

## REVIEW

## A NEW COMPANION TO THE GREEK EPIC CYCLE

Marco Fantuzzi and Christos Tsagalis, edd., *The Greek Epic Cycle and its Ancient Reception: A Companion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xiii + 678. Hardback, \$195.00. ISBN 978-1-107-01259-2.

‘Enough and too much has been written about the Epic Cycle’, wrote T. W. Allen in 1908, but more recent scholarship has not been dissuaded from tackling the subject afresh. We now have three editions of the fragments and testimonia, by Bernabé, Davies, and West; the short but useful survey by Davies (1989) was followed by a more ambitious and heretical analysis by Burgess (2001); West has produced a commentary on the Trojan epics (with valuable prolegomena which look more widely), and Davies a typically learned one on the less well-attested Theban series. But all these contributions are dwarfed by the book under review, containing a substantial introduction and thirty-two essays which occupy well over 600 pages, with a forty-five-page bibliography.<sup>1</sup> This is not a volume in the Cambridge Companion series, but more advanced and in grander format.<sup>2</sup> It is full of useful material, though inevitably there is a lot of repetition and despite its scale it cannot be regarded as comprehensive. Nevertheless, there is much food for thought.

The book falls into three parts. Part I consists of ten general essays (‘Approaches to the Epic Cycle’); part II contains eleven specific studies (one on ‘*Theogony* and *Titanomachy*’, plus an essay on each of the attested Theban and Trojan epics); part III deals with ancient reception, mostly in specific genres or authors. Much of this is literary inheritance, but there is a long and impressive essay by Squires on the visual legacy in Hellenistic and Roman times (especially the *Tabulae Iliacae*), very generously illustrated (archaic artistic representation is covered in an earlier essay by T. H. Carpenter).

I shall not discuss every essay, but arrange my comments under headings which reflect the main areas of debate.

(a) *Definition and scope*. The term ‘epic cycle’ does not appear until the second century AD, but Aristotle does allude to a *kuklos* in connection with epic, and in a cryptic passage says that one Phayllos compiled a summary of the poems therein (*Rh.* 1417a2); this, it is widely held, was a parallel enterprise or

<sup>1</sup> Visit [http://assets.cambridge.org/97811070/12592/toc/9781107012592\\_toc.pdf](http://assets.cambridge.org/97811070/12592/toc/9781107012592_toc.pdf) for a complete table of contents. My citations of the fragments follow West’s numbering.

<sup>2</sup> For a brief but helpful essay in an earlier Companion to Homer see Dowden (2004).

the direct source for the summaries ascribed to Proclus and cited by Photius. The aim, it seems, was to produce a compendium of mythology from the origins of the cosmos to the end of the heroic age. But this was the aim of the compilers; the original poems which they put together and summarised were not, or not all, composed to fulfil this need. Some of them, indeed, may have been conceived in relation to one another, as prequels, sequels, or supplements. But it is well known that even in Proclus' summaries there are overlaps, as between the end of the *Little Iliad* and the beginning of the *Iliupersis*. They varied considerably in length and perhaps in quality, certainly in influence, of which more below.

What should be included in a companion to the 'epic cycle'? Clearest is the case of the Trojan sequence, where we do know that these were the poems gathered together to form (with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) a continuous narrative of the events of that war. The Theban 'cycle' is less plain to us, but at least plausibly seen as a series of connected epics. But we know that there were many other epics composed in the archaic period: some of them are named (e.g. the *Minyas* or the *Capture of Oechalia*), others plausibly hypothesised (poems on Heracles and later on Theseus), but they do not figure in the present work.<sup>3</sup> The Argonautic expedition is alluded to in a famous passage of the *Odyssey* (12.69–72): was there a well-established epic tradition, even a canonical epic?<sup>4</sup> Other mythological traditions are referred to within the extant epics, such as the tales of Bellerophon, Meleager, the Lapiths and Centaurs, to say nothing of the catalogue of women in *Odyssey* 11. While it would clearly be impossible to treat these hazier traditions in separate chapters, it seems a pity that they are not given some consideration (the Argo-reference seems to be discussed nowhere in the volume). One might even remark that the conventional separation of Cyclic and Hesiodic studies is a disadvantage here: the Hesiodic *Catalogue* is sometimes cited in this volume, but a more systematic correlation of their narrative and mythological tendencies would have been useful.<sup>5</sup> There seems to

<sup>3</sup> Heracles is not entirely neglected (see the index), but given his frequent mention in the Homeric epics a more synthetic account would have been welcome. In particular the issue of his divinisation raises important questions relevant to the central plot of the *Iliad* (see esp. 18.117–19). Was the poet of the *Iliad* aware of the idea that Heracles became immortal (first attested at *Od.* 11.602–4 and *Hes. Th.* 950–5, both passages being suspect as late additions)?

