

Macintosh (F.) and McConnell (J.) *Performing Epic or Telling Tales*. Pp. xi + 157. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Cased, £55, US\$70. ISBN: 9780198846581.

Macintosh (F.), McConnell (J.), Harrison (S.), Kenward (C.) (edd.) *Epic Performances from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century*. Pp. xx + 643. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Cased, £115, US\$155. ISBN: 9780198804215.

These two complementary volumes arise from the remarkable activity of the ‘Performing Epic’ research project, a Leverhulme-funded project at the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (APGRD) at the University of Oxford. The aim of the APGRD project was ‘not only to trace systematically the afterlife of the ancient epics in performance; it was seeking also, and most importantly, to examine multiple reasons behind the continuous attraction of ancient epic material to theatre and film directors, to playwrights, composers and choreographers down to this day’ (Macintosh, *Performing Epic*, p. 6). Talks and performances connected with the project are regularly cited by the contributors, demonstrating that lively debates about epic as a genre for performance and the work of the APGRD’s team of scholars and archivists have made noteworthy contributions to the developments in contemporary epic performance as well as recording them. In both volumes discussed here, the broad and inclusive definition of epic performance is clear. A sense of the rich diversity of forms and genres of epic performance examined in these volumes may be seen in this (by no means exhaustive) list: live storytelling; simultaneous recitals of epic poems taking place in multiple countries; radio poems and dramas; burlesques; operas; musicals; performance poetry; rap; podcasts; video games; immersive theatre; masques; films; puppetry; concept albums; rhapsodic theatre; the opening ceremony for the 2012 London Olympics.

It is not surprising that many of the examples of epic performance draw on Homer's *Odyssey* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, texts which model the telling and retelling of stories, embellishing or concealing details to suit a particular occasion, and offer abundant opportunities for teasing out previously untold tales, supplementing the canonical narrative with the perspectives of previously silent characters. Inspired by Simon Armitage's treatment of the Homeric poems in *The Last Days of Troy* (2014) and *The Odyssey: Missing, Presumed Dead* (2015), Barbara Graziosi persuasively observes that the *Odyssey* 'is just as adaptable and bent on survival as its protagonist. It can arguably take on more, and more disparate, disguises than the *Iliad*' (*Epic Performances*, p. 30). The disguises are not limited to performance genres: poems such as Alice Oswald's *Memorial* (2011) belong to a burgeoning sphere of contemporary poetry and fiction in which characters from the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Aeneid* and *Metamorphoses* articulate and challenge the unspoken assumptions of those texts. Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) and Nobel laureate Louise Glück's poetic sequence *Meadowlands* (1996) are just two examples of the abundance of volumes in which Homeric silences are filled with new voices. Such projects show how reworkings of the ancient epics can both anticipate and participate in the classical canon's 'democratic turn', highlighting moments of openness and flexibility in the ancient texts which interpreters in the centuries between may have misconstrued or missed entirely (see also Hardwick and Harrison, *Classics in the Modern World: A Democratic Turn?*, 2013). They also leave a record of the preoccupations of early 21<sup>st</sup>-century classicists, poets, dramatists and so on for future scholars to decipher. Some notable trends here include giving a voice to the silenced women of ancient epic, examining Homer's representation of the trauma of war in the light of studies relating to PTSD, reckoning with the depiction of slavery in ancient texts and using the *Odyssey* to inspire autobiographical stories of identity and homecoming among groups of refugees or young men leaving juvenile detention.

The second of the volumes to be published, *Performing Epic or Telling Tales* (2020), is described as a companion to the 2018 essay collection but deserves to be considered an indispensable resource in its own right. Recognizing a recent turn to epic, storytelling or narrative in a range of performance genres, Fiona Macintosh and Justine McConnell seek to account for the 'sheer number of outstanding performances' of epic in the 21st century, in the context of the larger project of exploring 'the life of Greek and Roman epic across all performance genres, including theatre opera, radio, dance and film, from antiquity to the present' (v). This survey of epic performance in the twenty-first century demonstrates the close integration of the public-facing and academically-based aspects of the APGRD research project. Crammed with details of a wealth of experimental and diverse performances, the book has much to offer those who are curious about the recent upsurge in receptions of classical texts and the traditions of epic reception on which current practitioners might draw. The six chapters are 'Performing Epic Now', 'Telling Tales on Stage', 'Telling Tales with Words', 'Telling Tales with the Body', 'Telling Tales with Machines' and 'Telling Other Tales'. Each of the chapters explores a different context for some examples of contemporary epic performance, and this succinct analysis of contextual material drawn from various performance genres equips non-specialist readers with a basic understanding of some key developments in performance history. To take one example, the importance of narrative or storytelling in contemporary epic performances is explained as a reaction against the turn away from teleological narrative and from the dominance of the text which began in the theatre of the 1950s. A similar avoidance of narrative as a lower form of art in an earlier era and a more recent acceptance of storytelling can be found in various historical contexts in relation to music and dance. Descriptions of attempts to stage epic's fantastical elements (such as the intervention of the gods) and the resulting technological innovations offer illuminating connections between the early modern masques of Ben Jonson and Inigo Jones

and contemporary representations of the increasingly blurred boundaries between humans and machines. The restrictive rules devised by French neoclassicists are a recurring source of frustration, since a clumsy insistence on the separation of epic and drama as generic categories and demands for the removal of ‘low’ elements from epic stifled the kind of generic hybridity which energises art from the Romantic era to the present day.

