



1985

Reviewed Work: *Aspects of the Epic* by Tom Winnifrith, Penelope Murray, K. W. Gransden

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Recommended Citation

Murnaghan, S. (1985). Reviewed Work: *Aspects of the Epic* by Tom Winnifrith, Penelope Murray, K. W. Gransden. *Classical World*, 78 (3), 224-225. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/4349738>

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Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Classics

Comments

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Tom Winnifrith, Penelope Murray and K. W. Gransden (edd.). *Aspects of the Epic*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983. Pp. xi, 121. \$22.50.

This book is a collection of lectures on the European epic tradition, delivered at the University of Warwick in 1980 and aimed at "those just beginning a study of the epic." They are thus not so much new contributions to ongoing scholarly and critical debates as introductions to aspects of the study of epic that exemplify the preoccupations and assumptions of much current British writing in this field.

The collection focuses on Homer as the source of the epic tradition, and traces that tradition in Byzantine and modern Greek as well as western European literature. Two essays on Homer deal with the problems of authorship that still dog Homeric scholarship. Penelope Murray argues that the recent trend towards unitarianism enforces a new interest in Homer's biography; surveying the portraits of bards in the *Odyssey* and the ancient biographical tradition, she provocatively concludes that Homer, by including apparent self-portraits in depictions of Bronze Age life, himself deliberately invented the Homeric question. G. S. Kirk continues to develop criteria for distinguishing those sections of the poems that are attributable to the monumental composer from those that are traditional; here he uses the test of close connection to other episodes judged to be Homeric on grounds either of participation in the large-scale plot or of "brilliance" to show that Book 5 as well as Book 6 of the *Iliad* is "Homeric in the fullest sense." K. W. Gransden's treatment of Iliadic themes in the second half of the *Aeneid* illustrates how such comparative studies can bring out the distinctive characteristics of a poet who reworks traditional material.

The remaining essays all touch on what has become, especially since the work of Northrop Frye, a major question in genre study: the extent to which designations of genre can be based on thematic rather than formal characteristics. John

Gould identifies continuities of theme and technique between Homeric epic and Athenian tragedy despite the differences of form and intellectual climate that separate them. John Bayley locates what he considers a definitive feature of epic—its accommodation of the incongruous through treating both the highly spiritual and the lowly animal sides of human behavior—in Tolstoy and Shakespeare as well as in Milton. Similarly, Paul Merchant finds the legacy of Homeric epic in the works of a range of contemporary Greek poets. Finally, Tom Winnifrith deals with the same question from another angle as he considers what makes the Byzantine *Digenis Akritas* qualify as an epic. Indeed what value this volume has as a general introduction to the European epic lies more in this encouragement to consider how the genre should be defined than in the conclusions of the individual essays.

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CW 78.3 (1985)

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