<sup>4</sup> Cf. West (2005).

<sup>5</sup> A small point of contact is *Od.* 3.464–5, the bathing of Telemachus by Nestor's daughter Polycaste, in conjunction with [*Hes.*] *Catal.* fr. 221, where we learn that Telemachus and Polycaste were later married, and had a son Persepolis. Here we have a problem of the kind discussed below, where we wonder if the datum provided by the later source was already known to the earlier: that is, did [*Hesiod*] take the hint from the passing reference in the *Odyssey* and invent the marriage, or was the *Odyssey* quietly foreshadowing Telemachus' future nuptials? *Hellanicus* (fr. 156 Fowler) had a different story, that Telemachus married Nausicaa!

have been a decision to set apart the various works which offer mythological history, such as Eumelus' *Corinthiaca*. This is understandable if we are trying to stick close to the Proclan model of the Cycle, but that is not the only categorisation possible. Less can be said about Eumelus, no doubt (though see West (2002)), but the interest in foundation-legends and 'colonisation' has points of contact with the heroic narratives, with the dispersal of the surviving heroes across the Mediterranean. This fascinating theme, studied in depth by Irad Malkin in *The Returns of Odysseus* (1998), is briefly referred to in Finkelberg's essay (133, citing Malkin on 'the Big Bang of the Trojan War'), but it deserved a chapter to itself.

(b) *Chronology*. The different poems will be of differing dates, and those are controversial. Linguistic analyses of surviving fragments, particularly *Cypria* fr. 1, have often diagnosed late forms and deduced that this poem at least must be the product of the sixth century. It is therefore notable that several authors here express doubts about these findings (Bernabé, 139–40; Currie, 281). In any case, these dates can only refer to the works as they were committed to writing, when 'textualisation', to use a modish term common in this area, has occurred. Those who believe in a significant period of oral currency before that date can afford to be broad-minded about the datings, and will resist excessive precision. Absolute chronology, in any case, may be less important than relative chronology, as highlighted in the recent volume of essays by Andersen and Haug. That volume included a characteristically bold contribution by the late Martin West, who even presented a chronological table outlining the relationships between texts extant and those now lost (a table with significant similarity to a textual stemma) (West (2012) 240). But few will be prepared to accept all of his conclusions with confidence. For other discussions of dating, see 313–14 (*Aethiopsis*), 318–19 (*Ilias parva*), 384 (*Telegony*).

(c) *Homeric questions*. The chronological debate is chiefly important because we want to know the relation of these poems to the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Ancient scholars tended to refer to Cyclic poetry as the work of *hoi neoteroi*, a phrase probably used by Aristarchus (425). Traditionally it has been thought that the Cyclic epics were all later, cruder, and inferior poems which sought to supplement and fill in the gaps around the great epics; and this may still be the case with some of them, including the *Nostoi* and especially the *Telegony*. (This view is still strongly advocated also for the *Cypria* by West, 99; contrast Currie, 284, more nuanced.) But the Homeric poems clearly show knowledge of many characters and episodes which certainly figured in the Cyclic poems (Kullmann, recapitulating his seminal 1960 study, here offers an excellent overview of what he has described as the 'Faktenkanon'). It is now widely accepted that epics such as the *Cypria* had predecessors which contained this material, and that 'Homer' drew on these, though adding to and modifying the inherited material. Whether we speak in terms of specific early poems or of the general

body of mythological knowledge shared by the bardic profession is in part a matter of taste. What matters is to acknowledge that such a body of traditional tales did exist, that it was flexible within limits, and, crucially, that it admitted innovation and invention, which was sometimes achieved through ‘motif-transference’ (112).

