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It presents the work of leading scholars of written and oral epic poetry, ancient, Renaissance, and contemporary, from a wide variety of disciplines, including anthropology, classics, Slavic studies, comparative literature, folklore, and English. Epic poetry now stands at the center of an intense debate concerning the relevance and cultural significance of the works that have helped to define Western culture. The position of epic is especially vexed in those countries involved in postcolonial debates about the relation of their national literatures to the canons of Western and classical literature, which, as part of a colonial educational policy, often were imposed on school curricula. It places the epic poetry of Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Spenser, Tasso, and Milton in the context of performances of epic poetry in contemporary Egypt and India, and it sets current fieldwork and ethnographic research about the political and poetic complexities of epic performance in the context of studies of the densely self-referential Western literary epic. We make these juxtapositions in the hope of accomplishing three ends: The epic has been an object of study for two millennia, in part because the great classical epics and their modern counterparts continue to inspire cultural definition and self-definition. The epic is also a vital contemporary art form, both in writing and in performance. With this volume we hope to reshape understanding of epic so as to keep both of these aspects of the epic in sight, and to inspire a greater degree of comparative understanding, both of the form and of the related cultures in which each individual poem is embedded. What is the epic? This book compels its readers to grapple with this question. A first reaction of many scholars of the classical or Renaissance epic to an account of contemporary performed oral poetry might be to argue that it is not really the epic as they know it. Similarly, scholars doing fieldwork who can measure their epics by the number of days it takes to perform them might question whether strict formal limits can produce an adequate definition of the genre. Our working definition for this volume itself has a polemical or at least limiting edge: These deeds are usually presented as deeds of grandeur or heroism, often narrated from within a verisimilitudinous frame of reference. We exclude from the arena of study myth and other kinds of tales that depend largely on magic many epics include briefer magical episodes, and we also exclude epics in prose, although in historical perspective it is clear that the novel, for one example, is a form of the epic. The epic also has a peculiar and complex connection to national and local cultures: This political explosiveness is evident in the charged contemporary performances of epic several examples of which are described in this volume, in the intense reimagining of epic undertaken by most emerging European nations as a means of coming to self-knowledge as a nation, and in the bitterness of accusations today about the dangers of abandoning canonical study in the academy. We hope to show that knowledge of this traditional arena of cultural definition is extended, not limited, by the kind of cross-cultural context constructed here. The essays in this volume argue strongly, then, for the value of comparative literary study and do so in the context of an intellectual climate in which study of traditional genres sometimes is seen as rather old-fashioned. The challenge to cross-cultural study of a particular literary form has come especially from those whether old or new historicists who emphasize the importance in literary study of historical and political particularities. One critique of both these idealizations is that they each in different ways obfuscate precisely the political effects of epic poetry—whether the potentially propagandistic effect of glorifying the current rulers or the more complex cultural imperialism evidenced in many epic poems. The work in this volume seeks to avoid some of the pitfalls of generalized generic comparison by rooting the analyses in the political culture of the societies at issue. Each of these examines the positioning of this female genre within a characteristically male form while considering the culturally distinct role of women and of lament in archaic Greek society and Roman culture. Similarly, the political role of epic performance is the central focus of

several of the essays that rely on fieldwork in India. We propose, then, that comparative literary study can and should make the political and the culturally specific more visible, rather than hiding cultural contest and debate behind an idealized or essentialized mask. To look at the position of epic in the contemporary world is to pose, not to evade, the question of epic ideology and its relation to nationalism, national identity, and the politics of gender. One might argue that on numerous occasions, announcements of the death of Western epic have in fact been premature. Even though Francesco Petrarca, whose name is usually synonymous with the Renaissance, failed miserably in his own attempts to resuscitate classical epic, it was not long before, Tasso, Spenser, and Milton succeeded. But in the twentieth century in particular, despite and perhaps partly because of the epic strivings of novelists such as George Eliot, Thomas Mann, Marcel Proust, and of course James Joyce, the Western epic has been theorized as being, like the wicked witch in *The Wizard of Oz*, really and sincerely dead. Two critics who have been extremely influential in the past several decades might be said to epitomize much current thinking about the trajectory of Western epic—a rubric that is often used as a facile substitute for epic itself. Their writings reflect strains of thought