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Review of David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form From Virgil to Milton*; Susanne Lindgren Wofford, *The Choice of Achilles: The Ideology of Figure in the Epic*

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**David Quint, *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*. Literature in History. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993. Pp. x + 433. ISBN 0-691-06942-5 (hb). ISBN 0-691-01520-1 (pb).**

**Susanne Lindgren Wofford, *The Choice of Achilles: The Ideology of Figure in the Epic*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992. Pp. x + 520. ISBN 0-8047-1917-9.**

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**Reviewed by Joseph A. Farrell, University of Pennsylvania.**

These two ambitious and intelligent studies of European epic in the classical tradition have much in common. Both cover an impressive range of material. Both combine this range with an extraordinary sensitivity to those subtle textual gestures in which the epic abounds. Both start from the proposition that epic form embodies a system of belief that in varying ways reflects political, moral, and ideological issues. But despite these similarities, Quint and Wofford present different versions of the epic which contrast with and complement one another in ways that make the experience of reading them in conjunction a fascinating and provocative experience.

Quint posits two basic types of epic: epics of winners which celebrate the triumph of forces claiming to represent historical necessity and epics of losers which protest against the fortuitous course that history happened to take and hold on to a hope for future reparations. This central dichotomy, he argues, appears as early as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* but is codified in the the *Aeneid's* ideology-laden interpretation of Homeric epic, and continues its dialectical existence in later times. The argument thus begins from a familiar premise: the Homeric poems establish two distinct narrative patterns, the *Odyssey* a circular, repetitious, open pattern that becomes normative for romance and, according to Quint, for losers' epic; the *Iliad* a linear, teleological, closed narrative that becomes normative for the stronger branch of the epic tradition, the epic of winners. In the *Aeneid*, Quint argues, Vergil establishes a kind of generic hierarchy in which the Odyssean wanderings of books 1-6 are replaced by the Iliadic warfare of books 7-12. Here the succession of narrative patterns corresponds to a thematic and political succession: "The process by which the Trojans go from being losers to winners thus matches the movement in the poem from one narrative form to another, from romance to epic" (50). Vanquished in the *Iliad* and so condemned to the role of losers, the Trojans accomplish nothing in the first half of the poem, trapped as they are in a romance narrative of wandering and error. But in the second half, they establish themselves as purposeful epic heroes as they drive the narrative in linear fashion towards the climactic ending that establishes them as winners and Turnus now as the loser. Aeneas' victory over Turnus becomes within the poem the type both of Achilles' victory over Hector and of Augustus' victory over Antonius at Actium, while Actium in turn becomes the type of all victories (e.g. the Battle of Lepanto and the Son's victory over the rebellious angels) celebrated in subsequent winners' epics.

The dichotomy that animates Quint's analysis, however, begins not with Homer but with Lucan. Just as Vergil establishes the "proper" relationship between Odyssean and

Iliadic narratives in the winners' epic par excellence, Lucan rouses himself to counter this apparent last word on generic form and ideology with his own monstrous and nearly unnarratable example of what can only be called, in Vergilian terms, an anti-epic, an epic of losers. "Virgil and Lucan," argues Quint, "define an opposition of epics between epics of the imperial victors and epics of the defeated, a defeated whose resistance contains the germ of a broader republican or antimonarchical politics. The first, Virgilian tradition of imperial dominance is the stronger tradition, the defining tradition of Western epic; for ... it defines as well the norms of the second tradition of Lucan that rose up to contest it" (8).

The greater part of Quint's study is thus devoted to illustrating the dialectic between these rival traditions in renaissance epic in particular. Although it is possible to assign individual epics to one or another category, as noted above, such simple taxonomies are hardly Quint's main purpose. What is most impressive in this analysis is Quint's ability to keep the defining characteristics of the rival traditions in clear focus even as he explores their extreme interdependence throughout European epic. For example, winners' epics do not merely reenact the Battle of Actium in different guises, but incorporate defining elements of losers' epics as well. An excellent illustration of this process is given in chapter 3, "The Epic Curse and Camões' Adamastor." In the *Odyssey*, in the *Aeneid*, in *Os Lusíadas*, and in Villagrà's *Historia de la Nueva Mexico*, to cite only four of the examples that Quint discusses, the victor is explicitly and significantly cursed by one of his victims: Odysseus by Polyphemus, Aeneas by Dido, da Gama by the titan Adamastor, the Spanish conquistador Don Juan de Oñate by a pair of captives taken from the Acoma pueblo. These curses in a sense never come to fruition: Odysseus reaches Ithaca, Aeneas conquers Italy, and so on. The curse fails in that it never becomes the linear, teleological narrative of the victorious against which it protests and contends. And yet in the curse the voice of the vanquished is heard, and its prophecy is not in vain: Trojan and Roman victory will in a sense never be final; Dido will be succeeded by further opponents to Roman triumphalism: by Hannibal, by Cleopatra, and so on. "The characters who give utterance to [the epic curse] -- the red man, the monster, the Eastern woman, the monster who is also a black man -- provide a catalog of types of the colonized "other" into which the imperial epic turns the vanquished.... Nonetheless, these voices of resistance receive a hearing, as the epic poem acknowledges, intermittently, alternative accounts vying with its own official version of history: they are the bad conscience of the poem that simultaneously writes them in and out of its fiction" (99).

