

Structures of Epic Poetry

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Volume III: Continuity



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Christiane Reitz and Simone Finkmann

The origin, tradition, and reinvention of epic structures – a short introduction

Two questions remain and need to be addressed in the final volume of our compendium: Are the structural elements scrutinised in volumes I and II characteristic of classical epic specifically? Or are they consistently used throughout the entire tradition of Graeco-Roman epic from early Greek to Neo-Latin epic?

Any conscientious diachronic study of the development of a literary genre, but especially of such a long, dense, complex, and experimental tradition as epic poetry has to start with several caveats. The fact that the design and structural approach of this study as well as the normative structural theories of classical epic that form the basis of our analysis nearly exclusively focus on the epic form is not to be understood as a renunciation of the significance of the poems' content and language for the epic tradition. As Johannes Haubold convincingly shows in the first contribution of this volume, the dialogue between form and content plays an important part from the very start of the tradition, which is universally accepted to have begun with Homer for the Western tradition in the form of oral poetry. Johannes Haubold is not challenging this view, but he expands the analysis to ancient Mesopotamia, especially Akkadian epic, to explore and gain new insights into the conditions, shared cultural background, and the understanding of the divine and human history that influenced Homer's composition, and thus the early stages of the epic tradition.

Another persistent challenge for diachronic approaches is, of course, that of periodisation. These problems of chronology and direct and indirect borrowing and (inter)dependency of the individual poems only multiply when the analysis is expanded from the structures of classical epic to the entire tradition of Graeco-Roman epic from its beginning to the early 20th century. While we divide the important periods of the structural development of the epic genre into different eras for the purpose of our analysis, we do not postulate that the individual time periods and developmental stages are self-contained units and independent from one another. All contributions in this volume work on the assumption of a fluent, albeit not strictly linear transition, and, more importantly, parallel development of multiple strands of the epic genre. It seems reasonable therefore to exclude the problem of periodisation as well as questions about the transmission of the individual epics from our discussion.

No theoretical model could accurately unify the versatile and ever-evolving architecture of epic poetry, for which the only constant is the shared knowledge of a clearly recognisable set of building blocks between the poet as the builder and creator of a complex epic construction and the recipient (both contemporary and of future generations) as admirer or critic of this epic architecture. It therefore cannot be the aim of this study to develop a comprehensive theoretical model that can truly encompass the complex development and transformation of epic structures throughout the entire tradition. The architecture of an epic poem can be individually modified to fit the desired layout and the specific purpose of the intended construction. It can easily be expanded horizontally and vertically to the point where only individual structures resemble the blueprint of the classical model, but it will always be held together and defined by its core structures, irrespective of the time of its creation, the skillset of its creator, the material from which it is built, the different paint jobs it receives over the years, or the degree of change or de(con)struction it undergoes over the course of time.

Similarly, this study will not examine the historical, cultural, and socio-political background of the individual epics under discussion in detail, but presupposes that the authors' and the readers' biographies inform the practice of literary composition and reception, and as such have a significant impact on the reception and the transformation of epic structures and the perception of epic poetry as a reflection of the poets' (and by extension their contemporary readers') cultural and political values as well as aesthetic and religious views. These important external factors are explicitly addressed in this volume only when they are the main factor for the modification of an established epic structure or for the creation of a new one.

For the purposes of our study, a strict classification system is neither necessary nor beneficial, as it is not relevant whether the different products of epic experimentation are subtypes in their own rights. It is more important which structures are studied, copied, varied, enhanced, or omitted, and to what effect. Acknowledging the experimental nature and openness of the epic genre to expansion and variation, and the occurrence of many mixed types of epic poetry, as well as a predilection for the shorter form of the *epyllion* in Late Antiquity, we adopt a broad definition for epic poetry in this compendium. This allows for the inclusion of a great range of epic designs and subtypes, such as didactic poetry, verse panegyrics, hagiographic poems, animal epics, romance epics, and mock epics, some of which even came to surpass the production of classical historical and mythological epics.

This evolving process of composition, literary taste, and perception of the form and content of epic poetry is particularly evident in the Christianisation and rhetorisation of epic poetry in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, which gave

rise to the creation of new epic conventions, while leading to the disappearance of other well-established structures.

