

Tobias Gregory. *From Many Gods to One: Divine Action in Renaissance Epic*.

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006. xii + 248 pp. index. bibl. \$30. ISBN: 0-226-30755-7.

One of the basic ways the classical epic poem enlarges its scope and achieves its grander scale is by representing divine as well as human action, and often commingling them. In both of Homer's poems and in the *Aeneid*, readers recognized that the presence of the Olympian gods and their recurring intervention was a defining feature of the genre. Gregory's book investigates the challenge that Renaissance epic poets faced when they could no longer depend on the polytheistic system available to the ancient poets but had to represent divine action that conformed to the Christian beliefs of their time.

In his introduction, Gregory presents a perceptive account of the narrative advantages a polytheistic supernatural structure offered the ancient epic poets. To begin with, the community of Olympians provides a flexible narrative mechanism for generating, extending, and eventually resolving epic conflict. Also, because of their anthropomorphic nature the motives of these divinities are perspicuous. "Juno's motives," Gregory writes, "may be self-interested, amoral, even spiteful, but they are not mysterious. An analogous detailed account of divine motivation is less easily furnished when the god in question is the Christian God omnipotent" (7). That the Olympian gods were not infinite beings and could move from one spatial location to another meant that divine absence was possible in pagan epic,

and such temporary absence allowed for events to occur contrary to a god's wishes. In a universe governed by an infinite all-knowing God, anything that happens must be presumed to happen with his oversight, which can make events like the temporary successes of the adversarial side more difficult to explain. More generally, the question of divine consent for mortal suffering, which looms particularly large in epic, becomes a much thornier problem for the Christian epic poet than for Homer or Virgil. Furthermore, "[D]ivine partisanship became endowed with an intrinsic moral significance not present in a polytheistic context. It is one thing to represent two sides as favored respectively by Venus and Juno; it is another to show two sides favored respectively by God and Satan" (12).

Gregory's intelligent distinctions make the reader look forward to his analysis of how Renaissance poets handled the challenge of adapting the epic when they could not rely on ancient anthropomorphic polytheism but sought, nonetheless, to recuperate the Homeric-Virgilian paradigm of the genre. The difficulty, however, that confronts Gregory is that, leaving aside Trissino's *Italia liberata dai goti* (1548), until Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581) there was no successful modern heroic poem in that mold. Gregory begins with a brief discussion of Petrarch's *Africa*, a longer analysis of Vida's *Christiad*, followed by a chapter on Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*. He then considers the *Gerusalemme liberata*, and ends with a chapter on Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Despite Vida's recurring imitations of Virgilian passages, his poem about the passion of Christ doesn't lend itself well to the problems that Gregory adumbrates in his introduction. The challenge in making Christ into an epic hero is different from the challenge of depicting divine action in a cosmic order governed by a single all-knowing benevolent deity. Similarly, the *Orlando furioso* is a chivalric romance. While it occasionally participates in the epic mode, the poem has little resemblance to the Homeric-Virgilian model. Gregory is perceptive about Ariosto's subtle skepticism regarding divine benevolence, but the fact that God only makes a single appearance in the poem doesn't allow for much discussion of how Ariosto handled the problem of divine action.

It is really not till chapter 4, when the author considers Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, that the difficulties outlined in the introduction become much more pertinent. That's because the *Liberata*, unlike the prior postclassical poems examined by Gregory, is more discernibly in the Homeric-Virgilian tradition. Gregory also shows that Tasso was much more conscious of the tensions between classical epic narrative and Christian theology.

The delays in the taking of Jerusalem, during which much of the action of the *Liberata* takes place, are brought about by the powers of disturbance that God concedes to Satan and his agents. Tasso adopts this compositional tactic from classical epic, but he does it without putting into question God's omnipotence. Gregory is right to claim that the motives for God's concession to Satan are more mysterious than the indulgence that, for example, Jupiter in the *Aeneid* grants Juno in impeding the Trojans. Still, God's motives are not as inscrutable as Gregory proposes. God's design becomes more intelligible when we understand that some of the Christian warriors have to rearm themselves morally and spiritually. This is

particularly true of Rinaldo, and Gregory should have given more attention to how Rinaldo's defection, truancy, and spiritual reform, all part of God's plan, play a vital role in Tasso's overall design. In general, one wishes that the author had considered more extensively how the changes that Renaissance poets had to make in the representation of divine conduct affected the characterization and conduct of the human agents in their poems.

The limits of space don't allow me to do justice to some of Gregory's specific arguments. His best discussions are comparative ones: for example, his discussion of Milton's innovations in his representation of Satan and his fellow devils compared to treatments of devilish agency in previous Renaissance poems. In fact, the author's discussion of how different poets like Vida, Tasso, and Milton represented devils and the enabling fictions of hell is a particularly valuable aspect of his book, and this recurring topic helps to link some of the chapters that otherwise threaten to be disparate.

In sum, this lively book is a stimulating and much-needed study of the difficulties Renaissance epic poets faced, and of some of the solutions they found, when they had to replace the Olympian deities of classical heroic poetry with a Christian God that is unique, infinite, all-powerful, and good. By making us rethink how these poets could still generate dramatic tension within their epic plots and disguise the literary disadvantages of having to deal with an omnipotent God, Gregory has reanimated the comparative study of the epic tradition, and reaffirmed its value.

DANIEL JAVITCH  
New York University