that, though not entirely new, are certainly characteristic of much modern criticism of the literary epic and its tendencies to oppose the terms "modern" and "epic." Bakhtin regards epic as the master discourse par excellence, which he opposes to the popular and open-ended novel that necessarily overtook the earlier genre, impervious as it was to change. For Bakhtin, the epic is monologic. It has only one word, one tongue, one point of entry: Moreover, by denying to the *Iliad* the right to contemplate and question itself, Bakhtin denies to this splendid archaic Greek text its profound reflections about human agency and its only tentative attempts to articulate an ethos that might outlast the fragility of its own always impermanent performances. In so doing, he monumentalizes Homer before Homer has finished singing. In "The Storyteller," Benjamin envisions epic not as Bakhtin does, as an antiquated and outmoded form which of necessity yielded to the popular novel, but as itself a genre that reflects a "popular" spirit: Still, there is something paradoxical about "The Storyteller." By the same token, despite the ultimate intermingling of supposedly opposed categories in the two essays, both writers fundamentally believe that epic is a legacy of the past because the circumstances that enabled or necessitated its production are no longer present. In this volume, Bakhtin and Benjamin are challenged directly as the various pressures of the contemporary are brought to bear on a genre that they have declared is either a dead letter or a vital oral phenomenon that is simply no more. Indeed, the essayists in this volume directly address the contemporaneity of epic by taking into consideration one or more of the following: Such discussions have compelled many to question the assumption that epic is a purely textual phenomenon that began with Homer and ended with Milton, and to see epics existing in societies that have been denied the "right" to have epic such as North African societies, as Joseph Farrell notes in his essay. Such attentiveness necessarily extends to those contributors, such as Sheila Murnaghan, who consider the roles of ritual and that archaic form of storytelling known as the lament. Lament could consolidate community, but it could also threaten the other stabilizing bonds that held groups and epic poems together. On the other hand, the terminology invoked by Bakhtin regarding Homeric epic—its monologism, its closure, its authority—is likewise invoked by a number of scholars not so much in regard to single epic poems as in regard to an epic tradition and a desire found in numerous cultures to grant authority to epic tales of origins and political legitimation. The "contemporary," then, is in fact immediately relevant to discussions of epic. The essays that follow alert us to the ongoing function of epics in various parts of the world today. They articulate how current theoretical initiatives and debates about the canon are critical for an understanding of the hold of epic on the imagination in antiquity as in the present. At least part of the attraction of epic poetry consists in the skill and imagination of those who create, revise, and recite it. It is to this critical question that we turn next: What makes an epic poet? The Epic Poet When oral epic or literary epic are examined, they are generally treated as separate and distinct verbal narrative art forms, each with its own concept of authorship and its own array of characteristics, both formal and thematic. Oral traditional epic is understood as orally composed and orally transmitted. It is, very importantly, a genre that is performed before an audience. While individual performers of epic each with

varying levels of creativity are appreciated, anonymity and collective involvement surround authorship per se. Oral epic is typically marked by compositional devices that facilitate performance and transmission, as well as by content that is regarded as deeply traditional, at times even mythic bringing with it an identification of oral epic with story patterns that are both ancient and widespread. From the perspective of scholars of folklore, literary epic, unlike oral traditional epic, is usually seen as the creation of a single author, immersed in literacy and everything that literacy brings with it. If the creative processes of the oral epic poet and the writer of epics thus remain significantly different, it is worth considering more specifically what defines the poetic work of the oral poet. Much has been written on the apprenticeship of oral epic poets. Furthermore, traditional performers of oral epic are often characterized by gender and are not only artistically and at times professionally marginalized within the larger community but also situated on the periphery ethnically and socially. The art of oral epic singing is by and large "though not always" an art perpetuated by men for public performance. Customarily, young boys begin to cultivate the art of epic singing at a young age, first by learning to play an instrument. This is usually followed by mastering the art of singing and stringing metrically appropriate verses together. Finally, they assemble entire narrative songs and begin to perform in public. In certain cultures, epic is even perpetuated by a "class" of singers who are effectively on the margins, both ethnically and socially, of the community. They are what Susan Slyomovics has called the "poet outcasts" in an example from the Egyptian oral epic tradition. Like the oral epic poet, the writer of epic poetry has generally been male though this has begun to change in the last two centuries and is immersed in a tradition that takes years of training to master. