

BOOK REVIEW

The Renaissance Epic and the Oral Past. *Anthony Welch*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012. Pp. v+260.

The publication of F. A. Wolf's *Prolegomena ad Homerum* in 1795 is often treated as a watershed in the history of classical scholarship. Wolf's hypothesis that the Homeric epics were the product of a preliterate culture and that "Homer" was less an individual poet than an anonymous process of oral composition put the questions of orality, literacy, and authorship at the center of discussions of ancient poetry, where they have remained for over two centuries. But in Anthony Welch's elegantly written and intellectually rewarding book, Wolf's "discovery" of an oral Homer marks not the beginning of a story but the end. In the Renaissance, Welch argues, before the emergence of a fossilized binary between authentic ancient song and artificial modern writing, more fluid notions of earlier oral cultures had a deep impact on the development of epic poetry. As writers across Europe from Torquato Tasso and Pierre de Ronsard to Abraham Cowley and Nahum Tate negotiated their place in a crowded literary tradition, they "framed their ideas about authorship and tradition by grounding their work within, or measuring it against, an imagined oral past" (197).

The term "oral past" is the linchpin of the book, and readers will find the argument more or less convincing depending on the degree to which they are persuaded that the diverse cultural phenomena Welch groups together with this heading belong under the same roof. In the course of elaborating his argument, Welch presents an introduction, five chapters, an "interchapter," and a coda in which orality comes to refer to vocal and musical forms and practices of many kinds: historicist interest in the preliterate culture that produced the Homeric poems; the trope of the poet as singer bequeathed by Homer to subsequent writers of epic; Renaissance wandering minstrelsy; neo-Pythagorean theories of musical harmony; the subject

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matter of poems that were believed to have been composed orally; and early opera. If Welch does not always delineate the boundaries between different types of oral utterances (reading aloud, reciting previously written poetry, vocalizing words with melody), different oral practices (composition, transmission, performance), and historical versus figurative meanings of orality, it is because he sees his Renaissance subjects as eliding these distinctions, moving fluidly between inherited literary convention and living social practice. The book's view of antiquity is similarly capacious. The "oral past" refers not just to Greece and Rome but also to other ancient oral sources, from the vernacular bardic traditions of England, Ireland, and Wales to the lyric poetry of the Bible. The very best sections of the book are those in which the grouping together of these different oralities and different pasts seems an essential way of accessing the syncretic habits of mind of Renaissance artists and their complex attitudes toward literary continuity and rupture.

The first chapter, on Tasso, is one such section. Welch situates Tasso's lifelong crusade against chivalric romance in the context of sixteenth-century musical humanism, a scholarly movement dedicated to recuperating and re-creating the principles of ancient Greek music theory, and he finds that the renunciation of oral song becomes a central strategy in Tasso's agon with the chief exemplar of modern romance, Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (1532). Musical humanists looked to Ariosto as the new Homer not least because his poems were recited before large crowds in the town squares of Italy (Welch has a several illuminating pages on contemporary reports of these public oral performances). For Tasso, however, Ariosto's status as Homer redivivus posed serious problems of originality and poetic authority. As a result, Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581) resists oral tropes of poetic filiation and portrays the idea of a primitive preliterate community as a delusional, dangerous, and feminine fantasy. This lens yields a fascinating reading of Armida's garden, which becomes "a realm of female artistry, inward-looking lyricism, and contemporary song" (45), an oral environment floundering in the "rootless psychological present" (45). It does not take long in reading his book to appreciate Welch's gift for phrases that are both rhetorically elegant and packed with interpretive power.

Subsequent chapters pursue the idea of the oral past through the nation-building epics of Pierre de Ronsard and Edmund Spenser, the protected pastoral song-world of Giambattista Marino's *L'Adone* (1623), and the cavalier poetry of Abraham Cowley, William Davenant, and Samuel Butler. Welch shows that Ronsard turns to the Orphic hymns in his search for ever more ancient models of poetic authorization, whereas Spenser responds ambivalently to the parallels he recognizes between the oral culture of Greece and Rome and the oral traditions of Britain's native past. With the interchapter on Marino, Welch enters upon the major thread of the second

half of the book: in telling stories of oral ancestry, Renaissance poets increasingly confront their own historical belatedness, and this acute self-consciousness of the gap between the oral past and the written present pushes them away from the universalizing vision of epic and its traditional martial subject matter. Welch sees in pastoral poems like Marino's *L'Adone* a sense of permanent rupture between ancient orality and modern textuality. He finds a similar historical alienation in Cowley, Davenant, and Butler, each of whom in his own way uses the trope of the poet as singer to evoke nostalgia for a lost political community in the years of the English Civil War.

