*The Greek Epic Cycle and its Ancient Reception: A Companion*. Edited by Marco Fantuzzi and Christos Tsagalis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xiii+678. Hardcover, $195. ISBN 978-110701259-2.

*Dis Manibus Martin Litchfield West*

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ools may rush into the Epic Cycle where even the wary should tread especially carefully.[[1]](#footnote-1) Consider certain comparisons. Homer—whoever he/she/they was/were—produced two poems of some twenty-eight thousand lines; as for the Epic Cycle, whatever it was (there are some standard inclusions, others arguable), a miserable some one hundred lines remain.[[2]](#footnote-2)

As for Homer, there are issues such as oral-into-written, the Peisistratean recension, and the value of the papyri. The Epic Cycle, however, does not even possess plausible grounds for many debates; no certainty on versions of the poems such as the *Ilium Parvum;* enough issues of authorship to bedevil the scholar shaking the proverbial stick.[[3]](#footnote-3)In that latter instance, for example, we find a profusion of confusion since antiquity. Aristotle did a scholarly punt and concluded “whoever” for the author of the *Cypria* (*Poet*. 1459b1–2) while previously Herodotus had “not Homer” (2.117) though Pindar (fr. 280 Bowra) did have Homer. Penultimate, but by no means least annoying: lack of agreement on how which poems constituted a canonical Epic Cycle; indeed, it remains unclear if even antiquity possessed any such list(s).[[4]](#footnote-4) And finally, why such an intense interest in cycle at the expense of *epos*? Academics generally, though mostly loathe to admit, run in ruts and traffic in fads. Luckily, this is changing and producing exciting results.

Was it even called “cycle” in antiquity? Photius thought so, based on Proclus, and ∑ Gregory Nazianzus *Orat*. 45 on Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics* 77b3. Even there, when we invoke “Proclus” do we mean the second century grammarian or the fifth century Neoplatonist? *Communis opinio* favors the former, the latter is supportable. Scholars may well share Herakles’ dismay at the Lernean Hydra but they lack a scholarly flaming torch; nor is it likely they will ever have one. Dante’s *Qui si convien lasciare ogni sospett*o (*Inferno* 3.14) suits for Streitfragen both Lethean and Sisyphean. “Don’t go there. Nothing good happens when you go there.”

Go there we must. Homeric poems and the poems of the Epic Cycle have clear thematic overlaps; either as poems or summaries, the Epic Cycle influenced Greek and Roman authors in varying ways, often overstated (*infra*). Indeed, everywhere there are weak reads coming from weak philological reeds, all of Stygian growth habit. But in the going-there we find that a panoply of philological firepower has long been deployed. It smacks of “a game played on a high intellectual level with the ability to seduce the avid away from the real world into the realm of gambits and endgames” or, differently put, “there isn’t much to know and you can’t be wrong.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Small wonder, then, that the Epic Cycle has long largely lured scholars of the “best scholar has the most footnotes” ilk, those whose preferred publication format might be a book which consists of nothing but footnotes.[[6]](#footnote-6) Unfortunately despite philological value, there lurks a self-referential view of the Epic Cycle as mere minutiae. Absent new papyrus evidence, the ancients’ confusion remains. Definitely not the Hellenic case of “Romans confused; scholar knows best.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

In recent decades, scholarship on the Epic Cycle has tripled: at least a boomlet, perhaps a boom, in Epic Cycle studies. Some have produced valuable editions and wrung even more from the wretched and wrenched text and evidence, but more importantly others have gone beyond Einzelerklärungen to consider larger issues in philologically legitimate ways.[[8]](#footnote-8) Thus there exist, and always should exist, two salient and complementary dimensions to study of the Epic Cycle. And these are the two dimensions which encompass the volume under review.

There is a lengthy forty-page Introduction (1–40) which orients to those dimensions. Then thirty-two essays grouped in three parts, followed by bibliography, index of principal passages, and a generously full *index nominum et rerum*. Part One, “Approaches to the Epic Cycle” treats, e.g. orality, formation (West’s contribution), language and meter and narrative technique. Part Two, “Epics” examines the eleven agreed upon poems of the Epic Cycle. Part Three, “The Fortune of the Epic Cycle in the Ancient World” covers Nachleben, from Stesichorus and Ibycus to late developments such as the *Cynegetica* and Nonnus.