It is in the analysis of such motifs in which the rival traditions of epic become nearly indistinguishable that Quint excels. Not surprisingly, his dialectical theme reaches its logical conclusion -- the undoing of both traditions -- in Miltonic epic. In its depiction of a cosmic struggle between demons and divinity and its depiction at various levels of a victorious Christendom, *Paradise Lost*

provides the teleology that supports its overarching epic narrative of history. The contours of this narrative ... are recognizably Virgilian.... The opposition of the victors' teleological narrative, here authorized by the Christian apocalypse, the ending of endings, to the losers' condition of endless, circular repetition -- this condition being part of what the victor must overcome -- should by now be familiar to us as an organizing feature of epic poetry after Virgil. (282)

And yet that is only half the story. Despite his adherence to Christian views of history and eschatology,

Milton opposes both of the aspects of empire linked and celebrated by Virgilian epic, the kingship of an Augustus-like emperor and the expansionist territorial state. He thus goes further than the losers' epics of Lucan's tradition to which his poems bear and claim affinity, for those earlier epics still remain committed to one or the other kind of imperial power. *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* carry further ... the movement toward and valorization of romance that Lucan's tradition had begun, to the point where Milton's poems effectively create their own new genre. (340)

With this observation Quint closes his history of the epic proper. There follows, however, an interesting account of its *Nachleben* in the medieval pseudoepic of Ossian, the discovery of authentic medieval folk epics during the nineteenth century, and a late reflex of both traditions in Sergei Eisenstein's 1938 film *Alexander Nevsky*.

Wofford's study is organized on an even more explicitly chronological pattern than Quint's, although in her analysis historical development assumes a much less important place. Her title refers to the two lives between which the Achilles of the *Iliad* must choose: a short, glorious life of violence and heroism and a long, inglorious life of peaceful obscurity. The terms of this choice, she argues, establish the divided nature of the epic genre. An introductory chapter sets out in detail Wofford's general view that the defining feature of epic is an epistemological and ideological fissure between the heroic world of the narrative, the world in which Achilles chooses to live and die when he returns to battle, and the unheroic world that he rejects, represented by the various rhetorical figures that illustrate the narrative. It is the epic figure par excellence, the simile, that attempts to correlate these worlds and to suppress the ideological gap that separates them; but at the same, it is the simile that starkly reminds us that these worlds are parallel, not contiguous, and are in many ways opposites. As an example she cites the death of Gorgythion, a son of Priam felled by Teucer's arrow in *Iliad* 8. The boy's head droops in death to one side like a poppy bent by its own luxuriance and the spring rains (lines 302-8). "But the poppy," Wofford argues,

is not wilted or dead, just top-heavy; in any case, a poppy will return every spring to bow its head, but Gorgythion's death is final; it is a unique event that does not participate in any natural cycles of renewal or return. The gap between the heroic action and the imagery of the simile reveals the limits of the analogy between human experience and the natural world. Human society may need to assign value to death, but such juxtapositions fail to provide any genuine mediation between the human and the natural or between the individual and the social. The likenesses posited by the similes are important fictions; they show how meaning is constructed, but in doing so, they also reveal its arbitrary patterns, the way in which it responds to desires rather than actualities. Thus the similes also distort what they attempt to represent -- particularly when, as in this case, the distorting effect is also part of an artistic shaping, for to make death seem beautiful is to transform it into something different. In the description of Gorgythion's death, then, the comparison to the natural world and the efforts to render the dead body beautiful work hand in hand" (51).