Several essays in this volume engage with these tangled issues. In some cases there is a sense of opposing approaches between which the reader must make a choice: thus Burgess sets up a debate between the Homer-centric scholar and the ‘Systemic’ scholar (who questions the special status of Homer); and Foley and Arft present their approach through oral traditional poetics as one which opposes ‘textualist perspectives’. Yet when Foley and Arft conclude ‘In the end, we understand Homer’s grand poems and the fragmentary Epic Cycle as surviving remnants of a much larger oral epic tradition, most of whose riches either never reached textuality (for whatever reason) or have since perished’ (95), I see nothing here with which a textualist (West, for example) would quarrel: indeed, it seems to me to be a thoroughly orthodox position. I suspect the different approaches are less far apart than their proponents suppose.

One point which constantly recurs in the essays on specific poems, especially the Trojan group, is the difficulty of deciding whether a motif in Homer is an invention or something drawn from earlier tradition. If we find the motif recurring in more elaborate form in the Cyclic material, does that reflect pre-Homeric tradition precisely, or is the Cyclic poet embroidering on Homer? A typical case, aired agnostically by Currie, is the matter of Chryseis’s family background (293–4, on *Cypr.* arg. lines 161–2 Severyns with fr. 23–4 West). Here it does seem more likely that the *Cypria* is filling in gaps; that Chryseis existed in the tradition before the *Iliad* seems improbable (cf. Kullmann, 122). Many other cases occur, some of major importance (e.g. whether the ‘plan of Zeus’ as outlined in the *Cypria* was known to the *Iliad* poet and underlies or resonates behind *Il.* 1.5: 296).

Such questions can hardly ever be answered with a definite yes or no; it can always be maintained that the mythical tradition included material not visible to us. But we should not set aside the principle that there must have been a first time at which (say) Penthesilea was brought to Troy. The tradition was not all-inclusive, and we need to bear in mind Telemachus’ comment that audiences enjoy the newest tale (*Od.* 1.351–2). Some innovations do have chronological consequences which can be evaded only by special pleading. It is highly probable that the *Odyssey* was the first poem to bring Circe into association with Odysseus (she belongs in the Argonautic myth, as was shown long ago). If that is the case, the *Telegony*, which introduces the tale of Circe’s son by Odysseus and brings the company to Circe’s island at the end, must be seen

as a secondary development of one strand of the *Odyssey*.<sup>6</sup> It is simply not possible to see Telegonus as having had some hazy existence in the pre-Odyssean tradition. It is also worth noting places where the Cyclic poets seem to have differed from one another on details, sometimes perhaps polemically. A case in point is the killer of Astyanax: in the *Iliupersis* this is Odysseus, but in the *Ilias parva* Neoptolemus. Kelly (325) sees competitive engagement and modification of ‘relatively fixed traditions’ as a characteristic of the *Ilias parva* poet (cf. 324 n. 36, seemingly implying fixed texts so that one poet can react to another). More than a tiny discrepancy, this and other details may suggest that the *Iliupersis* stressed the brutality and sacrilege of the sack, whereas the *Ilias parva* adopted a more pro-Greek viewpoint.

(d) *Survival*. Reception studies become more difficult and perhaps less useful when the link between the original work and those receiving is indirect or partial. Hence it makes a difference when the Cyclic poems became harder to find or dropped entirely out of circulation. The essays on early lyric, Pindar, and Attic tragedy have an advantage here, as there is no doubt that these poets did indeed have access to the poems and drew on them extensively (see esp. Sommerstein’s essay on tragedy, with useful figures and lists to show the relative influence and popularity of the different epics). Things become more difficult in later periods (for an overview see West (2013) 47–51). High authorities have disagreed on whether Virgil was able to read the Trojan epics, or indeed whether he actually preferred to draw on the great tragedians for the tales surrounding the sack of Troy. Eduard Fraenkel argued that the efforts of Lausus to save his embattled father Mezentius in *Aeneid* 10 echoed Antilochus’ fatal attempt to save Nestor in the *Aethiopis*, but others have questioned whether Virgil even had access to the Cyclic epic, and claimed that Pindar’s version would have been sufficient (*Pythian* 6): for an ultra-sceptical treatment see Horsfall (2003) 465–72. U. Gärtner maps out the possibilities with exemplary clarity (she also provides a valuable appendix listing possible connections, 560–4). Agnosticism is recommended on Ovid too, by G. Rosati (576). Even among Greek authors citations are thin. Pausanias claims to have read or at least referred to a number of early epics, both ‘cyclic’ in the narrow sense and others (4.2.1; 10.31.2, 28.7), but the allusions have sometimes been seen as derivative from his sources (Wilamowitz’s scepticism is followed by Horsfall (2003) 469–70, despite recent defenders of Pausanias). The question of the disappearance