One should not expect unity of outlook in so diverse a collection. Some of the essays hew to their titles without concern for larger issues. Understandable to a degree, but those larger issues inevitably refract back on the precise value of the Einzelerklärungen. Three essays stand out for balanced discussion of both kinds of issues: Jonathan Burgess’ “Coming adrift: The limits of reconstruction of the cyclic poems” (43–58) displays a measured skepticism about some of the more extravagant claims made for and about the Epic Cycle. Gregory Nagy’s “Oral traditions, written texts, and questions of authorship” (59–77) usefully takes the orality issues from the Homeric poems and expands the discussion to the Epic Cycle. Finally, John Miles Foley and Justin Arft in “The Epic Cycle and Oral Tradition” (78–95) expand orality issues via consideration of contemporary oral poetry traditions.

The essays of Part Two, on the individual poems, are uniformly valuable, uniformly intense and uniformly useful to all who need orientation to the poems’ (such as they are) specific issues. As for the Nachleben essays of Part Three, my thoughts occasionally turned to Timon of Philus’ coarse jest about the scholars of the Library at Alexandria (*ap*. Athenaeus 1.22d) “in teeming Egypt they fatten up many bookish pedants, who quarrel endlessly in the Muses’ birdcage.” Many of the assertions are, to put it mildly, a stretch.

*Pars pro toto*, I focus on one article symptomatic of my complaints; but the same could be said for all. Ursula Gaertner in “Virgil [*sic*] and the epic cycle” (543–64) frankly admits (559–60) that none of her correlations can be proved. *Cui bono*? Most will accept West’s demonstration that knowledge of the epic seems “really to fade out” by the start of the third century ad.[[9]](#footnote-9) Assuming that the epic cycle still existed “complete” in Vergil’s time does not prove that he had access to it, or even read it.

The oft-bruited claim that because Vergil knows things not apparent in Proclus’ summary means the poet had read the Epic Cycle will not do. He might have gotten the information from others who had, either *viva voce* or in writing.[[10]](#footnote-10) In this latter instance, there can be no doubt that there existed paradoxographers and mythographers whose names we do not even know; recall that we possess only one to two and one-half percent of all written texts from antiquity.[[11]](#footnote-11) Again, Gianpiero Rosati on Ovid (565–77) concludes (577) “…we have confirmation of the profound affinity linking Ovid’s poem to an epic that not only offered an extremely rich mythical reservoir of Trojan stories, but whose world-view was also open, digressive and polyphonic like the *Metamorphoses*’.”

Here be problems. First, Ovid had an enormous number of Hellenistic sources for “monsters, miracles and metamorphoses”; in ancient categories, *thaumata*/*mira* and *terata*/*monstra*.[[12]](#footnote-12) Second, Ovid possesses remarkable unity of outlook and theme throughout his works; to extract the *Metamorphoses* on the basis of meter while neglecting, e.g. the *Fasti*, is otiose.[[13]](#footnote-13) David Elmer on the ancient novel (596–603) qualifies the authors’ engagement with the Epic Cycle as “sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly” (598) and posits a connection between Callirhoe’s frustrated suitors and the *Odyssey*. But one does not need Homer to explain an action on the parts of frustrated suitors; such action has occurred ever since men first wooed women. It is not a significant coincidence if it could have arisen plausibly by chance, in this case an omnipresent human behavior.[[14]](#footnote-14)

There is, then, in a majority of studies of the Epic Cycle, and not just the ones here, both a disregard of the epistemology of coincidences and a lack of cognizance of elementary statistics. Classics is a discipline founded on empiricism and still retains an emphasis on it; hence rampant disregard of coincidences sits ill. Thus when one finds something striking and epic in an extant author but not in Homer, need one posit the Epic Cycle? Definitely not. As for metrical and style observations, one hundred or so lines do not constitute a valid statistical base. If the odds are high of any one author specifically making the connection, the odds are far, far lower of one author out of the many writing will do so. It is one thing to generalize about meter in the Homeric poems with large corpus of lines. And it is the same when we note that in Catullus 64, Hermann’s bridge is observed, part of its neoteric epyllion heritage; here 410 lines constitute sufficient data points. But when Bernabé 153 notes a violation of Hermann’s Bridge in a papyrus possibly from the *Ilium Parvum*, there are no statistically significant implications at all for meter in either the work or the entire epic cycle.[[15]](#footnote-15)

There are some issues of presentation, by no means unique to this volume. For example, the near exclusive use of references by standard collections of the fragments without giving the actual ancient sources erects a serious barrier for the non-specialist reader who may well not have ready access to the collections.