In passages such as this Wofford locates what she sees as the central ideological motive of the epic genre, to justify narratives written in accordance with heroic values in terms of a more familiar and more readily acceptable unheroic system of values. By focusing on the incompatibility of these two perspectives, which the simile makes explicit even as it attempts to correlate them, Wofford argues that internal criticism and self-doubt

are defining characteristics of the epic genre from the beginning and throughout its history.

The history of the genre thus becomes the story of how the figural language of post-Homeric epic comes in different ways to reveal and to negotiate the bifurcated world-view on which the genre is founded. The basic ideological opposition that Wofford finds in the figural language of Homer is argued to define the epic in all periods. Thus the *Aeneid* (chapters 2 and 3) is shown to rely on the same ideological dichotomy as the *Iliad*, but in a more intense form because "Virgil inverts the relation between action and figure that typified the *Iliad*," in which figure (e.g. simile) serves to illustrate action at the level of narrative as well as to question it at the level of ideology. The result is that the story is presented "as having been generated by the figurative scheme, and consequently the narrative appears to constrain the characters to act in accordance with the claims made by the poetic figures" (97). In the *Iliad*, that is, a poppy simile may be said to illustrate or to attempt to justify someone's death, but it could not be said to cause it. In the *Aeneid*, on the other hand, the storm that descends upon the Trojans in book 1 might very well be said to exist for the sake of the simile that attends Neptune's calming of it: the narrative itself is shaped according to the ideological purposes of what Wofford calls the poem's "figurative economy" (120-25, 152-53). By the same token, Spenser's *Faerie Queen* (chapters 4 and 5) involves a further intensification because of its more explicitly allegorical nature: the allegory turns the narrative into a constant and simultaneous figure of itself. Here Wofford's analysis extends an obvious constitutive feature of Homeric and Vergilian epic, the fact that characters in the narrative cannot have access to the perspective afforded the reader by knowledge of the figural language of simile, ephrasis, prophecy, and so on, in a way that Spenserians may find controversial (see, e.g., Maureen Quilligan, *Milton's Spenser: The Politics of Reading* [1982] 51-52, cited by Wofford [457]). She argues her case well, although I find her elevation of the general principle of what she calls "heroic ignorance" (106-20) into "one of the fundamental rules' of *The Faerie Queen*" (220) somewhat troubling. I have just alluded to the "fact" that characters in Homer and Vergil are similarly ignorant, and I agree with Wofford that, finally, they are; but there is a great deal to be gained particularly in reading the *Aeneid* from asking whether Aeneas' having lived through the events narrated in Homer's *Iliad* gives him access to a perspective on his own "Iliadic" experiences in books 7-12 analogous to that of the reader, who has not lived but has read these experiences in Homer. The value of a rule may lie in its testing as much as in whatever follows from it.

Finally (chapter 6) Wofford discusses two limit cases, *Paradise Lost* and *Don Quixote*. The former she establishes as an extreme instance of the genre as "a text that aims to deny [the] fundamental distinction" between action and figure (372-73). The latter stands at the opposite pole in that its main character "behaves as a hero who can simultaneously act and read the narrative of his own action, a hero, in other words, who can understand the figurative version of his adventures prepared by his narrator, and who endorses that narrative as more true' and more to be desired than his own experiences" (392). Thus "Milton and Cervantes repeat in exaggerated or intensified gestures the strategies available to the epic narrator" (410). Once again the genre is brought to its logical conclusion.

The two books appear to have been written in total independence from one another; but for the purpose of comparing them, it seems to me useful to correlate Wofford's position on the heroic tenor (roughly) and the unheroic vehicle (even more roughly) of the epic simile with Quint's twin strands of winners and losers. For Quint, the two strands remain basically distinct until Milton; for Wofford, the two categories inform every epic narrative. These differing views correspond largely to the different texts that

each scholar chooses to discuss. Quint focuses on the most frankly heroic and formally conservative examples of the genre: these include, in addition to the ones I have already mentioned, Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, Ercilla's *Araucana*, d'Aubigné's *Les tragiques*, and a number of works discussed briefly or mentioned in passing, such as Fracastoro's *Syphilis*, Fletcher's *Apollyonists*, and Barlow's *Columbiad*. Wofford treats of Homer, particularly the *Iliad*, at greater length than Quint, and accords the *Aeneid* an importance comparable to what it receives in Quint's account. But her primary example of renaissance epic is Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, an epic that famously incorporates important elements of romance, while the more traditional epics of Camões, Tasso, and the rest are mentioned in passing if at all. The problematic *Paradise Lost* and the formally anomalous *Don Quixote* are brought in briefly in a final chapter. Thus the two studies overlap only in the classical period, chiefly on the *Aeneid*, and on *Paradise Lost*, both seeing Miltonic epic as in some sense closing the gap between winners' and losers' epic or between heroic and unheroic ideologies, respectively. It is thus possible and profitable to analyze the books' main differences in terms of the contrasting ways in which they read the *Aeneid*.

