of the sixteenth century, and would tell us much about the transition from the feudal to the modern state. This raises a bigger question: must the modern state be examined through its new institutions, as Potter seems to imply, or through the message and the ideology that lay behind those institutions? The answer lies probably somewhere in the middle, as administrative history cannot be totally separated from political history.

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Attempts to construct a genealogy of the epic from Virgil to Milton have often led to ahistorical narratives sustained by formalistic readings of individual poems. While such readings are valuable for their rigorous textual analysis, their tendency to privilege the text over context elides the cultural matrix in which overtly political works are produced. On the other hand, efforts to uncover the politics of a given poem are frequently reduced to tracing topical allusions: this approach isolates the text from its literary history, from the intertextual web so crucial to the study of epic. Negotiating between these critical positions is David Quint’s Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton, which combines close attention to the formal qualities of the genre with an astute awareness of the politics informing individual texts. While Quint’s study of what he figures as the two rival traditions of epic poetry — the Virgilian epic of imperial conquest and the Lucanian epic of vanquished republican or antimonarchical forces — focuses predominantly on narrative form, his focus is sharpened by an examination of what Fredric Jameson calls the “ideology of form,” that is, the political meanings and contexts embedded in form.

Quint’s attention to the relation between politics and generic form is manifest in his insightful reading of the Aeneid, a text which “encodes” and “transmits” an imperial epic tradition. Drawing upon the two types of narrative offered by the Iliad and the Odyssey, that of epic and romance, Quint notes that the Aeneid establishes a generic hierarchy, for the first six books are modelled on the Odyssey, while the last half of the poem recuperates an Iliadic narrative which drives towards ideological closure. Throughout the first half of the poem the Trojans seemed doomed to repeat their role as losers, as is evident in their endless and aimless wandering. Drawing on Freud’s concept of the “repetition compulsion,” which states that the victim of an earlier trauma may either neurotically re-enact his victimization over and over again or replay the original situation in order to recreate and master it, Quint notes that Aeneas’ initial regressive wandering betrays the former obsessive repetition of the past. In the last half of the poem, however, Actium functions as a replay of Troy, a replay, moreover, which undoes the past and transforms Aeneas from a romance wanderer to an epic conqueror. Thus the Aeneid invests narrative form
with political meaning: a linear, teleological narrative functions as a powerful political
tool used to fashion national history and glorify imperial Rome.

Quint is a subtle reader not only of epic poetry, but also of the rhetoric of empire and
the representation of race and gender, as is evident in his detailed discussion of the
description of Aeneas’ shield. Quint notes that “on the centre of the shield of Aeneas is
an ideology of empire that informs the Aeneid and that Virgil bequeathed to subsequent
literary epic” (21). By identifying Antony with the East, Virgil distinguishes the forces
of Augustus from those of his rival. As the civil war between Romans is transformed into
a war of foreign conquest there arises a process of “othering” in which a distinct binary
opposition is established between a rational and masculine West and a disorganized,
monstrous, and feminized East. This use of binaries to construct the opposing forces of
the winners and losers is one which will be transmitted to Renaissance epic: we see it in
Camoens’ Os Lusiadas, and Tasso’s Jerusalemme liberata, where conquering nations
subdue the demonized Other of Asia, Africa, and the New World.

Indebted to a post-structuralist critical practice that has turned “literary studies
back toward history,” (14) Quint’s work is most illuminating when he situates the text
in its political environment. Yet he distances himself from recent theoretical ap-
proaches in his willingness to problematize Bakhtin’s monologic model of the epic.
The Aeneid, Quint points out, is not merely a propaganda piece, for “a considerable part
of its energy is devoted to criticizing and complicating what it holds up as the official
party line.” By refusing to view texts as products necessarily determined by a dominant
ideology Quint offers a productive alternative to the current (New Historicist)
proclivity to fetishize power. It is precisely the recognition of uncontained subversion
that affords examination of the countervailing epic of the losers.

Whereas the Aeneid is presented as the originary imperial epic, Lucan’s Pharsalia
inaugurates the counter-tradition of the anti-Aeneid as carried on by de Ercilla’s La
Araucana and d’Aubigné’s Les Tragiques. The Aeneid colonizes history in the name of
empire; the Pharsalia “desacralizes” history by marginalizing the Olympian Gods
and confining Fate and Fortune. In a world ruled by chance — Caesar, for example,
is cast as a helpless romance wanderer — closed narrative form is denied, as is the
permanence of imperial Rome. The resistance to closure, then, is itself a political
alternative, for Lucan valorizes “the very contingency and open-endedness that the
victor’s epic disparages: the defeated hope for a different future to the story that their
victors may think that they have ended once and for all.” Quint’s inclusion of the
losers’ epic is not only innovative, it also encourages new and fruitful readings of
subsequent epics in relation to the winner/loser dialectic.

What makes Quint’s genealogy successful is his refusal to posit a rigid binary
distinction between epic and romance. “The stories that I want to tell,” writes Quint,
“about the epic of winners and the epic of losers, and about epic and romance, are
intertwined.” Nowhere is this clearer than in his reading of Paradise Lost, which is
Virgilian at the level of God and Satan, and Lucanian at the level of the fallen Adam and
Eve. The mapping of Virgilian epic on to the divine machinery in Paradise Lost manifests
itself in the imperial realm of Heaven and in the casting of Satan as a romance wanderer. Whereas Tasso transforms the romance pattern of the wandering boat into epic by representing Fortune as a minister of Providence (therefore valorizing exploration voyages and colonial expansion), Milton figures Satan’s voyage to earth within a romance narrative, thus suggesting that discovery voyages are the work of the devil. The human plot, on the other hand, “reclaims and revalorizes the open-endedness and contingency of romance.” Once again Quint takes into account the “ideology of form,” noting that deferral and deviation permits a “suspended period of free choice to surface again after the Fall, to resist the notion that the Fall and its consequences are final and irreversible.” Thus, on the level of topical allusion, Adam and Eve’s embracing of historical contingency signifies a resistance to and undermining of the permanence of the Restoration.

While there is little in Quint’s book to criticize, it does seem odd that he says nothing about Spenser’s Faerie Queene, a poem which oscillates between epic and romance. Nonetheless, Epic and Empire is a major contribution to the study of epic. In its impressive scope, rich commentary and notes, and its theoretical sophistication this book offers new and exciting possibilities to students and scholars of the epic. Whether in the application or critique of Quint’s epic/romance taxonomy, future readers of the epic will be indebted to this book.

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After reading Harinder S. Marjara’s Contemplation of Created Things: Science in “Paradise Lost,” one is certain that Milton must have been extremely thoughtful concerning natural philosophy, not simply accepting the orthodoxies of a bygone day, not simply adopting or adapting the latest trendy beliefs whether well- or ill-founded, not going out of his way to shock or to avoid shocking, but striving to create a cosmos whose operations would seem credible, even plausible, to his contemporaries. Essentially what Marjara shows, and it is well worth the showing, is that contemporary theological, moral, and scientific thought simply did not deliver a vision of the universe acceptable to all and which Milton could just assume and let his readers assume. Consequently, he had to construct a vision of nature (including the extra-mundane phenomena of angels, devils, Heaven, Hell, Chaos) that made sense within the context of contemporary empirical data, harmonized with his own theological and moral beliefs, and was, into the bargain, poetically effective — a huge and complex undertaking of the intellect and the imagination in which Marjara convincingly shows Milton to have been largely successful.

Marjara sets himself two primary tasks: to help Milton studies catch up to recent developments in the history of science by placing Milton’s beliefs within the context