

HERBERT F. TUCKER, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse, 1790-1910*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp. x + 737. \$60.

Let's run the numbers on this one: Herbert Tucker's *Epic* is 737 pages long, a good two inches thick, and nearly three pounds by my kitchen scale. It grants few poems more than seven or eight pages of its attention; most get rather less than half that. The list of poems discussed requires twenty-five pages all to itself. Here's a book, then, that will make its main argument just by the space it takes up on your shelf. When you first reach for it in the library, when you first flex your fingers wide to grapple its fat spine, when its heft first hits your palm, you will have already absorbed its polemic, which is that, contrary to what some Miltonist once told you, there *were* epics in the nineteenth century, swarms of them, such that no pamphlet will suffice to describe them. All scholarship is revisionist, of course; no scholar thinks of himself as comfortably reaffirming what everyone already knows. But this is the sort of book for which that word sometimes seems reserved, the kind of book that wants to undo one of our precious modernity narratives, to show us that modernity never arrived or at least missed the early bus—that there were, say, no liberals in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England or that the European aristocracy wasn't really displaced until World War I. You can think of Tucker as making a properly literary version of those arguments: it turns out that the epic hung around at least as long as those reprieved aristocrats, and this book will tell the history of its afterlife, will chart the retrenchments, concessions, and self-reinventions that were necessary to win that stay. Alternately, you can think of Tucker as engaged in the kind of retrieval project that has been the mainstay of literary history over the last forty years, though in a transposed key. Where Tucker's predecessors have set out to salvage a literature-from-below—a pop and pulp literature; or a middlebrow women's literature—he has brought into view something entirely unexpected: a tradition unmistakably elite and yet routinely scorned, a haplessly highbrow literature, powerless to command our imaginations. Sometimes, it turns out, the condescension of posterity falls on the overeducated. Once you've raked out the street's gutters, someone is still going to have to sort the attic.

So 737 pages. I think I'm meant to call this book "epic," but I'm not going to, though it is great and grand and will be long in the replacing. I plan on consulting it often. Tucker seems to have read every long poem published by a British writer in the nineteenth century,

from the young Robert Southey to the old Thomas Hardy, and has something of consequence to say about nearly every one of them. His book effortlessly vindicates the category of “the long nineteenth century,” dividing the period into five- and ten-year cross-sections, eleven of them, which then register at least as many shifting epic subgenres and poetic fashion bubbles, alongside which the umbrella distinction between “Romantic” and “Victorian” seems unmanageably crude, a mere cleaving. The book’s yield is thus a working map of a literary landscape most of us know nothing about, an oversized guide to Napoleonic epics and Oriental epics and apocalyptic epics and imperial epics and autobiographical epics and Crusader epics, plus an onrush of Arthurs and nearly as many Alfreds. And like any good plunge into the archives, Tucker’s has retrieved for our consideration some specimens of passing strangeness. Which of us knew that there was a nineteenth-century epic, written by an Irish teenager, about an exiled Australian native, an indigenous Odysseus who roams the earth, sermonizes against war, and predicts space travel?—that would be Kinahan Cornwallis’s *Yarra Yarra; or, The Wandering Aborigine*, published in 1858. Or who knew there was an all but openly queer riff on the Arthur legend, about Galahad and a young knight, a slash epic, as it were?—that’s John Payne’s *Romaunt of Sir Floris*, of 1870. In such company, even some of the century’s well-known and semi-canonical poems recover their full portion of oddness. Some of us have never believed that there ever really was a poem in which the medieval Welsh settled the Americas.

So: An exceedingly useful book, but not itself an epic; not an epic because it possesses none of the features one otherwise expects from the form, as also, in a certain mood, from good history writing: narrative propulsion, prophetic explanatory schemes, close attention to conflict or contrariety. I want to be clear: Tucker’s writing has other virtues. He excels at the discrete reading of the individual poem, and the book is best thought of as a seven-hundred-page string of these, though even here he specializes in the kind of ingenious interpretative turns that work best on readers who have just read the poems, which is a peculiar way to approach poems that no one has ever read. Offhand insights abound, however, and they are couched in an unusually playful prose, which would be the reader’s boon, free-and-clear, if archness didn’t sometimes creep in and obscurity hard upon it. Still, you can count on Tucker to have come up with a keen reading of nearly any long nineteenth-century poem that interests you, and you can count on its being quotable. But he’s not telling a story about the nineteenth-century epic; and he’s not much going to

explain why those epics matter; and his epics don't fight, either singly or in ranks, on grounds either Gramscian or Homeric. His usual link between poems is: *Here's another poem. . .* The epic is his theme, but Tucker has written a chronicle.