Quint, as I have said, views the *Aeneid* as the source of the ideological dichotomy inherited by later epic. In his view, the Homeric program of Vergil's narrative embodies a scheme that shows Aeneas sloughing off the dead weight of his defeated Trojan identity and becoming the founder of the greatest race of winners in human history. To explain this transformation Quint invokes Freud's concept of the "repetition compulsion," which states that the victim of trauma may either obsessively and neurotically repeat the past or may repeat it in order to gain control of and "undo" it. This proves to be a productive model for understanding the different types of behavior that Aeneas famously shows in the two halves of the poem. But it is not without its shortcomings. Of course my bare summary does little justice to the suppleness and nuance of Quint's reading. His *Aeneid* is by no means the crass propaganda document that some would make of the poem. Nevertheless, it is essential to his argument to read the poem as a winner's epic, and this involves minimizing certain aspects of the narrator's apparent identification with those who are sacrificed to Aeneas' mission, aspects that have fueled much of the best recent Vergilian criticism; his analysis of Dido's curse, which I have mentioned, is something of an exception in this regard. Furthermore, the way in which he argues for a generic succession between the two halves of the poem also entails a certain degree of schematism. For instance, the idea of an "Odyssean" and an "Iliadic" *Aeneid* remains a useful generalization for some purposes; but in light of such passages as the memorial games for Anchises in book 5 and, in particular, of Knauer's thoroughgoing analysis of Odyssean motives in books 7-12 (*Die Aeneis und Homer*, 1964), the traditional distinction has become hard to maintain in quite so definite a form as Quint does here. But his argument requires such a distinction. For Quint, the *Odyssey* represents not epic (as does the *Iliad*) so much as romance, and the existence of "Odyssean" elements in the "Iliadic" half of the poem rather undermines his argument about how Vergil interpreted and used the Homeric poems and about the degree to which Aeneas really does forget his losers' identity, or even the extent to which Vergil really did regard the *Odyssey* as a model of failed epic narrative. Such an argument at any rate goes directly against Knauer's view that the grand strategy of Homeric allusion in the *Aeneid* represents a desire on Vergil's part to find similarity beneath the obvious differences between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* -- an argument that may not command universal assent in all its particulars, but one that in view of the abundance of evidence and analysis that Knauer provides is in general impossible to deny. Quint (who knows and makes good use of Knauer's work in other respects) can of course take refuge in the fact that renaissance theorists did read the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in just his way, and that this fact establishes the proper matrix within which the epics of Camões, Tasso, Milton, et al. take shape. With this I have no

argument. And it is true that Quint is an excellent reader of all the ancient epics, one from whom we all have much to learn. His readings of many particular passages -- his realization of the specific narrative propriety of Achilles' perpetual epithet PODW/KHS (3); his analysis of the Diomedes theme in the *Aeneid* (69-74); his trenchant observations about the relationship between generic transgression, narrative "failure," and political ideology in Lucan (chapter 3 passim) -- are original and illuminating and should become required reading for all students of these poems. But I do regret that Quint does not entirely avoid the nearly universal modernist pitfall of regarding antiquity merely as protomodernity -- i.e. as a kind of necessary precondition of whatever was to come. The modernist bias entails just the kind of simplification and schematization that one sees in Quint's derivation of the two streams of the later epic tradition from the "Odyssean" and "Iliadic" halves of the *Aeneid*. This tendency vitiates his study to a remarkably small extent in comparison with what one is used to, so small in fact that I hesitate even to raise the point. But it is there.