The rhetorisation of epic poetry, under the influence of declamation schools and a more pervasive formal education of the target audience, is perhaps best exemplified by four developments: 1) the stricter application of already existing formal regulations and microstructures, e.g. in the greater precision of parallels between the objects of comparisons in epic similes; 2) the enhancement of (declamatory) speeches and rhetorical devices, esp. *ethopoia*, and the embellishment of *ekphraseis*; 3) the authors' purposeful combination of complex and subtle borrowings from multiple predecessors and literary traditions, which appealed to and challenged a learned reader and created a new style of epic poetry; 4) individual authors, such as the late antique poet Claudian, showed their versatility by composing different subtypes of epic poetry.

Other transformations within this process were the result of general changes in the use of the respective language itself. Nonnus' stricter regulation of the hexameter, for instance, is the result of the transition of the Greek language to a stress accent. The heroic verse is, however, a good example for the general pervasiveness of the changes an epic poem could undergo throughout this long literary tradition. Once the undisputed stock meter of the epic genre and a symbol for its high style, the hexameter was rivalled, and at times replaced, for instance, by elegiac couplets and even prose in the Middle Ages and Neo-Latin epic. This change is also indicative of the evolution of aesthetic views, which gradually led to a dilution of the grandeur of epic poetry with the incorporation of more 'undignified' elements such as humour or the burlesque, which became important elements of vernacular epic.

As a result of the rhetorisation of epic poetry and the formal education of the poet and his audience, there is also a growing awareness and explicit discussion of epic composition, and by extension, of classical narrative patterns and structural elements, and the authors' place in the literary tradition. This heightened (self-) reflection generated new programmatic microstructures, most importantly, the epic preface or prologue. In addition to praising and legitimising individual rulers and conquerors, as well as the development of new political or religious institutions, these paratexts explicitly address both the process of composition and of recitation, and thus provide helpful insights into the understanding and strategic use of structural elements as generic markers and normative criteria for literary assessment in Late Antiquity and beyond: postclassical epicists expected to be judged by their audience based on their own successful and innovative adaptation of traditional epic structures and the creation of interesting new forms.

The emergence of Christian epic and cento poetry brought with it new structural challenges for the authors in so far as they had to decide whether to follow

the narrative sequence of their biblical sources, such as the four Gospels of the New Testament, in their adaptation and combination of Christian and pagan pretexts, or whether to adopt the chronology more loosely instead. The poets were also aware of the difficulties of incorporating mythical pagan structures, such as theomachies, divine council scenes, the epic hero's descent to and return from the underworld, or his sexual dalliances during epic voyages, and, most notably, the invocation of the Muses, into their Christian narratives. They successfully navigated this problem by recasting and repurposing these structures, or by embedding them in similes, dream visions, and *ekphraseis*.

In addition to the omission or Christianisation of typically 'pagan' structures, other 'Christian' structures, e.g. the depiction of the Eucharist, became new stock elements in late antique biblical epics and paraphrases as well as in medieval and Neo-Latin epics, whose authors were frequently priests or members of ecclesiastical institutions.

As patchworks of epic structures and the purest form of structural adaptation, biblical cento poetry even created additional challenges to both their authors and readers. Since cento poetry is the result of the deconstruction and recombination of a selection of already existing epic structures, which may not be modified except for minor alterations, this associative form of composition draws attention to the authors' decision-making process and their structural concept for the selection and reorganisation of epic models. Several redactions of both Homeric and Vergilian *centones* have been transmitted, which are an important source of information for the authors' structural reasoning and selection process.

As the individual contributions of this volume cover long periods of time and/or a large number of epic poems, they cannot possibly be comprehensive in their discussion of the building blocks of epic poetry. Instead of attempting to discuss the reception and appropriation of all epic structures analysed in detail in volume II.1 and II.2, they focus on core structures, which have been identified to carry special importance as generic markers of epic poetry and metapoetic structures in volume I: these are direct speeches, *ekphraseis*, similes, and aetiological and genealogical catalogues. They transcend the epic plot by allowing the authors to incorporate contemporary or past historical and socio-political events and characters that lie outside the time frame of the epic narrative, as well as new technological developments or contemporary scientific knowledge into their poems.

