THE EPIC IN HISTORY

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SYDNEY STUDIES

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Foreword

S. N. Mukherjee

It is thanks to Zdenko Zlatar that in this volume we can bring together poets from many different strands of the epic tradition - from ancient Rome and India to medieval and modern Europe.Originally it was Zlatar's idea that we expand Gian Biagio Conte's concept of reading a text. Zlatar wanted to read an epic "in connection with" and "in opposition to" other epics, as Conte would have wanted. Accordingly a workshop was organized by SASSC in 1990 in Sydney and it brought together scholars from all departments of the University of Sydney. It was intended to follow this with an international conference in 1991 or 1992, to be addressed by the late Professor Alfred Lord. Alas, Professor Lord died and the University of Sydney failed to give us financial assistance for such a conference.

In 1993, thanks to Lola Sharon Davidson, SASSC was able to organize another workshop on epics at which we heard some new papers and some revised versions of the papers from the 1990 workshop. It is due to the efforts of Dr.Davidson that we are now able to present a selection of these papers in this volume. Unfortunately we have not been able to publish all the papers from the two workshops, so this volume does not provide as broad a coverage of epic poetry as we initially intended. In particular, works on the Indian and Indonesian epics, on the Icelandic sagas and the Byzantine epics had to be ommitted. The workshops themselves were in the best tradition of SASSC. They were interdisciplinary, original and informative. The discussions, often fierce and emotional, helped to shape the final version of this book.

Finally we must thank Michael Wilding for helping us with the publication and the Faculty of Arts of the University of Sydney for financial support for this volume.

Introduction

Lola Sharon Davidson

We start our examination of epics with one of the most ancient that has come down to us, the *Mahabharata*. Although in the Indian tradition the *Ramayana* is considered to be older, modern scholarship considers the *Mahabharata* to pre-date Valmiki's *Ramayana*. Soumeyn Mukherjee examines the *Mahabharata* in the context of the *itihasa-purana* (history of antiquities) of ancient India, and shows how that tradition still continues in India today. He argues that not only the *puranas* but also the epics, including the *Mahabharata*, were finally edited during the Gupta period (c.320-543 A.D.). The Guptas were of obscure origin and from their inscriptions it seems that they relied heavily on the *Mahabharata* to give themselves legitimacy.

From ancient India we move to post-Roman Britain, a period which has been described as the British Heroic Age. Helen Fulton argues that this description is mistaken. Far from depicting a "heroic" pre-feudal society based on the *comitatus*, Aneirin's *Gododdin*, a sixth-century Welsh epic, shows us a tribal society based on regional, cultural and kin loyalties. Consequently it cannot be used to support the universalizing notion of a Heroic Age proposed by the Chadwicks.

Our next paper deals with how a theme common to many epics is moulded by a particular culture. The theme is flyting, a boastful verbal exchange which establishes the status of potential combatants, and so whether they should proceed to a fight or not, and what significance that fight will have. The epic is the Irish *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, which dates from the eighth century, but probably draws on oral material going back much earlier. Extending Ward Parks' treatment of flyting in ancient Greek and Old English epic poetry, Bernard Martin shows how the flyting in the *Táin* has affinities

with the flyting in the *Iliad*, and yet presents a specifically Irish flavour. In three important respects the *Táin* diverges from Parks' Greco-Germanic model: in the emphasis on the central figure of CúChulainn as supreme warrior, in the conflict of loyalties which afflicts most of the participants, and in the unheroic status of the two main adversaries, CúChulainn, a beardless youth, and Medb, a woman, who can never fight directly.

Not only may epic themes vary according to context, but epics themselves may assume different meanings as cultures change over time. In my first paper I examine how medieval writers used Virgil's comments on dreams to provide a justification for fiction, pagan learning and the dream experience, all of which were mistrusted by Christian moralists. By treating Aeneas' descent to the underworld as a dream, a falsehood concealing a true meaning, medieval scholars were able to pass beyond the threatening pagan content of the vision to what they perceived as its philosophical truth.

It has been suggested that the allegorising and pedantic tendencies of medieval Latin culture were hostile to the heroic spirit of the epic. In a paper itself of epic dimensions, John O.Ward shows how untrue this is. The *Waltharius,* a Latin epic from the ninth century, gives Virgilian echoes to a fourth-century Germanic story which it reorients to focus on the question of marriage. Here we find the epic used to address contemporary issues, namely the sanctity of betrothal and marital loyalty, and we are reminded that the epic is not to be narrowly confined to the celebration of masculine aggression.

