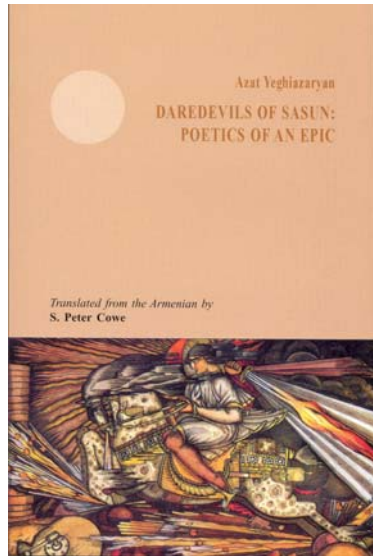


Daredevils of Sasun: Poetics of an Epic. By Azat Yeghiazaryan. Translated by S. Peter Cowe. Costa Mesa, CA: *Mazda Publishers*, 2008. 270 pp. Paper \$35.00.



Armenian epic and its outstanding representative *Daredevils of Sasun* do not enjoy much scholarly attention outside Armenian studies. The translation into a widely accessible language of this important study by a leading scholar from Armenia is therefore to be welcomed. Published in 1999, the original quickly established itself as an authoritative introduction to the study of the many aspects of the still immensely popular millennium-old epic. It places a variety of elements of Armenian epic in the wider context of, for example, European medieval epics, Russian *bylinas*, and the *Manas* epic and also provides a useful bibliography, which, like the text, is adapted for the English version.

The historic anchoring of *Daredevils of Sasun*, which was gestated between the eighth and twelfth century CE, lies in the period of Arab domination over Armenia. It relates the vicissitudes of four generations of the giant heroes of the House of Sasun, and yet, while some of its narrative is rooted in historical events shot through with much more ancient mythic layers, it also inhabits a timeless world that allows constant actualization.

The first of the four branches reaches back far beyond this period to Sanasar and Baghdasar, twins miraculously born after Tsovinar drank one and a half handfuls of water. They came to Armenia from Assyria and founded the house of Sasun. The last branch is devoted to Little Mher and is even more steeped in mythical material. Lion Mher—who is one representation of the Iranian deity Mihr or Mithra, his grandson Little Mher being another—is the hero of the second branch. He kills a lion that is causing famine in Sasun and thereby lays the basis for its prosperity in the third branch relating the exploits of Davit', whose name Sasunts'i Davit' often is shorthand for the whole epic. Little Mher is doomed to slay his father Davit' in single combat and because of his perceived limitless might is cursed to childlessness and deathlessness. He retires to a cave where he sits on his talking horse, armed with his lightning sword, until the end of the world.

The epic has been orally transmitted by a multitude of tradents in three main groups coinciding with geographical areas: those of Mokk', Mush, and Tarōn.

Yeghiazaryan adduces differences between these groups throughout his study to account for innovations and archaisms perceived in the epic. The introduction critically surveys the scholarship from the 1870s, when the epic was first transcribed, to the present time. Positing the primacy of the work as a product of art, Yeghiazaryan rejects the extremes of the historical school that sought to establish direct correspondences between epic narration, names, events, and Armenian historical reality. Similarly, its mythical dimensions have to be seen in the context of its character as a medieval epic, as they function in an indirect way only. Davit' in particular represents a turn away from the archaic. In a section on earlier Armenian folkloric traditions, Yeghiazaryan addresses the contested point of the existence of older epics based on the few extant fragments, which were built into a conjectured sequence of epics relating Armenian pre- and early history by Abeghyan, the paradigm-setting scholar of Armenian literature up to World War II. Yeghiazaryan achieves an elegant balance between showing respect for previous scholarship and advancing his own approach, which rejects several of the tenets of this scholarly tradition. He concludes the chapter by helpfully providing an overview of the epic's reception in modern Armenian literature.

The four themes treated in the introduction are taken up in relevant sections of each of the three chapters that form the central part of the work. The first chapter offers a many-sided approach to the phenomenon of the epic hero. Yeghiazaryan emphasizes how a hero's individuality is shaped by his position in society and how that individuality embodies its norms. Davit's immense strength is seen as representing that of his whole community combined. The author places epic in a comparative framework with modern literature and with ancient myths by comparing how heroes are portrayed in them; he usefully singles out areas where further research is needed, such as in the evolution of the epic hero, in order to elucidate the *Daredevils of Sasun*'s place between archaic epics and those of the Middle Ages. This way of presentation not only provides students with a sound introduction but also alerts them to opportunities for further engagement with the field—in particular to ways of better understanding the diachronic aspects of the epic and their synchronic occurrence. Yeghiazaryan further characterizes the hero in terms of the equivalence between inner convictions and external norms, a subject that enables him to reject a psychoanalytical interpretation of the Armenian epic's hero as impertinent to the genre and that reinforces the idea that *Daredevils of Sasun* is a sui generis art form. Yeghiazaryan highlights in particular the daredevils' moral attitude toward evil from the outside: they will kill but in defense only—with the exception of Little Mher, whose case is a particular one in many ways and to whom Yeghiazaryan devotes a large section in the chapter on the epic world.

The author points out a difference between the oral epic and the Christian literary tradition with its glorification of martyrdom. The Christian narrative stresses the discrete vertical relationship between martyr and God; in contrast,

the *Daredevils of Sasun* stresses the readiness of Sasun's heroes to lay down their lives for their community. This does not fully account for the Armenians' defense of their faith in the Battle of Avarayr in 451 CE against the Zoroastrian Sasanians. Here the Armenians followed the example of the Maccabees, approaching martyrdom as part of the Christian Armenian community's covenant with God, which served as an inspiration throughout the centuries. The two traditions concur to a considerable extent in ideology here. But differences remain, as the author shows: physical health is an expression of spiritual welfare in the epic, a concept alien to the ascetic ideal of mortification of the flesh in the Christian tradition, and the walnut rye and eglantine wheat that signifies a future terrestrial world of plenty in the epic is not the same as Christianity's kingdom of heaven. Other subjects covered in this chapter, including the antihero and humor in the epic, receive insightful treatment as well.

The chapter on the epic world opens with a brief retelling of the epic (129–30) and posits that while tradents and audience were aware of the overall story, it was not usually told in its entirety and not all of it is present in some of the versions. Yeghiazaryan discusses the merits and problems of a composite version derived from the variety and richness of the many versions. Bakhtin's definition of epic time as "absolute past" does not apply: tradents and peasants drew strength from Little Mher's expected return from confinement in Raven's Rock to free them from oppression. Yeghiazaryan's treatment of the theme of the hero's childhood yields further insight into the role of the flow of time in the epic and inspires acute observations on the absence of fixed epithets, elaborated in a penetrating section of the final chapter on epic narration.

Owing to its fixation in transcription we no longer witness the development of the epic through its traditional means of transmission, yet the conservative character of the art of transmission ensures that we have reliable witnesses of the epic's millenarian life at least in its latest stages. Setting off epic from fairy tale precisely because of its "truth," some tradents nevertheless distance themselves through humor from exploits they consider to be unlikely. The author considers simplicity as a hallmark of the epic's overall artistic ambience.

The conclusion presents the study's contribution as one link in a chain of interpretations that are validated by the fact that they grasp the Armenian epic's "natural context and time" and thus understand its specifics and the mirror it continues to hold up. This study places the Armenian epic tradition and its constituent elements in the mainstream of international scholarship. It is to be hoped that ample use will be made of the opportunity this offers, and that thus both the study of epic and of the Armenian contribution to the genre will receive further attention.

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