As the ‘Drama’ in the APGRD title suggests, the research on epic performances presented in these volumes is informed by substantial reserves of interdisciplinary scholarship on the reception and performance of ancient drama. In their rich and groundbreaking *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre, 1660-1914* (2005), Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh illuminated a diverse history of performance traditions in the tragic theatre. The two volumes reviewed here investigate epic counterparts to that tragic tradition. The essays in the edited volume engage with a multiplicity of epic performances and interpretive approaches. The title, *Epic Performances from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (2018), makes clear the ambitions of this undertaking: a pioneering attempt to outline the history of epic performance across significant spans of time and space and in diverse genres.

The volume consists of 36 essays written by scholars representing a wide range of disciplines, such as classical studies, English and comparative literature, modern languages, music, dance, and theatre and performance studies, joined by practitioners who contribute analysis of epic performances in the light of their experience as actors, directors, choreographers, musicians and so on. Their essays are arranged in 5 thematic sections, ‘Defining Terms’, ‘Crossing Genres’, ‘Formal Refractions’, ‘Empire and Politics’, ‘High and Low’, with an epilogue by Lorna Hardwick, ‘Voices, Bodies, Silences, and Media: Heightened Receptivity in Epic in Performance’ and an immense bibliography (over 70 pages). Each thematic section is diachronic, and while readers with a particular interest in the early modern period or the 21<sup>st</sup> century will find these periods especially well represented, the

rich and cogent comparative analyses of the popular theatre and other entertainments with their epic precursors are valuable contributions to the understanding of classical reception in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In Fiona Macintosh's introductory chapter, the challenging nature of interdisciplinary dialogues is usefully illustrated by the initial misunderstandings between Oxford-based classicists and Paris-based performance scholars and theatre historians. She addresses their divergent assumptions about the significance of the phrase 'epic performances' – the classicists use the phrase to signify the reception and performance of ancient epic, whereas for theatre historians the formulation evokes dramatic traditions dominated by the 'Epic Theatre' of Brecht. Although the volume's focus is on performances relating to Greek and Roman epic, there are references to epic traditions from other cultures which have been explored in notable theatrical landmarks such as Peter Brook's 9-hour *Mahabharata*. Tim Supple's vibrant essay, 'Theatre on an Epic Scale', relates the development of epic performances in the British theatre to folk storytelling and to all-night performances from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* in India, the 'street theatre of martyrdom' such as Christian Passion Plays and the Iranian Sh'ia Ta'ieh, and Chinese opera.

The early modern period emerges as a particularly dynamic period for theatrical innovation, as several essays address the ways in which the increasing availability of vernacular translations of Homer and Greek tragedy inspired versions of epic on stage in England, Ireland, France, the Dutch Republic, Spain and Portugal. In her essay, 'Encountering Homer through Greek Plays in Sixteenth-Century Europe', Tanya Pollard examines the influence of Homer, mediated by fifth-century Greek tragedy and the cyclic epics, on the early modern popular and commercial stage. Pollard's essay convincingly demonstrates that a tragic tradition deriving from the *Iliad* and a robust and witty comic spirit associated with the *Odyssey* contributed to the development of dramatic hybridity in a period

of lively debate about the origins and definition of tragicomedy. Pollard's recognition of 'Homer's complex legacy of mixing genres and emotions' (p. 75), here manifested in characters such as Hecuba and Odysseus, might be applied to many of the other specific theatrical contexts and traditions discussed in this volume. Essays by Imogen Choi on seventeenth-century Spain and Wes Williams on the early modern French theatre emphasise that the turn to hybrid genres such as tragicomedy and romance was not an isolated phenomenon.

After Homer, Virgil and Ovid, Shakespeare is perhaps the most prominent author studied in the volume. Claire Kenward compares the Thersites of *Troilus and Cressida* with versions of the character in other early modern plays and with contemporary interpretations of the *Iliad* at a time when the poem was still largely inaccessible. Other essays which engage with Shakespeare explore the adaptation of epic to drama as crucial to the innovative culture of the early modern theatre. Colin Burrow's essay questions how the influence of epic might be analysed when it is not a matter of direct verbal imitation. This is an illuminating account of what 'epic' would have meant to Shakespeare and his contemporaries. David Wiles examines the notion of 'epic acting' in the context of *Hamlet* and debates about rhetoric and the performance of emotion in the theatre of the Renaissance and other periods. Shakespeare also contributes to the complexity of epic drama's reception, since new dramatisations of epic are frequently mediated by Shakespeare. Marchella Ward draws attention to self-consciousness about genre in the Pyramus and Thisbe episode from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the play within a play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the stage adaptation of Ted Hughes's *Tales from Ovid*, examining the ways in which each of those authors made distinctive contributions to 'Hughes's Shakespeare's Ovid's Ovid' (p. 97).

Given the extraordinary range of performance traditions discussed in this volume, only a selection can be indicated here. There is much to be discovered, for example, about

popular performances, such as London fairground theatricals, burlesques, equestrian spectacles and circuses. Edith Hall describes an intense fight over the ownership of classical stories in the eighteenth century and argues that classical scholars have wrongly ignored supposedly ephemeral spectacles such as the fairground ‘droll’, Elkanah Settle’s *The Siege of Troy*. That this particular example of popular entertainment had a lasting influence is shown by its reappearance in Laura Monrós-Gaspar’s account of nineteenth-century versions of Cassandra and Rachel Bryant Davies’s essay on Homeric and Virgilian burlesques. In essays devoted to more recent epic performances, innovations in choreography and movement are conspicuous, as are poets who seek to capture the immediacy of oral epic. In such essays the variety of epic performances outlined in *Performing Epic or Telling Tales* appear in a new light, with expert scrutiny by practitioners and scholars offering boundless insights into theatrical processes and intertextual inspirations, encouraging the reader to get out and experience the wealth of epic performance in its current diverse forms.

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