In this middle section of the book, the pleasure of the initial chapter is somewhat diminished by long sections of exposition. A reader whose primary expertise lies in seventeenth-century English literature will be grateful for Welch's broad-stroke introduction to Ronsard's *Franciade* (1572), and a scholar of Italian music will welcome the pages overviewing *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596), but specialists will find it tedious to plod through extended rehearsals of familiar material. At certain moments, the narrative reads like an encyclopedia entry under the heading "Renaissance epic, interactions with literary precursors." Even so, there are gratifying vistas gained from comparative reading across geographical and temporal boundaries (it is a rare treat, for example, to be invited to consider Cowley's *Davideis* [1656] in relation to Continental epic). There is also sharp new material about the representation of Irish bardic culture in Spenser's *View of Ireland* (1596), an exercise in comparative ethnography that Welch shows to have shaped Spenser's pessimistic view of cultural change.

The argument resurfaces at full strength in the chapter on John Milton, and here Welch further substantiates his claim that orality plays a crucial role in the development of epic as a genre. He demonstrates that Milton's distinctive and well-documented obsession with the voice of the singing bard—dispensed with by Tasso and Spenser, despaired of by Cowley, romanticized by Davenant, and travestied by Butler—is part of his aim to replace conventional epic warfare with a hymn of creation. Not only does Milton anchor the central books of *Paradise Lost* (1674) in hexameral epic; he also figures the future restoration of Eden as an oral world of divine song, to which the poet is linked through his role as singer. As so often with Milton, there is a shadowy underside to this story: the solitary singing voice "takes on a thoroughly negative coloring, as a symbol for the sinful desire to claim as one's own the creative energy that derives from God" (156). In the singer's struggle to allow his voice to merge anonymously with the music of cosmic harmony, we see Milton's dramatization of poetic self-definition, as he wrestles with the limited prerogatives of human art.

If the fifth, and final, chapter leaves one with slightly greater regrets, it is because it does not quite follow through on its claim that "in early opera the epic tradition returned at last to an oral idiom, but one transformed by

centuries of literate cultural history" (176). Welch shows convincingly that opera composers and librettists participated in and continued to shape changing attitudes toward antiquity, but it is something of a disappointment to discover that in the book's only chapter about a fully oral medium very little is said about music *per se*. The chapter dwells instead on the late seventeenth-century reception history of Vergil, culminating in an extended reading of Tate-Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* (ca. 1688). There are some exhilarating pages in which Welch finds that Tate-Purcell's reimagination of Dido is symptomatic of a broader uncertainty about approaching the material of an epic tradition whose claim to authority has been eviscerated by the period's ever-expanding view of the past. The book's coda pursues this theme further, delicately charting the divided itineraries of epic and song, as eighteenth-century music theorists turned away from ancient orality as a reliable source of knowledge about music.

This consistently learned and imaginative book will be of significant interest not only to scholars of Renaissance literature and music but also to classicists, for whom it will complement recent studies (by Barchiesi, Habinek, Lowrie, among others)¹ of the self-consciously complex poetic and cultural meanings of orality and the oral past in Augustan Rome. Welch's multipronged argument repays careful rereading, and his lyrical prose commands grateful admiration.

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1. See, esp., Alessandro Barchiesi, *Speaking Volumes: Narrative and Intertext in Ovid and Other Latin Poets* (London: Duckworth, 2001); Thomas N. Habinek, *The World of Roman Song: From Ritualized Speech to Social Order* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); and Michèle Lowrie, *Writing, Performance, and Authority in Augustan Rome* (Oxford University Press, 2009).