<sup>6</sup> Proclus’ summary makes clear that Circe conveys Penelope, Telemachus, and Telegonus, and the body of Odysseus, to her island. But the editors are surely mistaken in thinking that Odysseus is immortalised with the rest of them (4, cf. Tsagalis on p. 381): that claim is made only by schol. Lycophr. 85, doubted with good reason by West (2013) 306; contrast Hyginus *fab.* 127, cited on p. 394 of the volume under review, who is explicit that Odysseus is then buried. If Penelope marries Telegonus and Circe marries Telemachus, there is no body left for Odysseus (the poet evidently did not think of drafting in Calypso!).

of the Cycle is discussed at various points in the volume, e.g. 34–6, 107, 694–6: the last passage is the opening of an essay on the Cycle and imperial Greek epic. Some have maintained that Quintus of Smyrna wrote his epic because the Cyclic treatments no longer survived, but the ingenious critic can always say that when Quintus does things differently, this indicates his knowledge of the earlier epic and his determination to strike out new ground (on p. 612 the same suggestion is made about Quintus' relation to the *Aeneid*). In the end it is hard to find solid ground, but we must give some weight to the total absence of identifiable papyri of the Cycle, and to the outright statement by Philoponus that the poems were no longer available in the third century AD (34, 428 n. 60, 548–9; West (2013) 50–1).

(e) *Evaluation of the poems*. It has long been seen, and is reemphasised in Carpenter's essay here, that in terms of visual evidence it seems that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were not predominant in the archaic period. In fact, identifiable scenes from myth are more often drawn from the myths narrated in the Cycle than from the Homeric epics. The same tendency can be seen in the choice of subjects by the tragedians (think of the popularity of the Theban myths, or of the events surrounding the sack of Troy). No disparagement of the Cyclic poems seems to be detectable before Aristotle, who strongly emphasised the contrast between those works and the Homeric epics. Fantuzzi's essay well shows the rising tide of hostile criticism: neither the Aristotelian demand for holistic unity nor the Callimachean obsession with refinement and original deployment of language could find much to approve in the form and manner of the Cycle (Callim. *epigr.* 28 Pf., discussed e.g. on p. 417). Horace's dismissal of the cyclic style is famous (*ars poetica* 136–9). Later still, Pollianos complained of the dull transitions in these works, signalled constantly by *autar epeita* (*AP* 11.130, first/second c. AD: p. 427). These and other criticisms have often been echoed by moderns (and indeed *Thebaid* fr. 2, with three uses of *autar* within five lines, bears out Pollianos's complaint). In an influential essay of 1977 Griffin was chiefly concerned to bring out what he saw as the special qualities of the *Iliad* (less so the *Odyssey*), by contrasting the Homeric vision with the rather different ethos and mythological selection of the Cyclic epics (which for purposes of argument he lumped together as effectively homogeneous). The same line was taken by Davies in his 1989 book. It is striking that several of the contributors to this *Companion* make a real effort to counter this trend, trying to find virtues in the surviving fragments and being prepared to see merit in narrative techniques and ethos remote from those of the monumental epics. Thus Currie attempts to answer the criticisms directed at *Cypria* fr. 5 (p. 297) and 10 (299–302); Kelly subjects the meagre remnants of the *Ilias Parva* to minute analysis and finds an inventive poet, with 'a noticeable talent for striking metaphor and expressive syntax' (343); and Finglass, though more guarded on the *Iliupersis*, certainly finds the *potential* for sophisticated handling of the action narrated (he

emphasises the negative treatment of the Greek leaders). Even the end of the *Telegony*, so often summarised with contempt, gains a defender in Tsagalis (395). Although of course in the absence of the actual poems none of this is conclusive, it is salutary to consider what does survive in an unprejudiced spirit, and some at least of these suggestions are persuasively put.

These comments touch on only a few of the many subjects on which this Companion stimulates and provokes thought. It was impossible for it to be a comprehensive handbook, and some gaps are frustrating, but there is a huge amount of judicious comment and thorough documentation here. It will long remain an essential reference tool for any reader concerned with these poems, the myths they enshrined, and the influence they had on writers of the stature of Pindar, Sophocles, and (possibly!) Virgil.

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