

The Muses' Playground 20

Late epic and its predecessors

Lecture overview

- This module has focussed on a limited set of epic texts from the Roman period
- This lecture will survey briefly other epic texts contemporary to and later than Lucan
- This is important in order to gauge
 - The development of the genre as a whole
 - The reception of individual authors

Authors of note

- Statius: *Thebaid* + *Achilleid* (contemporary with Lucan)
 - Also small-scale poetry (but in big books) and panegyrics
- Valerius Flaccus: *Argonautica* (Flavian period)
- Silius Italicus: *Punica* (The Punic War; Flavian period)
- Claudius Claudianus: *The Rape of Propserpine* (late 4th C AD)
 - Also panegyrical texts; court poet in Ravenna and Milan

Types of epic

- As is clear from the previous slide, mythological epic continues to be the most productive type
 - Silius' *Punica* often considered out of fashion, reconnecting to the early Republican tradition of purely historical epic
- ...but at the same time, history is key to Valerius Flaccus as well
 - Cf. emphasis on consequences of the invention of sailing in the introduction leading to national conflict and change
 - Follows influences from historiographers like Herodotus on the Argonaut expedition prompting the Trojan war
- *My song is of the straits first navigated by the mighty sons of gods, of the prophetic ship that dared to seek the shores of Scythian Phasis, that burst unswerving through the clashing rocks, to slink at length to rest in the starry firmament.*
- *I sing of seas first traversed by mighty sons of gods, and of the fate-speaking ship that, having dared to seek the shores of Scythian Phasis and to burst through the Clashing Rocks, finally came to rest on fiery Olypmus.*
(*Argonautica* 1.1-4)

Types of epic

- However, epic continues to develop through the same type of cross-fertilisation as seen in the case of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, giving rise to:
 - Panegyrical epic (e.g. Claudian)
 - Biblical epic
 - Biblical cento: Proba (4th C AD)
 - Hagiographical epic (e.g. Fortunatus)

Proba's *Cento*

Once I wrote of leaders violating sacred
tracts,
of those who cling to their terrible thirst for
power;
of so many slaughters, the cruel campaigns
of Kings,
of blood-brothers at battle, illustrious
shields spattered
with kindred gore, trophies taken from
would-be allies,
cities widowed once again of their
countless peoples:
of these, I confess, I once wrote.
It is enough to record such evil. Now, all-
powerful God, take, I pray, my sacred song,
loosen the voices of your eternal, seven-
fold
Spirit; unlock the innermost chambers of
my heart,
that I, Proba, the prophet, might reveal its
secrets.

Now I spurn the nectar of Olympus, find no
joy
in calling down the Muses from their high
mountain haunts;
not for me to spread the idle boast that
rocks can speak,
or pursue the theme of laureled tripods,
voided vows,
the brawling gods of princes, vanquished
votive idols:
Nor do I seek to extend my glory through
mere words
or court their petty praise in the vain
pursuits of men.
But baptised, like the blest, in the Castalian
font -
I, who in my thirst have drunk libations of
the Light -
now begin my song: be at my side, Lord, set
my thoughts
straight, as I tell how Virgil sang the offices
of Christ

Vergil in the Christian tradition

- Vergil popular with Christian writers as he was felt to have an affinity with Christian faith
 - The boy to be born in Pollio's consulate taken to be a reference to the birth of Jesus
 - The ideal of *clementia* and virtue put forward strongly in the *Aeneid* tallied with Christian values
- Cf. Dante's *Divina Comedia*: Vergil is the narrator's guide through the underworld but cannot enter *paradiso*

Yet do thou at that boy's birth, in whom the iron race shall begin to cease, and the golden to arise over all the world, holy Lucina, be gracious; now thine own Apollo reigns. And in thy consulate, in thine, O Pollio, shall this glorious age enter, and the great months begin their march: under thy rule what traces of our guilt yet remain, vanishing shall free earth for ever from alarm. He shall grow in the life of gods, and shall see gods and heroes mingled, and himself be seen by them, and shall rule the world that his fathers' virtues have set at peace. But on thee, O boy, untitled shall Earth first pour childish gifts, wandering ivy-tendrils and foxglove, and colocasia mingled with the laughing acanthus: untended shall the she-goats bring home their milk-swoln udders, nor shall huge lions alarm the herds: unbidden thy cradle shall break into wooing blossom. The snake too shall die, and die the treacherous poison-plant: Assyrian spice shall grow all up and down. (Verg. *Ecl.* 4)

The debt to Vergil: Statius

- Many scenes in the *Thebaid* closely mirrors such in Vergil:
 - Telling of the origins of war (Stat. *Theb.* 1.515-56 – Verg. *Aen.* 7.45-106), the banquet scene, ghosts prompting action, etc
 - Effects? Tribute to Vergil? Tribute to Rome? Writing Rome into earlier mythology/history?
- Statius also offers explicit reflection on his debt to Vergil – cf. epilogue (right)
 - Describes the *Thebaid* as a follow-on...
 - ...but note the careful description of Statius himself as a second Vergil
 - Preparation time, involvement of the emperor, death of the poet balanced by survival of the work
 - Effects? Writing himself into literary tradition a common *topos*

*Wilt thou endure in the time to come,
O my Thebaid, for twelve years
object of my wakeful toil, wilt thou
survive thy master and be read? Of a
truth already present Fame hath
paved thee a friendly road, and
begun to hold thee up, young as thou
art, to future ages. Already great-
hearted Caesar deigns to know thee,
and the youth of Italy eagerly learns
and recounts thy verse. O live, I pray!
nor rival the divine Aeneid, but follow
afar and ever venerate its footsteps.
Soon, if any envy as yet o'erclouds
thee, it shall pass away, and, after I
am gone, thy well-won honours shall
be duly paid. (Statius *Thebaid*,
12.801-810)*

...but how about Lucan?

