

Medievalists and Classicists in Conversation: Epic

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There is not always much interaction between classicists and medievalists; each discipline tends to have its own conferences, departments, and domains of academia. However, the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literatures and the Corpus Christi College Centre for the Study of Greek and Roman Antiquity sought to bridge this divide between periods to engage scholars in animated discussion with the event *Medievalists and Classicists in Conversation: Epic*. On 10 March 2012, about twenty-five academics and beginning researchers congregated at Corpus Christi College in Oxford to exchange ideas and collaborate on the topic of epic literature.

Unlike most conferences, the one-day event's schedule was equally dedicated to paper presentations and to discussion, and the seminar room was organised with panelists and audience members all seated around one group of tables in order to facilitate this dialogue. The first session, "Heroism", began the day with medievalist Professor Philip Bennett (University of Edinburgh) as the opening speaker. His paper "Fierceness and Folly: Heroism in the Old French Epic" explored linguistic clues in the text of the *Chanson de Roland* and other Old French works which point to certain expectations of heroism and bravery. Dr. Francesca Galligan (Bodleian Library, University of Oxford) continued exploring heroism of French epic in "The Role of the Pagan Hero: Walter of Châtillon's Alexander". Châtillon—a Christian author writing a Virgilian epic on a classical figure—offers his Alexander hero as a negative example of heroism whose paganism limits him in the text of the *Alexandreis*. Finally, classicist Professor Philip Hardie (Trinity College, University of Cambridge) guided participants through the Latin of Petrarch's *Africa* in Book IV to illuminate the ways in the classical past is used to indicate heroic attributes in "Petrarch's Scipio and the Heroic Ideal". Following the short presentations, the participants engaged in animated discussion about the idea of heroism in all the texts, raising questions about the folly of the hero and the authors preserving the glory of the people about whom they write.

Following lunch, two more speakers presented their research in the session on "Supplements". Classicist Dr. Llewelyn Morgan (Braesnose College, University of Oxford) presented "Some Reflections on the Metres of the *Appendix Vergiliana*" and explored how the *Appendix* engages with other classical poets and poetry using satire and poetic form. The second and final speaker in this session, medievalist Tom Rutledge (University of East Anglia) presented parallels among texts and concerns of reception in "Reopening the *Aeneid*: The Thirteenth Books of Maphaeus Vegius and Gavin Douglas". The conversation afterward explored the reception of classical texts in a Christian context and the ways in

which later literary responses use themes of epic and to what extent these responses are seemingly encouraged by the classical authors.

The final session of the day, “Other Worlds” began with medievalist Dr. Manuele Gragnolati (Somerville College, University of Oxford) using characters’ successful and failed embraces to explore the relationship between the physical body and the soul in the *Aeneid* and the *Divine Commedia* in his paper, “Re-writing Virgil: Dante’s Embraces in the Afterlife”. Professor Stephen Harrison (Corpus Christi College, University of Oxford) of the classics department followed with his investigation of shades and their characteristics in the Underworld in the *Aeneid*, the *Metamorphoses*, *De Bello Civili*, and the *Punica* in “Underworlds and the Literary Past in Classical Latin Epic”. Finally, classicist Professor Andrew Laird (University of Warwick) presented “Between Worlds and Beside Oneself: *Ecstasis*, a Confessional Latin Epic by Fray Cristóbal Cabrera”, concluding the day’s panel of speakers with comparisons of *Ecstasis* with classical epic, the New World with the old, and fantasy with reality. The subsequent conversation revolved around authorial control in an established epic tradition and raised questions regarding the differentiation between author, compiler, and translator within and outside texts.

To wrap up, the final discussion of the day covered some of the trends which had emerged in the sessions. Sexuality, gender, continuity, established traditions, epic lineage, loss, and order all were brought up by the group, and the conversation confirmed the purpose of the conference: classicists and medievalists examine similar trends in literature, and the texts of the Middle Ages were very dependent on the classical past. All of the attendees share common interest in the progression of ancient literary topics and devices, and this mutual appreciation for epic tradition produced brilliant and stimulating conversation in a warm and rather informal environment. Students and established scholars alike were able to share their observations and ideas, making the day enjoyable and relaxing as well as academically engaging.