Despite my complaints *supra passim*, study of early epic has come a long way since Kirchhoff’s “Flickstück” (“patchwork”) or Wilamowitz’s “ein gering begabter Flickpoet” (“an extremely poor patchwork-poet”) so characterized the *Odyssey*.[[16]](#footnote-16) The current volume betokens the change. No longer analysts or unitarians write as if their opposite numbers are ninnies; rather, each approaches a common goal via complementary means. Perhaps best put by a leading analyst who opened this review, Martin West: “Analysis, unitarianism, oralism, neoanalysis have all had their parts to play in bringing us this far, and still have their parts to play. They all have their limitations, but none of them has proved unprofitable.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

In this connection, consider everyone’s favorite crank, Thersites (*Il*.2.211–78). There are various trajectories involved. Is he an elite warrior or common soldier?[[18]](#footnote-18) Initially, Homeric language supports both views, likewise *Aethiopis* (Procl. *Chrest*. 1, 111 West (2003) = Bernabé 67‑68) describing Achilles slaying Thersites as punishment for unsuave japes about the former’s eroticism for the dead Penthesileia.[[19]](#footnote-19) Then there is Pherecydes’ contrasting Thersites, kinsman to Diomedes, bold participant in the Calydonian Boar-hunt together with other elite warriors, in consequence acquiring his physical disabilities (cf. Nestor’s expedition:  *Il*. 1.245-84). What does this mean? More trajectories provide direction. Thersites’ name (“bold, daring”) fits him both in Homer and Pherecydes.[[20]](#footnote-20) Homeric Thersites has a dearth of formulae with the added tang of several rare words and usages: αἴσχιστος , φολκὸς , φοξὸς (216–219).

All of this separates him from traditional epic language for warriors but makes him akin to the nasty Irus (*Od*. 18.1–31). His physical condition in Homer betokens physiognomic prejudices which have a long Nachleben in Greek literature (Plato *Rep*. 6.495c-6a); in contrast, Pherecydes presents his physical condition as an unfortunate consequence of an heroic hunt (fr. 123 Fowler = ∑ *Il*. 2.212b). Then there is chronology. With Homer’s mid eighth-century *floruit*, Thersites’ temper and disabilities mirror nascent social discontents arising as the traditional warrior elite viewed with alarm the nascent hoplite line together with the attendant narrowing of gap between elite and commoners so omnipresent in the *Odyssey*. And, of course, not so many years later the transformation was complete, witness Archilochus (60D = 114 West) and the importance of armies-for-hire in the various Dorian tyrannies, a view which reaches critical mass in later decades and ultimately fell to the new warrior definition. Homer and Pherecydes, then, could have a common source for Thersites.[[21]](#footnote-21) It is totally plausible, then, to have a bold man on Pherecydes’ boar-hunt be bold in epic speech.[[22]](#footnote-22) Consequently, in a world of oral traditions distinctly not global, quite literally, anything goes.

If you think you need this volume (you know who you are) you do; it constitutes a shining example of how good an edited collection of essays can be. Put differently, even at its high price, it is a bargain. Those jaundiced by the seemingly inexhaustible and unnecessary cacophony of handbooks, companions and edited volumes will find their faith in the genre restored. Interested bystanders would be well served by Malcolm Davies, *The Greek Epic Cycle* (1989) but realize that much has happened in Epic Cycle studies since then.[[23]](#footnote-23) Urgently needed: a smaller edited volume to bridge the gap between Davies and the present volume. But be prepared to work very hard in a Vergilian *descensus*, *difficilis* rather than *facilis*. That *labor improbus* will win new friends for studies of the Epic Cycle and what those studies can accomplish.