Wofford is no more exempt from this modernist bias than Quint: witness her account of the progressive "intensification" of the action/figure duality, which finally implodes in Milton and Cervantes. The assumption that "earlier" equals "simpler" seems so natural as to be all but invisible, except to a classicist. But in proportion to the relative unimportance of history to Wofford's argument, the bias, though more obviously present, is also more innocuous. Her book is also slightly more in line with recent work within classics on the interpretation of the ancient epics. She cites Conte, Johnson, Gordon Williams, Adam Parry, di Cesare, and Putnam as major influences on her interpretation of Vergil. (Her Homer, too, is the Homer of Redfield, Schein, Vernant, and Segal.) She convincingly relates the self-questioning character of the *Aeneid* to one of the *Georgics*' principal themes, the search for causes, in a way that emphasizes the epistemological gap between the questioning and uncertain human characters who find themselves embedded in Vergil's poetry and the various representatives of a superhuman omniscience who communicate with the reader, but do little to illuminate the way of those mortals trapped within the implacable narrative. Here Wofford is very much in agreement with two excellent recent studies, apparently not known to her, which also focus on the ironies created by epistemological slippage in the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*, Christine Perkell's *The Poet's Truth: A Study of the Poet in Virgil's Georgics* (1989) and James J. O'Hara's *Death and the Optimistic Prophecy in Vergil's Aeneid* (1990). In Wofford's view Aeneas, like the farmer of the *Georgics*, is a wanderer in search of a narrative that will make clear the meaning of his existence. But this narrative is in fact the condition of his existence, and he can never know how it will turn out before the event, nor can he know what future events his story will call into being, events that will endow his life with meaning. Such knowledge is the property of the gods and is disclosed to the reader by the narrator through the poem's figurative economy.

Wofford's reading casts an interesting light on Quint's project: one glimpses what he might have done if he had not committed himself to representing the opposing traditions of winners' and losers' epics as closely related but nevertheless clearly distinct and of reading most individual epics as exemplifying primarily one tradition over the other. I suspect that many Vergilians in particular will imagine for their own use (to borrow a term from Wofford) a "narrative double" of Quint, one more willing to entertain the notion that the *Aeneid* might equally well be read as a winners' epic or a losers' epic. This is of course essentially what Wofford says about all epic (again I am oversimplifying), and she suggests that the idea might be taken farther. At one point, Wofford tellingly intimates an alternative course for her own project, one that would not confine itself to any one genre: "an epic poem," she says, "is by definition unable *not* to employ this disjunction [i.e. between action and figure], since the separation

between action and figure is fundamental to any narrative so dependent on a temporal gap -- and perhaps to all narrative" (378). "By definition" of course begs the question: this is, after all, Wofford's thesis, not an axiom. But the extension of the principle from epic to "all narrative" is important. One of the considerable values of Wofford's book is that it begins with a set of conditions that are specifically characteristic of Homeric epic in particular and then branches out from them to provide a model for understanding the double consciousness of all narrative. She does not make this her overt project, but in some ways I wish she had; for in the end it seems to me that she teaches us less about the particular quiddities and qualities of epic narrative (in the way that Quint, for example, does) than about the ways in which the student of epic gains insight into the workings of all narrative -- no small achievement in an era when the epic is too often regarded as a relic or a historical curiosity.

This review can only begin to suggest how much I have learned from these two important studies, and it may be that I have focused too narrowly on my own interests. Let me close by suggesting one last lesson that they can teach us. Finally, both studies share a single purpose, which they accomplish in significantly different ways: that of articulating a theory of the nature of epic. For all their differences, both these studies concur in their tendency to reify and essentialize genre itself. Both Quint and Wofford argue forcefully and well that epic "is" one thing or another. They evidently share the conviction that epic can be described as an objective phenomenon. But it seems to me equally useful to question the premise that epic, either the epic or any epic, "is" either one thing or another. Rather than make this assumption, I hope that the results reached by both Quint and Wofford will encourage future students of epic to adopt a phenomenological approach to genre and to admit that genre itself and the relationship of any single poem to its genre(s) is to a large degree whatever its readers make of it. On such a view it might prove impossible to write either a history of epic or a theory of epic of the sort under review. On the other hand, it would be a daring and perhaps rash scholar who would agree to challenge either Quint or Wofford on their own terms; and it might prove possible to combine and extend the strengths of these two books if we could learn to see the epic and indeed all genres in more open terms.

Much more could be said of these two books, which deserve and indeed almost demand fuller discussion than space allows here. Both will surely find a wide audience. I hope this audience will include many classicists, who will learn much in particular from Quint's and Wofford's close readings of the ancient epics and will perhaps be moved to make a more serious contribution than has recently been our habit to the discourse on epic as a genre that survived and flourished beyond antiquity.

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