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**Review of Charles Rowan Beye, *Ancient Epic Poetry*, Peter Toohey, *Reading Epic: An Introduction to the Ancient Narratives***

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**Disciplines**

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ALSO SEEN

Charles Rowan Beye, *Ancient Epic Poetry*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993. Pp. xiii + 280. ISBN 0-8014-2673-1 (hb) / 0-8014-9964-X (pb).

Peter Toohey, *Reading Epic: An Introduction to the Ancient Narratives*. London: Routledge, 1992. Pp. xiii + 248. ISBN 0-415-04227-5 (hb) / 0-415-04228-3 (pb).

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Reviewed by Joseph Farrell, University of Pennsylvania.

And speaking of epic....

Beye, author of *The "Iliad," the "Odyssey," and the Epic Tradition* (1966) and of *Epic and Romance in the "Argonautica" of Apollonius* (1982), brings authority and experience to this overview of the ancient Greco-Roman epic tradition. This volume is a kind of revised and updated amalgamation of the earlier two. It contains a preface, seven chapters (1: "Oral Poetry," 2: "The Poet's World," 3: "Poetic Technique," 4: "The *Iliad*," 5: "The *Odyssey*," 6: "The *Argonautica*," 7: "The *Aeneid*"), suggestions for further reading, and an index.

Those who know Beye's earlier work will find no surprises here. "Instead of revising" his earlier work, the author notes, "I seem to have written an entirely new book. I have more or less changed every sentence" (ix). I have not collated the relevant texts with sufficient care to test that claim, but I would say that the similarities outweigh the differences. The book offers a sound introduction for nonspecialists -- the most obvious audience would be participants in undergraduate literature courses -- to four of the most important ancient epic poems. The balance does seem to me to incline a bit excessively towards Homer (*pace* Beye, x), but the full incorporation of Apollonius into the Homeric/Vergilian tradition makes possible a much more realistic and up-to-date view of where that tradition ended up, and this helps to compensate for the fulsome treatment of its beginnings. The book's main value seems to me to consist in the essays on the individual poems, which one could usefully assign as interpretive starting points for (or counterpoints to) whatever ideas one wanted to develop in a classroom discussion.

Peter Toohey extends his syllabus further than Beye. His first chapter ("Epic: The Genre, Its Characteristics") covers more briefly much of the same material as Beye's first three. He follows this with chapters on the *Iliad* (2) and the *Odyssey* (3), both of which offer brief introductions and running commentaries on the poems, which are broken up into units of four books. Chapter 4, on the *Argonautica*, intersperses a book-by-book discussion of the poem with a number of useful sections ("Alexandria and Apollonius"; "Fantasizing about the Dark Ages: the Argonautic Legend and Alexandrian Apollonius"; "Callimachean Poetics and the Epic from Homer to Apollonius"; and so on) that help place the poem into a literary and historical context. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss, respectively, "Beginning Epic in Rome" and "The Alexandrian Miniature Epic" from Callimachus' *Hecale* to Ovid and the Appendix Vergiliana. In

chapter 7 the *Aeneid* receives what seems to me a more imaginative and genuinely analytical treatment than the Homeric poems in chapters 2 and 3. Subsequent chapters include (8) "Ovid, *Metamorphoses*," (9) "Lucan, *The Civil War*," (10) "Roman Epic and the Emperor Domitian," and (11) "Ends and Beginnings: Late Ancient Epic," which deals with Ausonius, Claudian, Quintus, Nonnus, Musaeus, Corippus, and others. An appendix addresses the topic of "The Epic and the Novel." There is a bibliography and an index.

Toohy's account of the epic is up-to-date and enlivened by an obvious enthusiasm for the material. Its two great merits are its range and its sense of continuity within the tradition. Students reading this book will learn to think of epic not as a type of poem of enormous length and seriousness that appeared occasionally out of nowhere like a volcano erupting into being out of a level plain, but as a thriving and multi-faceted genre that treated of a variety of themes from the sublime to the ridiculous and that addressed audiences of different cultural and social backgrounds from one end of antiquity to the other. Those of us who teach epic in translation and have tried to get these messages across know how difficult a task it can be. This book can help advance that particular cause -- I expect that it will find a place on my reading list next year -- and should prove useful to more advanced and specialized students as they begin their explorations of one of antiquity's most important and influential contributions to the history of culture.

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