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1. Martin West, the scholar, needs no additional eulogy. He was my tutor for Greek literature in the Oxford Greats (*Literae Humaniores)* curriculum, later a valued colleague, friend and munificent host on my research trips to Oxford. I pay homage to Martin West the person notable for his puckish sense of humor as I inflict a Latin epitaph on him. My thanks to Joel Christensen for valuable assistance *passim*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. An even more miserable example: *Oedipodea* and *Epigonoi* combined offer four lines. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Discussion of authorship is not news; Wilamowitz, among others, raised the issue long ago: “nennung bestimmter verfasser ist eine ganz seltene ausnahme”. *Homerische Untersuchungen* (1884) 346 n. 28; likewise Welcker, see my “Classical Scholarship against Its History,” *AJP* 110 (1989) at 653–654. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There is, for example, a Trojan Cycle and a Theban Cycle and a “Universal” Cycle, on which see West in the reviewed volume “The Formation of the Epic Cycle,” 96–107 at 101–104 with his Loeb *Greek Epic Fragments* (2003) 3-13; “‘Eumelos’: A Corinthian Epic Cycle?” *JHS* 122 (2002) 109–33; Cf. “Introduction” to the current volume, 5-6 citing *IG* 14.1292, on which see McLeod, *TAPA* 115 (1985) 153–65. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. M. McDonnell, *CP* 92 (1997) 202 on early Rome and Livy; George Cawkwell, *in* *verb*. on archaic Greek history. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gottlieb Wilhelm Rabener, *Hinkmars von Repkow Noten ohne Text* (1743); more recently a novel, Mark Dunn, *Ibid*. (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mary Beard, “Re-reading (Vestal) Virginity,” in Richard Hawley & Barbara Levick, eds., *Women in antiquity. New assessments* (1995) 166–177 at 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See *Philologia Antiqua* 7 (2014) *Studies on the Greek Epic Cycle Cycle* (continued in 8 (2015)) with valuable introduction by G. Scafoglio 11–13; Elton T. E. Barker, Joel P. Christensen, “Odysseus's Nostos and the *Odyssey*'s Nostoi: Rivalry within the Epic Cycle” 85–110; Issue 6, *Reflecting on the Epic Cycle* of Classics@ from the Center for Hellenic Studies: http://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/3232 accessed 1 June 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *The Epic Cycle* (Oxford, 2013) 47-51 at 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Gaertner is excellent on these points: 543-50. Esp. 546 n. 18; cf. West (previous note) 48: “He [sc. Vergil] could not have managed with the epitomes alone.” Apollodorus knows more than Proclus, and may well have had access to the entire cycle; West *loc*. *cit*. and 13-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Roger Bagnall, “Alexandria: Library of Dreams,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 146 (2002) 348-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Abstracted from a sentence in Griffin, next note, *loc*. *cit*.; an example of Hellenistic sources, Adrian Hollis on Ov. *Met*. 8 (1970) 66-9 on the Calydonian boar-hunt. See the detailed overview of Jessica Priestly, *Herodotus and Hellenistic Culture* (2014) 51–108. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Thus my “Rethinking Augustan Poetry,” *Latomus* (1983) 780–818. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ponder James Thurber’s “The Luck of Jad Peters,” *New Yorker* December 8, (1934) 22–25; often anthologized; a hilarious and accurate conceptual liquidation of significant coincidences. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 32.11 in Bernabé’s edition. Curiously, he does not mention the further instance of Bridge violation at 32.16. In fairness, 138 n. 50 in the current volume freely acknowledges the small number of lines. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Die homerische Od*yssee (1859) x, *Homerische Untersuchungen* (1884) 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. “The Homeric Question Today,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 115 (2011) 383–393 at 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. G.S. Kirk (1985) *ad loc*., A.G. Geddes, “Who’s Who in ‘Homeric’ Society?,” *CQ* (1981) 17–36 at 21–23, 31, 34; Geoffrey de Ste. Croix, *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (1981) 279, 412–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. More unsuave is Thersites’ necrophilia accusation: Tzetzes ∑ Lycophr. 999; cf. Eustathius *Il*. 2.220=208.1–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. P. Chantraine, “A propos de Thersite,” *AC* (1963) 18–27. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Tzetzes says as much at *Chiliades* 7.52 (7.878-89). Both here and on necrophilia (*supra* n. 21) “antiquarian speculation” would be wrong; consider, e.g. Pilumnus, minor Roman god in Varro *ap*. Aug. *Civ*. 6.9. Long so derided, until an altar dedication at Veii appeared: Mario Torelli, *Tota Italia* (1999) 27–29. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. A parallel analysis would be the two versions of Helen’s presence or absence in Troy (Homer, Stesichorus); see Leonard Woodbury, “Helen and the Palinode,” *Phoenix* (1967) 157–176. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. While this review was in press, Malcolm Davies’ *The Aethiopis: Neo-Neoanalysis Reanalyzed* (2016) appeared. It teems with valuable insights and excites, 50–58 discuss Thersites. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)