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EPIC AS GENRE

To call the _Iliad_ and _Odyssey_ 'epics' today can evoke two quite different sets of comparable works. The first grouping would put Homer at the head of a Western tradition of literary epic that runs from Apollonius of Rhodes through Vergil, on to the Renaissance and beyond.¹ The second, with equal justice, would view Homeric poetry as one instance of a type of traditional oral narrative to be found the world over, including cultures far outside the influence of the West.² For all their divergence, these two classes of 'epic' are not unrelated: the traditional oral art embodied in Homer was, after all, what Aristotle took as his exemplar when he laid the groundwork for the theory of Western epic in the _Poetics_. Between these two aspects of epic is yet a third way of defining the genre, in relation to the other forms of song that were named and recognized in Archaic Greece. This chapter will attempt a definition of Greek epic in such terms, asking how Homer's poems were presented to and accepted by contemporary audiences as instances of a particular kind of singing. Defining the genre in historical and culturally specific terms may offer an enriching perspective on the works, and may make clearer the connections between Homer the oral poet and Homer the father of classical epic.³

We do not know when the Greeks began to sing what we now call epics, for the _Iliad_ and _Odyssey_ derive from oral traditions reaching back to the Bronze Age (see Horrocks, this vol.; Bennet, this vol.). Because the Mycenaens did not write their songs down, we can only conjecture that they may have had songs about notable ancient kings which they distinguished from cult songs or praises of living

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¹ Valuable overviews of the classical epic tradition are Newman (1986); Hainsworth (1991).
³ A. Fowler (1982) argues powerfully for the continuing usefulness of genre criticism in these terms.
men. It is in any case generally agreed that the Greek 'Dark Age' was crucially important for developing the themes and the special style we see in the Homeric poems. By the end of the eighth century, the Ionian version of this ancient art had triumphed over all others as the way to sing the exploits of heroes and gods. This style, entailing formal features such as a characteristic meter and dialect as well as larger narrative patterns, amounted to a distinct genre in the sense that it could be expected of a certain class of singers when they performed certain themes, no matter where they came from or where they sang.

This genre appears to have had at first no particular name, though Greek critics eventually named it 'epic.' When the Western critical tradition was founded in Plato and Aristotle, Homeric poetry was popularly called ἐπιστοινίκα, meaning something like 'verse composition' or 'hexameter composition.' Although Aristotle objected to naming kinds of literature according to the meter used, he recognized that trial and error had established the dactylic hexameter as the only proper vehicle for heroic narratives, and he took account of meter in defining epic. His conception of ἐπιστοινίκα as a distinct genre, however, also includes historical, 'natural,' and thematic considerations: epic was the ancestor of tragedy, each genre satisfying a human impulse to imitate the actions of serious or elevated men; the shared themes and aim of epic and tragedy distinguished them from such genres as mock-epic and comedy, while they were distinct from each other in formal terms: epic was longer and greater in scope; it used a single meter throughout which was intoned without the full musical range employed in tragic odes or other songs such as the dithyramb; epic could not dispense with an element of narrative. For Aristotle, these features and the genres they marked were far from arbitrary conventions; on his view, literary genres were rooted in natural aptitudes and appetites but evolved historically as poets discovered the kinds of representations that most fully and efficiently achieved their particular aims. (Aristotle notoriously specified the aim of tragedy as a catharsis of pity and fear; some ancestral

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4 Cf. Webster (1953) 91–135.
6 Because the poet's essential task is not versification but imitation: Poetics 1447a28–47b28; cf. 1451a37–b5, 1451b27–29.
7 Poetics 1459b31–60a1. Cf. Aristotle's brief formulas for epic: 'the mimetic art in hexameters' (1449b21) or 'the art of narrative imitation in recited meter' (1459a17).