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Studies in Roman Epic

INTRODUCTION

A YEAR AGO THE *Colby Quarterly* published an issue on the Homeric epic (volume XXIX, number 3, September 1993). This issue is devoted to Roman epic literature, especially Vergil's *Aeneid* and Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* ("On the Nature of Things"). The Roman epic poets were well versed in the Greek epic tradition, which was for them simultaneously a source of inspiration, a frame of reference, and a model for emulation. It would be a mistake, however, to judge the Roman epics exclusively from their relation to earlier Greek literature. More interesting perhaps are questions such as: how did Roman poets fashion Greek and Roman material into a Roman epic? What constraints, if any, were put on poets who composed an epic narrative? How much of the contemporary world of the poets was allowed into their works? And how can ancient and modern studies of the epics enhance or impede our reading of them?

Roman epic literature, of course, raises many other questions that cannot be addressed here. However, a common theme that runs through the contributions to this issue and encompasses some of the questions mentioned above is the problem of consistency within the narrative and in the relation between the poets and their source material. It is our hope that the papers will introduce the reader to some of the issues that current scholarship on Roman epic is addressing.

The articles have been arranged alphabetically, according to the author's name. The publication dates listed in the bibliography are those given by the authors.

Gregson Davis examines Ausonius' *Cupido Cruciatu*s, a short narrative "eclogue" in hexameters that purports to describe the contents of an actual painting. The episode re-narrated in the ekphrasis features the god Cupid on a visit to the underworld site, the *lugentes campi*, where Vergil had located the shades of heroines who suffered death on account of *amor*. Analysis of the intertextual links with the Vergilian model suggests that the late antique author probably interpreted Aeneas' *katabasis* as a dreamlike, if not illusory, episode in the hero's progress. This sophisticated reading of Vergil's text, which is also in accord with the original Homeric passage, anticipates, by several centuries, a strain of modern narratological exegesis that sees Aeneas' exit through the ivory gates as indicative of a "subjective," even dreamlike, descent narrative.

To explore the important figure of Apollo in Vergil's *Aeneid*, John Miller

takes an unusual but rewarding point of departure concerning the scene in Book 11 in which an Etruscan ally of Aeneas named Arruns prays to the god as he appears in a local Italian cult on Mount Soracte. Miller shows that Vergil's picture of this local Italian divinity coheres with the poem's more frequent references to the god as Olympian and Delian. Some points of contact with the larger Vergilian vision of Apollo emerge through the *Iliad*. At the same time, the most striking feature of the scene, the god's qualified response to the Etruscan's request, matches the qualifying gesture that Apollo made to Ascanius after the boy's first battle kill in *Aeneid* 9. A comparison of these two episodes reveals an insufficiently appreciated aspect of Vergil's Apollo: the god numbers among his concerns not only prophecy, colonization, and Julian destiny, but also heroic morality.

In her paper Georgia Nugent first argues that, despite the apparent acceptance of women within Epicureanism as a philosophical school, Lucretius' exposition of Epicurean philosophy effectively omits women as potential (or "implied") readers. The paper turns to consider the various ways in which females appear as figures within Lucretius' text. Particular focuses of attention are the sexual and generative female body and the body of "mother" earth, with some consideration of woman's cultural role as wife and social being. In each of these modes, Lucretius represents the feminine as problematic and negative, associated with a materiality which, while it is constitutive of the Epicurean cosmos, is also the source of its mortality.

James O'Hara's paper argues that Vergil presents an inconsistent and so an indeterminate portrait of Italy and the Italians in the second half of the *Aeneid*, which thus offers different viewpoints about whether the Italians are disorderly warlike peoples in need of the civilizing influence of the Trojans or peaceful peoples invaded by an army that destroys something innocent. The paper first reviews recent scholarship on inconsistencies in other Greek and Roman texts. Then it examines passages in the *Aeneid* that describe inconsistencies that cannot and should not be resolved. The paper then explores similarly contradictory aspects of the associations of the two sides in the war in Italy with the myth of Gigantomachy. It closes with reflections upon potential strengths and weaknesses of an approach that seeks to interpret rather than explain away inconsistencies.

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Guest Editors