Readers who, upon tackling a prodigious book about epics, think it clever to call that book "epic" are mistaking length for epic-ness, or at least making it the sole epic criterion. The problem in this particular case is that Tucker encourages the error. There is one over-riding difficulty with his account, and it goes back to the book's title and central term. Much is unclear in the history of the epic, not least of which is the history of the word itself. When exactly does "epic" become the English language's preferred term for long narrative poems? How does it crowd out its rivals?—and with what consequences? Is it, in fact, suited for the job? We know that the seventeenth century mostly preferred the term "heroic poetry," a category that kept conjoined two modes—epic and romance—that critics would later decide to separate. Heroic readers refused to distinguish between Greek warriors and Welsh knights. The shift over to "epic," on either side of 1700, was to that extent a classicizing move, bracketing out the folkloric and the feudal, and thereby preserving the dignity of Greek and Roman poems in the century of romance's disrepute. Knowing even that much, the fair-minded student of the epic is faced with a difficult choice: either you respect the term's classicizing force, and so confine your efforts to poems plainly on a Mediterranean model, even if this means ditching, as romance deviations, all manner of later (Gothic and neo-chivalric) poems; or, alternately, you let everything in, but do so at the expense of a certain conceptual creep and anachronism.

Tucker is a capacious and liberal-minded scholar, which means he lets everything in. Conceptual creep it is, then. He usually defines epics as "long narrative poems on a national theme"; except a fair few of his poems aren't overtly political in that way, which gives us "long narrative poems"; except a handful of his poems aren't even narrative, which gives us "long poems." At this point, we are forced to call attention to just what it is this liberal-mindedness gives up—its price. You can sense Tucker paying his liberality tax when you see him describing as "epic" all manner of poems that, when first published, went by some other name; poems, that is, whose originators made a show of bypassing the word "epic" in favor of designators like "romance" or "romaunt" or "poem." That choice obviously matters, and it is never really clear why Tucker feels licensed to disregard it. The terms "epic" and "romance" are inevitably historicizing; they refer back to earlier social formations, if occasionally to imagined ones, and to the

dominant poetic modes that these supposedly produced. The term “epic” is usually keyed to the commercial, urban, and expansionist orders of the ancient Mediterranean, which means that “romance” gets to name the poetry of various post-antiquities, though it is often called upon to name the culture of various pre-antiquities, as well, of an archaic or tribal Mediterranean, at which point it becomes a near synonym of magic, myth, and legend. This is actually a distinction internal to the epics themselves, which is one of many reasons why we can’t just dispense with it: even in Homer, romance only survives in some of the eastern Mediterranean’s more distant backwaters, and it is Odysseus’s task to *escape* these enchanted and stateless islands so that he can return to city life, where political order, not tribal magic, prevails. *The Odyssey* incorporates myth mostly as a generic competitor to be superseded.

It is this stepping out of romance that the epic often models, which means that to compose an epic of nineteenth-century Britain is to describe a certain modernity, a trading Britain, at sea and with colonies, whereas to write a new British romance is, in most cases, to attempt a medievalizing correction. The terms are, of course, unstable; it is easy enough to nag away at the distinctions they establish. A poet can write a classicizing epic on a subject borrowed from medieval history; or—other way round now—a philologist can theorize a savage antiquity and so decide that Homer was more like a Celt or an Icelander than like a Roman. The medieval verse romances themselves generally posed as rewrites of the Roman epic, and this last observation will be the quickest way to dispatch the dichotomy of epic v. romance, by making the division collapse at its source. But to say that this distinction was wobbly is *not* to say that it wasn’t historically operative, which means that the particular manner of its teetering will still have to be traced. Tucker makes this all hard to see by sticking with the classicizing term as though it were neutral, and this in a period when romance variations were at the fore in long poetry.

The matter is probably worse than that. Tucker, by rechristening so much nineteenth-century poetry as “epic,” has built certain distortions into his argument at the ground level. I quickly want to name three of those distortions; it should be clear enough that they are linked.