Irene Harris returns us to an aspect of the epic already touched on by Helen Fulton, namely the epic as an affirmation of group identity. The *Gododdin* depicts a solitary, unified tribe of British warriors valiantly resisting the English who triumph only through superior numbers. Historical sources, however, suggest a far more complicated pattern of shifting allegiances and ethnic mixing. The twelfth-century monk, Stephen of Rouen, reworked Norman history in much the same fashion as the Welsh bard Aneirin reworked British history centuries earlier. Stephen's Latin poem, *Draco Normannicus,* presents the Normans as a unified people with a historical mission. It seems that Stephen hoped to encourage his king, Henry I, to a stronger identification with his Norman heritage and a more spirited defence of Norman independence from the French crown. This immediate political purpose gives the *Draco* a rhetorical flavour which Harris suggests is not altogether compatible with the epic genre.

Epic, history, rhetoric and romance come together in my paper, which compares the treatment of dreams in different literary genres. In the medieval French epics, the *chansons de geste*, dreams feature frequently as true divine

revelations which give cosmic meaning to events and bring the dreamer closer to the truth. Dreams are treated in the same way and perform the same function in Latin histories of the period. By contrast, dreams in the romances of the time typically express personal desires which are at variance with social reality and so are ultimately illusory. The similarity between the dreams in the *chansons* and histories reflects their common religious background. The dream was the expression and proof of divine involvement in earthly affairs.

Probably the best known of the *chansons* is the *Chanson de Roland*, whose earliest version is to be found in an eleventh-century manuscript at Oxford. Bernadette Masters presents here a detailed analysis of the language and structure of the Oxford *Roland*. She reveals an apparent confusion of characters and incidents, accentuated by variations in the spelling of names. Masters argues that far from seeing these confusions as literary faults we should understand them as deliberate techniques. Iconographic reformulation and boundary dissolution are used to transpose the subject matter of the poem from the historical to the mythic domain, in the same way as they are used in the contemporary art forms of the Mass and Romanesque architecture.

The question of the essential nature of the epic is raised again in John Clifton-Everest's paper. The *Nibelungenlied* is commonly thought of as Germany's one great epic, yet it shows a profound romance influence. Although the story is know from the Icelandic *Eddas*, the *Nibelungenlied* itself was composed at the beginning of the thirteenth century, at the same time as Germany's two great romances, Wolfram's *Parzival* and Gotfried's *Tristan*. The central concern of the *Nibelungenlied* is not so much the military exploits of heroes and their kin groups, but rather the power of sexual love and the threat it poses to the social order. The *Nibelungenlied*, then, is both epic and romance, another demonstration of the way the epic form has adapted to different contexts.

The revolutionary debates of seventeenth-century England form the context for Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Milton has often been accused of failing to extend his egalitarian views to the opposite sex. Michael Wilding argues that this is a misreading of the poem. Milton's message is one of absolute equality - sexual, political and economic. In the dangerous climate of the time, Milton had to be careful how he expressed such a radical view. Modern readers have been shocked by the poem's male supremacist statements, failing to notice that these are part of Satan's distorted vision. Inequality is a characteristic of the fallen state, where what "seems" cannot simply be taken

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as true. The inequality imposed by a repressive society is totally opposed to the hierarchy of spiritual ascent which should be our true path of redemption.

Also from the seventeenth century comes Gundulic's *Osman*, an epic about the struggle of the Balkan Slavs to throw off the yoke of the declining Ottoman Empire. Zdenko Zlatar shows us that rather than drawing on the oral tradition of Slavic epic poetry, Gundulic was inspired by the Italian epic, particularly Tasso's *La Gerusalemme liberata*. Resistance to Turkish oppression did not end, and in the nineteenth century Gundulic found a follower in Mazuranic, who finished Gundulic's poem and then proceeded to write his own epic, *Death of Smail-aga Cengic*. Like Stephen of Rouen and Aneirin, Gundulic and Mazuranic found the epic the appropriate form in which to express their sense of national pride and historic mission.

From ancient India to nineteenth century Yugoslavia, the epic has maintained its popularity and prestige. Of the epics we have examined here, many have sought to affirm a sense of group identity - firstly the *Mahabharata* which presents an idealised history of India, Aneirin's *Gododdin* which celebrates Welsh resistance to the English, the *Chanson de Roland* whose Christian hero dies fighting the infidel, Stephen of Rouen's *Draco Normannicus* which pleads for Norman independance from French suzerainity, and the epics of Gundulic and Mazuranic which exhort the Slavs to free themselves from their Turkish overlords. Politics seems central to the epics we have studied, but it is a widely conceived politics - the epic cannot be dismissed as tedious tales of men killing each other. The Indian *Mahabharata*, the Irish *Táin*, the Latin *Waltharius* and the German *Nibelungenlied* all have important female characters and address the question of women's role in society. Milton's *Paradise Lost* extends the message of resistance to oppression to embrace the human race as a whole. Finally we must not forget the religious dimension of the epic. The *Mahabharata* is epic, history and sacred text, a status to which Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid* also aspired. The epic hero is often fighting for his faith as well as his country. While the epic is usually based on a historic incident, it reaches beyond history to give the moment a transcendent meaning, to transform the squalor of human violence into the splendour of triumphant good. So Dante reaches Paradise by losing himself in a dark wood.

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