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom suggests that English poets who wrote after a Milton regarded as largely inimitable struggled in a variety of ways to master and usurp their great precursor. Yet in many senses, to begin with the romantics is to begin 2, years too late. When Virgil writes "Arma virumque cano" Of arms and a man I sing, his use of the first-person verb form stands out in contrast to the more anonymous invocations of the Homeric bard: It is in going back to Homer and the tangled origins of written epic in the West that one finds potentially similar circumstances to those present in the shaping of oral poetry, and arguably they have impinged on the production of written epic itself. And it is also in Homer that we find the image of the marginalized poet, subject to the whims of patronage such as Phemius, who is told now by Telemachus, now by Penelope, and now by the suitors, what to sing or physically marked by the sign of his outcast and yet privileged status such as the blind bard Demodocus, who performs for Odysseus and the Phaiakians. Dante writing his *Commedia* in exile from Florence, Milton writing *Paradise Lost* during the Restoration, the composer of the *Chanson de Roland* "perhaps" in figurative exile at the English court. In such ways, the social and economic vulnerabilities to which oral poets continue to be subject have left their mark, however mediated, on the legacy of written epic as well. Walter Ong has been, perhaps, the most eloquent spokesperson for the impact of literacy on culture and literature, tracing various developments from orality to literacy and mass dependence on the printed word. Along with others, Ong has argued persuasively for a recognition of the profound changes that literacy has engendered in human history. Indeed, polemics surrounding orality and literacy among scholars of oral poetry frequently focus on texts that are not unquestionably either oral or literary, or on transitional texts "those that fall somewhere between oral and literary for any number of reasons. Similarly, the role of literacy in the creative process of oral poets and determining which features point to either orality or literacy in their poetry has been a matter of controversy. Nonetheless, it is rare when critical readings of oral and literary verbal art are truly exchanged; the distinction between "us" and "them" still tends to dominate scholarship, from whichever perspective. The essays in this volume challenge the current understanding of orality and literacy as opposed categories. By putting aside strict boundaries of genre and methodology, they enable an exchange between literatures and between scholars that confronts the very idea of what epic is and how it can be read. And this exchange proves effective because, put simply, those who study oral epic and those who study literary epic have much to learn from each other. Epic conceived as a poetic narrative of length and complexity that centers around deeds of significance to the community transcends the oral and literary divide that has long marked the

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approach to the genre. In transcending that divide, epic emerges as a larger genre within which comparative study becomes more dynamic and broader in scope. By addressing authorship, readership or "listenership", form, and meaning in the "other" be it oral or literary epic, scholars in this volume have been challenged to see how they have constructed the "other" as opposed and separate, and are thus encouraged to reexamine the epic tradition they know best. Because of their "literary" nature, written texts have engendered a level of theorizing that cannot yet be assumed by scholars of oral literature. The tangible written text in itself generates complex theoretical systems of approaching literature—systems that can also provide exciting tools for the understanding of oral literature. From the literary side, the ethnographic criticism of oral epic also furnishes means by which the study of literary epic may be given a sharper political and cultural focus. The essays by Susan Slyomovics and Dwight Reynolds on Egyptian oral epic poets provide especially rich examples of this detailed analysis of performativity. The immediate politics of oral epic performance—how a traditional genre can be interpreted, say, as a potent political statement to the community—is explored in the essays on the Indian epic by Joyce Flueckiger and William Sax. It is precisely through the juxtaposition of oral and literary epic in cases like these—and the recognition of a larger concept of epic that transcends orality and literacy—that a more complex sense of the interactions of form, genre, politics, and culture may be brought to the interpretation of the genre. Studies of oral epic similarly suggest that interpretation of written epic could be directed more toward study of the tension between the local and the national or universal. Oral epic continues in general to be more attuned to the indigenous or local traditions that inform epic poetry. This focus can be a productive one for scholars of written epic. And in their feminist reappraisals of Greek and Roman epic, Sheila Murnaghan and Elaine Fantham demonstrate how the oral tradition of female lament threatens to subvert the heroic functions of literary epic. Students of oral epic can be more attentive, in turn, to ambiguity, linguistic nuances, and the extent to which oral texts, like written texts, construct themselves as theoretical systems. Several of the essays in this volume that give detailed accounts of performances suggest the virtues of this approach. In the exploration of various forms of verbal art, there is a point at which one can speak of a larger aesthetic that embraces both the oral and the literary. In so doing, one is liberated to speak of language elevated from the pedestrian to the realm of higher poetic diction, not only among the "lettered" poets, but among the "unlettered" as well.

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