- *Epics are poems of the nation.* That’s a common enough mistake, but it’s a mistake all the same. *The Iliad* recounts the sacking of a city overseas. Odysseus and his men scout out islands they might colonize later. *The Aeneid* describes the settling of a new Troy on foreign territory. Milton has a story to tell about the New World and its natives.

None of these poems are geographically bounded in a way that nationalism requires; the colonial horizon was built into the epic from the start.

- *There were a few imperialist epics in the late nineteenth century.* This is undoubtedly the most puzzling claim that Tucker makes. Tucker says that the nineteenth-century epic was emphatically a national form—that it was trying to imagine Britain, a British history, that it addressed itself mostly to goings-on at home; he then feels compelled to grant that the epic took an imperial turn in the late century, that British poets eventually started messing about in Asia and the Pacific. Having argued previously that the early Victorians were too busy worrying about domestic politics to be interested in the rest of the world, he seems to find this development surprising and altogether unfortunate. It's hard to know where to begin with that one. Not only does it make imperialism sound like a brief, late-Victorian detour from the basic trends of British history, but it also contravenes the plain evidence of his own pages, since by the time he makes this observation, Tucker has himself already discussed a galley's worth of imperial or transnational poems from the *early* century: Blake, Southey, Byron, a group of poems he dubs “the invasion epics.” It's almost as though, having mis-described as epic the period's sundry chivalric poems, he is startled to run now and then into the authentically martial article.

- *There were no eighteenth-century epics.* I would say we should cut Tucker some slack on this one, since nobody seems to realize that there were eighteenth-century epics. But then he knows better than anyone to look for epics in unexpected places, so it remains surprising to see him claim over and over again that the epic was “dormant” or “hibernating” in the eighteenth century, waiting to be kissed awake by the revolutionary poets of the 1790s. One longs to ask him about Richard Blackmore's *Creation* (1712) or *Alfred* (1723); about Richard Glover's *Leonidas* (1737); about William Wilkie's *Epigoniad* (1757). The Glover is even worth reading. More important, the epic also survives in the eighteenth century in truncated forms, mini-epics that borrow freely from the epic canon but never master the form's entire, unwieldy apparatus. There may not be many successful epics after Milton—full-bore, fancy-dress epics—but there are rolls and rolls of epic-ish poems, the clearest mark of which is eighteenth-century poetry's habitual sublimity. In fact, one sometimes gets the feeling that the epic after Milton, rather than vanishing, simply crossbred with every other form, generalizing itself across the literary sphere—and so vanished only by disappearing *into* every other poetic mode. It matters that Tucker has overlooked the eighteenth-century epic, because

he couldn't have made those other mistakes if he hadn't made this one first; anyone who knows eighteenth-century poetry would have to know that the epic strain is not, in the main, tied to the nation, but is rather transnational or imperial or wave-ruling. Alexander Pope sends England's oaks out floating into the Atlantic. James Thomson conducts a review of the far northern peoples: the Russians, the Mongols, the Lapps, the Skraelings or fairy-Inuits of the Arctic. One of the threads in Tucker's vast book is a two-stage story in which the nationalist epic undergoes a disturbing imperialist departure. But the matter is probably better conceived as a running battle in long poetry, across a longer span of time, between a classicizing strain whose basic impulses are imperial or planetary and a romance strain whose basic impulses are localizing and indigenizing.

It seems downright unfair to say that Tucker should have read *more*; his book is wholly generous, extravagantly so, to its readers as to its materials. But that's the problem with the epic: it will always demand the wider view.

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CAROLINE SUMPTER, *The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Pp. xii + 254. \$75.

Caroline Sumpter's *The Victorian Press and the Fairy Tale* is an important study of the relationship between the fairy tale and the popular press in Victorian Britain. As Sumpter notes in her introduction, the Victorians themselves pitted the press against the fairy tale, and they thus posited a false binary between (on the one hand) modern, urban-industrial, print forms of communication and (on the other hand) those they supposedly destroy—the ancient, rural-agrarian, oral ones. The main work performed by Sumpter's book is original and most valuable: to show how the Victorian press “brought literary fairy tales . . . to truly mass readerships” and to show how “the press also helped to reinvent the fairy tale,” such that “authors and readers used the fairy tale to grapple with a surprisingly wide range of controversies, from the impact of industrialism, socialism and evolution, to debates over race and nationalism, masculinity and women's rights” (p. 2).

Sumpter's first chapter aims to provide, as its subtitle states, “An Alternative History of the Fairy Tale,” a “history of reading” (p. 3)