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Review of Kenneth Borris Allegory and Epic in English Renaissance Literature: Heroic Form in Sidney, Spenser, and Milton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

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Kenneth Borris

Allegory and Epic in English Renaissance Literature: Heroic form in Sidney, Spenser, and Milton

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 320p.

£40

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Renaissance allegory has been associated with the end of medievalism but Borris contends that the mode was substantially influenced by new access to classical texts which "changed and revitalized literary conceptions" about it (p.4). Other factors such as the Reformation, the Council of Trent, and the Counter-Reformation, "reinforced the contemporary topicality of utilitarian or morally instrumental approaches to literature, and thus of allegorism itself" (p.4). In the early modern period heroic poetry by Homer and Virgil was considered especially important and in sixteenth-century accounts of literary genres, epic and allegory were closely connected. Sidney's *Arcadias*, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* here receive fresh readings to confront previous critical interpretations which assumed that allegory became less important after 1600. Borris emphasises the allegorical nature of Sidney's writing and positions him as Spenser's immediate literary progenitor. He also contends that, contrary to recent critical opinion, Spenser did not abandon allegory in the later books of *The Faerie Queene* and shows that episodes dismissed as allegorically simple, such as the one featuring Arthur, Turpine, Enias and the Savage in Book 6, are complex: Enias evokes the classical hero Aeneas, the figure of Judas Iscariot, and even Jesus Christ. Spenser's presentation of Christian virtues anticipates Milton's *Paradise Lost* although Milton's epic (whose allegory is critically under-examined) does not celebrate the nation as Spenser's does. In the final three chapters of this book Borris relates the Christian motif of the doctrine of the mystical church to that of composite heroism from allegorical epic and explains that heroism in Milton's poem is Christ-centred. Sidney, Spenser, and Milton used allegory differently but shared an interest in the mode's capacity for psychological subtlety, and Borris's argument will interest students of the epic as well as those concerned with poetical devices.