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### Welch, Anthony. The Renaissance Epic and the Oral Past

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**Welch, Anthony.**

***The Renaissance Epic and the Oral Past.***

New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012. Pp. viii, 260. ISBN 978-0-300-17886-9 (paperback) \$40.

Anthony Welch's *The Renaissance Epic and the Oral Past* argues that the fictions of oral performance that Renaissance epic poems inherited from their ancient sources reveal evolving notions of authorship, history, and political authority in the early modern world. Welch's analyses of the ways poets such as Tasso, Ronsard, Spenser, and Milton imagined themselves as pre-literate "singers of tales" revisit a key problem for modern readers of this genre: the deployment of formal and thematic devices from a temporally, culturally, and religiously alien past in order to reckon with political, aesthetic, and confessional challenges in the historical present. Welch's images of oral performance thus work like A. Bartlett Giamatti's gardens, Michael Murrin's military technology, and Tobias Gregory's pagan deities. What is new is that the emphasis on oral performance offers insight into the epic poems' engagement with Renaissance historiography; particularly, how positivist narratives of historical emergence are complicated, on the one hand, by encounters with oral communities in the Americas, Wales, and Ireland and, on the other, by a growing skepticism about the mythic origins of modern political orders.

As a study of the historiographical impulse in Renaissance epic, the book is broadly concerned with the ways that echoes of an alien past both theorize and complicate the myths of historical progress underwriting so many of these poems' cultural and political claims. Welch's readings of Tasso, Ronsard, and Spenser describe these sixteenth-century dynastic poets as seeking both to "master ... classical ancestry and to preserve a deep sense of its alterity" (49). Their poems engage with what Welch terms a "deep history" wherein the teleological ambitions of "family and nation are made to cross into older precincts of archaic magic, cultic mystery, and cosmic myth" (88). Welch's model proves particularly useful for thinking about the ways Spenser's fascination with mutable form can be mapped onto his understanding of *The Faerie Queene* as an exercise in historical mimesis. For instance, Welch argues that Spenser's juxtaposition of "aboriginal" oral golden ages with a nearly ethnographic eye towards modern "salvage" nations displays not a clearly progressive telos, but "contrasting pattern[s] of historical progress" (82).

Part two of this study charts seventeenth-century epic's course away from Virgil's linking of poetic voice with state power and towards a counter-discourse in which poetic utterance discovers individual origins in a past unsullied by endangering political entanglements. Welch argues that the politically disparate poems of Davenant, Cowley, Butler, and Milton are linked by seeking their voices in longed-for and perhaps irrecoverable golden ages. Each confronts "the idea of an oral past as an object of both nostalgia and apprehension" (106). Welch's reading of Milton's career through the figures of voice and utterance maps out a long-evolving sense of poetic vocation whereby the poet moves from the "desire to project an exceptional purity" (151) to singing "the human music of the passions" (171). This chapter also offers useful insights into the metaphysical underpinnings of Milton's poetics, arguing that Milton imagined the voices of his mimetic structure evoking "the structure of Christian salvation history" (149).

Welch's study closes with a chapter on epic's transmutation into opera, suggesting that this shifting of epic narrative back into its original oral form constitutes the culmination of the ambivalent sense of historical relation animating the Renaissance epic. On the one hand, opera's inscription of epic theme and content into a vocal medium embodies a radical formal atavism. On the other hand, these works' specific rewritings of epic tales—notably their interest in a sympathetic Dido rather than a pious Aeneas—fulfill Renaissance

epic's vexed movement away from Homer and Virgil's formal models and their attendant ideologies of self, state, and historical emergence. This chapter's focus on musical form develops a counterpoint running throughout the book: the relationship between images of singing poets and early modern musical performance and theory.

However, in developing a series of themes working in and around the argument's major statement, the chapter highlights the book's principle weakness. For all its engagement with key theoretical voices—Walter Ong and Eric Havelock as well as classical and Renaissance rhetoricians—the book often mirrors its very subjects in feeling more like an *entrelacement* than a fully unified history. In its scrupulous attention to these poems' formal, thematic, and conceptual complexities, the book's synthesis is often occluded by the many parallel and inter-related stories being told.

Nevertheless, Welch's refusal to constrain his topic's richness and diversity into a "one-size-fits-all" analysis is also a significant virtue of this study. This book's thorough, if sometimes diffuse, analyses of the ways that models of authorship and utterance mediate relationships between the ancient and modern worlds offer important perspectives on the evolving roles of epic poems and poets in early modernity, and give this book a well-deserved place in the critical conversation with Giamatti and his successors.

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