Papers in this volume that do include a more detailed analysis of a plot-constricted narrative pattern select the same set-pieces to trace the development of this particular structural element from late antique epic to Neo-Latin epic – as, for instance, in the case of epic sea-storms, which are discussed in more detail in all of the individual time periods covered in this compendium, while also being examined in a synchronic analysis juxtaposing the use of maritime storms in myth-

ological epic, Christian epic, and cento poetry in Late Antiquity. This comparative, synchronic approach is also employed by Martin Bažil who uses the building block ‘epic games’, and more specifically, the funeral games for Anchises in *Aeneid* 5, as a shared point of reference for his analysis of the reception of this particular Vergilian structure in epic and non-epic cento poems and late antique *epyllia*.

In addition to examining the continuity of firmly established ‘classical’ structures, the contributions focus on new structures that are developed in the course of the epic tradition, which can be considered as characteristic for the concept of epic(ity) in the respective time period.

The individual studies have – as far as that is possible with traditions spanning from c. 330 to 1453 as in the case of the Byzantine Empire and the combination of diachronic and synchronic analyses – been arranged chronologically. While we have allowed for necessary temporal, thematic, and motivic overlap between the different contributions to highlight the important intersections between the individual subtypes and transitional stages, we have opted for a division of the discussion of post-classical epic into Greek epic and Latin epic from antiquity onwards to acknowledge the split of the literary tradition into an independent Greek and Latin epic tradition and its substrands.

In accordance with the tripartite development of both Greek and Roman epic in Late Antiquity, the three variants of the epic production are discussed in separate contributions: 1) ‘classical’ historical and (archaising and Hellenistic) mythological epic (Simon Zuenelli), 2) biblical epic and paraphrase (Berenice Verhelst and Christoph Schubert), and 3) Homeric and Vergilian cento poetry (Berenice Verhelst and Martin Bažil).

The two time periods in the production of epic poetry which are often ignored in diachronic studies and handbooks of Graeco-Roman epic as a result of the small number of extant traditional epic narratives, ‘Byzantine epic’ and medieval Latin ‘epicity’, are scrutinised, explained, and opened up for a new discussion of the many problems and questions these stages of the epic tradition pose by Kristoffel Demoen, Berenice Verhelst, and Wim Verbaal.

The long and very productive period of Neo-Latin epic composition from the 15th to the 19th century is examined in two individual contributions by Christian Peters and Florian Schaffenrath that combine in-depth analyses of a selection of the most influential epics from 1440 to 1500 with a more concise comparative analysis of the adaptation and transformation of a wide range of epic structures, e.g. book divisions, invocations, middle proems, digressions, battle scenes, *ekphraseis*, and funeral games. While the first study provides us with a representative overview of the use of the micro- and macrostructures of classical epic in the early stages of Neo-Latin epic, the second assesses the continuity of the traditional core structures in epic poetry from the 16th to the 19th century.

During our research for this volume we benefited greatly from the interdisciplinary dialogue with experts in the field of English, French, German, Italian, and Portuguese epic, as well as classical reception during the rise of vernacular epic from the 16th century onwards and its impact on the production of Neo-Latin epic. This took place at a workshop we hosted at the University of Rostock in December 2016. We are very grateful for the opportunity to compare our research findings for the adaptation and transformation of ‘classical’ structures and narrative patterns in Graeco-Roman ‘post-classical’ epic with our colleagues’ analyses of the most influential European vernacular epics such as Dante’s *Commedia* and Petrarch’s *Trionfi* (Bernard Huß), the German *Nibelungenlied* (Franz-Josef Holznagel and Julia Frick), Luís de Camões’ *Os Lusíadas* (Rafael Arnold), Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (Philip Hardie), as well as epic structures and narrative conventions in French and Italian literature of the 19th and early 20th century (Stephanie Wodianka). This inspiring exchange taught us two things: 1) vernacular epic continues the practice of structural imitation, transformation, and (in)novation of epic structures from (a small number of the most influential) Greek and Roman classical epic models, and it shares many of the programmatic and strategic usages of post-classical Graeco-Roman epic; 2) a fruitful analysis of the reception of classical epic structures in the individual vernacular epic traditions is such a fascinating, vast, and complex endeavour that it deserves its own independent study.

While we decided against the inclusion of individual contributions on the development of narrative patterns in vernacular epic, the final paper of this volume addresses the chances and challenges modern scholars face when studying epic structures. Matteo Romanello examines the various possibilities new digital research tools and the combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis open up for the analysis of large data sets, such as the one collated to create a searchable digital appendix (<http://epibau.ub.uni-rostock.de/app>) for this study of the narrative patterns and structural elements in Graeco-Roman epic from early Greek epic to Neo-Latin epic.