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## Review of: J.B. Hainsworth, *The Idea of Epic*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.

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**Disciplines**

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**J.B. Hainsworth, *The Idea of Epic*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991. Pp. viii + 192. ISBN 0-520-06814-9.1.**

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**Reviewed by Sheila Murnaghan, University of Pennsylvania.**

In this contribution to the California Press series on genres of ancient literature, *Eidos: Studies in Classical Kinds*, a scholar best known for his technical studies of Homeric compositional technique (especially, *The Flexibility of the Homeric Formula*, Oxford, 1968) takes on the whole history of classical epic and its aftermath and proves to have a deep knowledge and a store of strong opinions that range over the entire field. In seven concise, elegantly written chapters, he offers a definition of epic and traces the history of the genre in both theory and practice from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to Milton and beyond.

Hainsworth opens his discussion with the statement that "The exciting turmoils of three decades of revolution in criticism have left the classic texts much as they were: the canonical exemplars that continue to organize our Western concepts of literature" (vii), and it soon becomes clear that he has no intention of disrupting this state of affairs. His main agenda seems to be to define the greatness of the two supreme exponents of the form -- Homer in the field of primary epic, Virgil in the field of secondary, or what he calls "sentimental" epic -- and to explain why everyone else deserves a relatively minor status.

For Hainsworth, the defining feature of an epic is that it combines expansiveness of form with greatness of soul and a clear focus on a central theme of universal appeal. This combination was first achieved in the *Iliad*, where the dreary and incoherent parataxis that supposedly characterized traditional heroic poetry gave way to a more concise and focussed narrative centering on the idea of heroism. The *Odyssey*, although "in the common and reasonable view ... created later than the *Iliad*" (33), is more primitive because of its affinities to folktale and romance, although redeemed by its non-linear structure. In Greek literature, it was downhill after that. After Homer, poets of genius turned to lyric; the poems of the epic cycle were "spasms of a dying tradition" (45) whose attribution to Homer was "a grave injustice" (43). Antimachus' *Thebaid* was "the most famous in its day, but also the most sterile" (60) ... "an excellent reproductive antique" (61); Choerilus' *Persica* failed because it tried to give a heroic dimension to characters from the recent past. Only the *Argonautica* claims "an honorable mention in literary history" (67), despite its lapses into the episodic, because it found a way for the epic to continue even when the heroic element is not dominant, making room for the personal concerns (in this case romantic) and personal voice of the poet. Otherwise, "no one regrets that the fragments of Hellenistic historical epic are fewer than the remnants of its architecture" (66).

Turning to Rome, Ennius' *Annales* was a necessary step towards the creation of Roman epic but, no matter what the Romans themselves thought, not a good poem: "They were amazed that it could be done at all and so did not ask whether it was well done; and having been done, the *Annales* set a precedent and created a tradition" (83). The historical epics that followed it, however, were too much concerned to extol war and imperialism to be great literature, and the neoteric epyllia were too slight and overwrought. Success was finally achieved with the *Aeneid*, when Virgil managed to

find a theme that could unite Roman national concerns with the trappings of Greek mythological epic, expounded it through an economical plot and fully accomplished Latin verse, and tinged it with an awareness of human sorrow that gave the poem the universality it needed to qualify for greatness. Ovid produced in the *Metamorphoses* something that looked like epic, but was too disjointed and playful to really qualify; Lucan's *Pharsalia* was a more serious attempt, but too narrow in its expression of a particular political perspective to be entirely satisfactory either. There the story of classical epic effectively comes to an end: "Lucan's concept of a political epic was the last significant development the genre made in antiquity, for the classical world survived the hardening of all the arteries of its culture by three or four centuries" (132).

Hainsworth several times notes the influence of the *Poetics* on later conceptions of the epic, and Aristotle seems to have played a key role in forming his own vision as well. He shares with Aristotle an hostility to episodic narrative structures, a sense of literary history as involving development towards the ideal realization of a genre, which is then followed by decline, and a tendency to judge works according to how well they match certain norms that he himself posits for their genre. He is certainly not interested in evaluating works by the criteria of their own periods, when many of the works he dismisses were widely admired, or of our own, when canons are being expanded or abandoned wholesale, and when it no longer seems to be the primary task of the literary historian to sort the good works from the bad and to arrange them into evolutionary narratives of progress and decline.

It is a little hard to know what the intended audience of this book is. Its general scope suggests a readership of non-classicists but, although Hainsworth does throw in occasional dates and plot summaries, most of his discussions are really only intelligible to someone who already knows the poems and their literary and historical context, and one might be reluctant to start a beginner on so opinionated a history of the genre. The book will probably be read with most profit by specialists who, having their own experience of these works against which to measure Hainsworth's judgments, are in a better position to admire his breadth of literary knowledge and to be entertained and stimulated by his forcefully stated views.

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