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Epic and History (review)

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if American and British scholars had been keeping up with the work of their
German colleagues, particularly Christian Meier and those influenced by his
pathbreaking 1966 study, *Res Publica Amissa* (Wiesbaden 1966), we would
already have known at least the outlines of the answer.

That answer involves not constitutional structures or who was related to
whom, but the values, traditions, and practices that informed the worldview
of elite and ordinary Romans alike, in other words their political culture.
Hölkeskamp begins by criticizing Millar’s treatment of Gelzer and other
predecessors, and then contrasts Millar’s static Mommsonian view of the
Republican constitution with the characterization offered by Meier and Wei-
acker of an organic, evolving entity. He then notes the well-known limits
on the assemblies’ power and the rarity of their lawmaking in the middle
Republic as opposed to the wide-ranging—because undefined—powers of the
senate and the hierarchical nature of Roman social relations. Important, too,
is what could and could not become subject to political debate: the crisis
of the Republic only arose when the consensus on the latter broke down.
Hölkeskamp stresses the importance of the value system for understanding
how political power was constructed and surveys its concrete manifestations
in language, through ceremonies like the triumph and aristocratic funerals,
and in places of memory, public rituals, and constitutional speeches. Aristocratic
status was not hereditary. It had to be earned by members of a family in
each generation and rare was the family that managed to remain at the top
for more than a few generations. Competition therefore was keen but could
only take place, as the sociologist Georg Simmel argued, in the context of a
fundamental consensus on the rules of the game and arbitration from outside
the aristocracy itself. This latter role the popular assemblies played. Hence
aristocrats’ need to present themselves before the public and the critical
importance of a family’s symbolic capital in winning and maintaining status.
Hölkeskamp closes with a plea for a “modern” ancient history, one informed
by methodologies and theories of social and political science.

This brief summation cannot do justice to Hölkeskamp’s nuanced and
wide-ranging survey. The notes and bibliography alone are worth the price of
the volume. Missing, however, is any analysis of how the economy affected
ordinary Romans’ acceptance of aristocratic rule. Recent research suggests
Republican society was not sharply divided between a few rich and many
poor, but that prosperity was much more widely spread. Did citizens follow
their elite leaders because political culture determined their thought-world
or because of the material benefits they brought them?

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NATHAN ROSENSTEIN

David Konstan and Kurt A. Raaflaub (eds.). *Epic and History*. The Ancient

The volume under review might be better called “Epic and the Past.” It
does not show how epic influenced the genre of history, but instead explores
the interaction of epic with many different types of past. Among the issues
discussed are the conditions of creation, redaction, and performance, of his-
toricity, and of the way that the poet’s creation of the epic past can promote
or challenge political power in his own period.

Different pieces exhibit the sometimes contradictory uses of the genre.
Grethlein’s piece on Homer, for instance, describes how the characters in
the *Iliad* interact with a plu-past—a preceding time when men were greater. This is most often manifested by interaction with some object, and Grethlein posits, in line with Patzek, that the epics of this period may have been attempting to explain Mycenaean remains and “reflect a newly awakened historical awareness guided by material leftovers” (137 n.67). Goldberg, on the other hand, shows convincing parallels between Saturnian verse—the meter of Naevius’ *Bellum Punicum*—and inscriptions such as the epitaph on the sarcophagus of L. Cornelius Scipio. He suggests that the language of the poet “recording Roman deeds” may have “informed the language of the noble Romans who took credit for them” (175). Thus, in one essay, epic poets rationalize monumental remains, while in the other, the poet influences the fashioning of such monuments.

Some of the most exciting offerings have to do with epics that the scholars have seen performed. The Mayan epic *Rabinal Achi*, still performed yearly in Guatemala, is a fascinating palimpsest of influences. Tedlock enumerates traditional indigenous elements such as its references to the Mayan calendar, its costumes, and its debt to earlier dance dramas. *Rabinal Achi* also shows the effects of conquest by paralleling and inverting many scenes in the Spanish play *Carlo Magno*. Whitaker’s essay discusses Nguni praise poetry. He describes how the Xhosa poet Manisi, in a performance at the University of Natal, moved on the stage like a secretary bird hunting food and how the poet’s modest clothes highlighted the affluence of the academic audience around him. This is a theatrical aspect of performed epic that words on a page cannot reveal.

The power and authority of the epic genre is displayed throughout this collection. Many of the works described draw heavily from the natural world for their imagery. The presence of poetic techniques creates in place of history’s political sphere a more universal sphere of action. Symbol and simile replace process. By writing human beings into the larger world of nature, epic creates a grander stage for action than the transitory world of human alliances. Despite a stress throughout the collection on the temporal conditions that affected these works, I found myself impressed by the way that poetry—to paraphrase Cicero—plants an oak in one’s imagination in a way that history cannot. Symbol transcends fact and the poetic tree will outlast the historical tree that inspired it.

The twenty-three essays in this book move from Sumerian Gilgamesh to South African izibongo, from the *Mahabharata* through *Beowulf* and *Roland* to *Rabinal Achi*, from the third millennium B.C.E. to the near present. These essays will provide comparanda for students of mythology or epic. But more importantly, they tease the comfortable assumptions that one can acquire by working within too narrow a slice of the genre. I left this volume with some of my former certainties shaken, which is a mark of an exciting collection.

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With exhaustive modern commentaries available to date for only two sections of Petronius’ *Satyricon*—Breitenstein (Berlin 2009) on chs. 1–15 and Habermehl (Berlin 2006) on chs. 79–110—we can hardly be very happy about an intersection of eleven chapters between the sixteen discussed by Vannini