

Chloe Wheatley. *Epic, Epitome, and the Early Modern Historical Imagination.*

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Chloe Wheatley focuses on a hitherto slighted form much utilized by early modern historians, biblical commentators, and epic writers from Spenser through Milton. This rich but widely neglected subject matter provides Wheatley ample room for original scholarship useful to a wide range of early modern scholars specializing in history and epic. She largely limits her survey to English authors but includes *The Divine Weekes* of the French Protestant Guillaume du Bartas, who, like his many English translators and imitators, used the epitome form to condense, gloss, and generally map much longer works. Even in dealing with the originally far briefer creation history recorded in Genesis, Du Bartas typically interwove it not just with overarching biblical patterns and episodes, but also with current speculations about the divine design of the world. These speculations cause Wheatley to pay some attention to the evolution of empirical thought, but mainly as a backdrop to more literary-historical developments preceding the larger changes undertaken by post-Restoration culture. Her book concludes with Milton's complication of the theory and practice of epitome in *Paradise Lost* but not in *Paradise Regained*, a work perhaps even more thoroughly invested in the art of epitome; however, this loss is more than compensated for by Wheatley's skillful examination of the differences between Milton's republican perspective on biblical history and that of his rival Royalist poet, Abraham Cowley. Intriguingly, she finds far more similarities than differences in their practice, even suggesting that Milton significantly gained from Cowley's skillful epitomization and contextualization of the multiple accounts of David's life contained in the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. Despite the incomplete state of Cowley's *Davideis*, she finds much poetic and historical value in his too-often-underrated work.

Other strengths include Wheatley's treatment of both positive and negative appropriations of epitome. Here her discussion ranges from outspoken critics of the form such as Bacon and Milton — who nevertheless used it to their advantage — to outright apologists. Her correction of by-now traditional dismissals of historical epitomes as mere digressions or narrative lapses is equally welcome, her prime instance in this case being the British and Elfin chronicles summarized in book 2 of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. This material frames a larger overview of how epitomes formed and informed readerly habits of learning, study, and critical engagement. Biblical study was naturally regarded as the most central and important of these habits, which were thought to be well-served by multiple guides and supplements to scripture; yet here as in secular and royal history, epitome also introduced readers to competing interpretations. This competition culminates in civil war histories attempting to gain the approval of the acutely "Judging Mind" (32) of their various audiences. On the republican side of the controversy, polemicists such as John Hall, Milton's Interregnum colleague, notably attempted to normalize the progression away from monarchy by placing it in a longer historical perspective. This section might have been fruitfully expanded to include more wide-ranging polemics on both sides, but Wheatley's approach is to sketch the many roles of epitome rather than to treat them exhaustively; this, appropriately, makes her study an epitome of epitomes.

Her chapter on John Stow's contributions to civil history is particularly informative, showing how Stow turned a relatively "straightforward topos of humility" into "a conception of the epitome as a work to be valued for its capacity to be qualitatively great" despite its material limitations (42). Stow's other major accomplishment was to bracket monarchical reigns alongside the efforts of London bailiffs, mayors, and sheriffs to promote and increase charitable contributions to the civic life of London. In the process, Stow developed a continuous, universal dating system where "the basic components of reality came to be treated as a series of events . . . arranged as part of a single time line" (46). Prophetic of much later histories, this system combined linear simplicity with a capacity for complex annotations and compilations of "novelties," a method that her final chapter on Cowley and Milton shows both turning into full-scale "back-looping" modes of historical narration. Wholly surpassing the more simplistic aims and purposes of Du Bartas, his translators, abridgers, and fellow contributors to the art of epitome, these far greater authors point to the future of the form.

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