- *My spirit is touched by Pierian fire to recount **the strife of brethren**, and the battle of the alternate reign fought out with impious hatred, and all the guilty tale of Thebes. Whence, O goddesses, do ye bid me begin?* (Stat. Theb. 1.1-4)
- ‘Strife of brethren’ clearly recalls Lucan’s ‘kin facing kin’
- Statius’ narrative as a whole also shares Lucan’s focus on responsibilities of lone rulers and the dangers of dictatorship
- Statius’ theme is power and the abuse of power – cf. multiple passages in Lucan
- Descriptions of bodies on the battlefield

Are there epic heroes in later epic?

- In Lucan, we have noted the lack of a central heroic character like Aeneas, Achilles or Odysseus
 - Cf. also Ov. *Met.*
- This is a recurring feature:
- Silius:
 - Silius writes historical epic just like Lucan, but does not signal his indebtedness to this author nearly as strongly as he does with Vergil
 - Lucan's sombre view of Rome in stark contrast with Silius' more optimistic view
 - ...but both share the absence of a central leading character: for Silius, too, the main protagonist is all Romans
- Statius:
 - The Seven against Thebes – fractured image of heroes manipulated by the gods

Here I begin the war by which the fame of the Aeneadae was raised to heaven and proud Carthage submitted to the rule of Italy. Grant me, O Muse, to record the splendid achievements of Italy in ancient days, and to tell of all those heroes whom Rome brought forth for the strife, when the people of Cadmus broke their solemn bond and began the contest for sovereignty ; and for long it remained uncertain, on which of the two citadels Fortune would establish the capital of the world. (Silius Italicus 1.1-10)

But...

- Valerius Flaccus places the focus on a small set of characters:
 - Heracles and Jason; Jason and Medea
- In reaction both to the no-hero epics of his contemporaries but also to Apollonius where the Greeks as a group are more significant
 - ...or Medea??
 - Vergil's Dido is essential background reading for understanding Flaccus' Medea and foreshadows the outcome of her story throughout

A different hero

And now there was an end of drinking and of merriment, and laid upon quiet couches all were still; alone amid the ranks of the sleepers the leaders is left and courts not slumber. The aged Aeson and Alcimede, sleepless too, gaze at him with brimming eyes and would not hold him back. Jason ministers to them with gentle speech and soothes their troubled hearts. Soon, when their eyelids had sunk overcome with deep sleep, the shining guardian of the wreath-bound vessel seemed to exhort the leader with these words: "An oak from Dodona, the servant of Chaonian Jupiter, thou seest here. With thee I launch upon the ocean, and the Saturnian goddess could not have torn me from the prophetic woods had not heaven been promised to me. The hour is at hand; up, an end to delay! and even though while we roam over all the ocean the uncertain sky be veiled in cloud, trust even now in heaven and in me, and banish your fears." She ceased. He in fear, favourable thou the omen from heaven was, sprang from his couch. Straightway Tithonus' bounteous wife, ruffling the sea with the new-born sunlight, brought all the Minyae before him. They hasten to and fro on the decks; these make ready the yard on the high mast, others try the oars for the first time on the glassy surface, Argus from the lofty prow draws in the cable. (VF 1.293-314)

Flaccus and Vergil

- What are the effects of the Vergilian echoes in this passage?
- What are the motivations of Jason and Aeneas respectively?
- Does this mean the emphasis shifts from the personal development of the hero to the story itself?

But the sight of him left Aeneas dumb and senseless. His hair stood on end with horror and the voice stuck in his throat. He longed to be away and leave behind him this land he had found so sweet. The warning, the command from the gods, had struck him like a thunderbolt. But what, oh what, was he to do? What words dare he use to approach the queen in all her passion? How could he begin to speak to her? His thoughts moved swiftly now here, now there, darting in every possible direction and turning to every possible event.

Verg. Aen. 4.279-486

Divine machinery

- From Homer to Lucan we have seen a considerable reduction of the divine machinery portrayed in epic
- In later epic, we find rather the opposite: gods are active and increasingly involved
 - Both in terms of actions and in terms of being pivotal for the narrative
 - Statius, Flaccus, and Silius all present extensive divine machinery (esp. Statius)...
 - ...but gods and their actions are increasingly flawed

Divine machinery: relevance

- ‘The despairing portrait of the divine powers, institutional monarchy, the great war, and the human condition [i.e. humans being manipulated by the gods] evidenced in the Thebaid necessarily invites a comparison with events and personalities in Rome during the turbulent reigns of the Julio-Claudian and Flavian emperors [...]’ (Dominik, 2006, 522)

Changing times, changing genre

- Epic thus changes with the needs of the authors located in specific times and circumstances – a different type of hero needed at different times
- Epic also constantly reinvents its rules for contrast and artistic effect...
- ...while at the same time remaining conscious of its origins and development