dimensions, which will be picked up and centralised in the next three parts of the volume (respectively, on epic time, epic people and epic feelings). Berenice Verhelst considers space in a more formalistic sense, in a chapter centred on the controversial epic 'sub' genre of the epyllion. She first underlines the scholarly debates surrounding epyllion as a category, and then turns to look more closely at poems which themselves could be termed 'epyllionic', focusing not just on the aesthetic dimensions of these poems, but also and especially on the characters contained within them: 'small' characters like children and mice, and foreboding cameos by figures like Achilles. Verhelst shows how these texts put grand epic heroics into a new perspective, be it comical or dark, to negotiate their own position in relation to Homer and the epic tradition.

Part III, 'Epic Time', takes up another highly topical area of scholarship: temporality. Taking their cue from the central and complex role of time within the ancient Greek epic tradition and its inheritors, the three chapters in this section trace treatments of temporality in Greek epic from Homer and Hesiod through Apollonius to imperial Greek poetics, revealing the transformations which took place in epic temporal structuring, and assessing the influence of Hellenistic aesthetics, imperial Greek politics, and the dawning of Christianity. Simon Goldhill explores three key ways that epic has expressed a sense of temporality: foundational – how epic uses genealogy to express the structure of things; narratological – how epics make time a subject of their narrative; and poetic – how epic marks its awareness of its place in tradition. After this panoramic purview, Tom Phillips zooms in to show how Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* offers a particularly powerful example of epic temporality at work. Phillips draws attention to the small moments of temporal shaping within the *Argonautica* – how time is experienced by the characters and the readers on the level of the individual line, phrase and even word – which contain the many perspectives offered by

Apollonius on navigating the burden of living as a subject of history. Phillips' readings, like those in Loney's chapter, also reveal the emotional layers at work in his passages, and thus pave the way for the fifth part of the volume, where Apollonius will also make a poignant return. My own chapter considers the prominence of and play with temporality in imperial Greek epic through a reading of three poems which return directly to the mythic time of Troy: Quintus of Smyrna's *Posthomerica*, Triphiodorus' *Sack of Troy* and Colluthus' *Abduction of Helen*. Treating some key moments of temporal reflexivity in these poems, the readings outline the specific imperial Greek temporality that they share, which renders them distinct from Apollonius' Alexandrian epic as analysed by Phillips. By emphasising how Troy operates in these poems not only as a physical space and geographical place, but also as a marker of time, this chapter seeks to underscore the deep interconnection between space and time within the Greek epic tradition that has been suggested in various ways by the contributions across these two parts.

Part IV, 'Epic People', focuses on the social fabric of epic. Moving beyond conventional topics of characterisation and heroic identity,[31] this section incorporates newer perspectives to address and re-address religion, morality, gender and ethnicity. Renaud Gagné tackles the vast topic of religion in epic through a specific and innovative lens: the detailed descriptions of animal sacrifice found in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and the dominant referential role that they continued to play in Greek representations of sacrifice, creating what he terms 'the ritual archive' of Greek epic. Jackie Murray offers an illuminating approach to the discourses of race and ethnicity in ancient Greek epic, specifically Homer's *Iliad* and Apollonius' *Argonautica*. The chapter begins by defining, theorising and applying a transhistorical concept of race and ethnicity which makes it possible to analyse the literary representations of ancient manifestations of ethnic and racialised oppression. Using this model, Murray argues that epic poetry transmitted to its receiving society, whether ancient or modern, a mythical social order that placed the heroes, the demi-gods, at the top of the human hierarchy, and non-heroes, the people who are oppressed and exploited by the heroes, at the bottom, and shows how this order, so integral to the society of Greek epic, was racial. Emily Hauser investigates the roles and relevance of women in Greek epic, and argues, like Gagné, that the ideas and motifs developed in Homeric epic have intense and complex relevance to the later development of the tradition. Following the emphasis placed in this Introduction on reversing the customary 'post-scripting' view of modern reception of ancient epic, Hauser shows that looking back to gender, and women, in Homer is as important now as

[31] These topics feature within this part but no single chapter is dedicated to them.