

The Hero as a Reflection of Culture

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Abstract: In works of literature, a hero is a man to be admired and emulated. For this reason, the hero always demonstrates the embodiment of the ideals of the creating culture. Historical events and social conditions of different cultures cause different attributes to become valued in leaders. These cultural values are reflected in both the actions of a hero and in the heroic motivations. This paper focuses on the heroes of the Iliad, the Aeneid, Beowulf, and The Song of Roland and examines how historical events and cultural circumstances shaped the portrayal of the heroes in these works.

Every culture has heroes. In works of literature, is an individual to be admired and emulated, and because of this he is the embodiment of the greatest virtues of the culture that created him. The ideals of every culture were shaped by the social conditions of the time and therefore different attributes became valued. To different degrees, the hero in a work is a result of not only the culture from which the hero comes, but also the culture of the author. Cultural values are reflected in both the actions of a hero and his motivations. As heroes, Achilles, Aeneas, Beowulf, and Roland reflect the values of the societies that created them.

One of the oldest works of ancient literature is Homer's Iliad. Homer's works are dated to between 900 and 750 B.C. (Krieger, Jantzen and Neill 106). Although the events of the Iliad take place during the Greek Bronze Age, the culture portrayed in Homer's works is that of Greek Dark Age (Redfield 99). The Dark Age was a result of the struggles that took place after the fall of the Mycenaean civilization (between 1200 and 1100 B.C.). The exact cause of the sudden decline of the Mycenaean civilization is unknown. Historians generally agree that it was a result of invasions, possibly from the Dorian Greeks (Krieger, Jantzen and Neill 106). The abrupt collapse of this civilization caused social instability, creating the necessity for defense. As James Redfield explains in his book Nature and Culture in the Iliad,

When the background condition of life is a condition of war - when men feel themselves free to steal from anyone with whom they are not acquainted and to plunder and exterminate any town against which they have a grievance - men must place great trust in those close to them. Thus, combat generates a tight-knit community. (99)

The times about which Homer wrote were filled with strife, generating the need for a strong, defensive community.

The culture resulting from such a society was one that relied heavily on the warrior class. In Dark Age Greece, the warrior class was the ruling class. Because of the extreme instability of the times, the culture viewed warriors as the only class fit to lead. In order to prove he was worthy of ruling, a leader had to continually demonstrate his ability as a warrior (Redfield 100-101). Thus, excellence on the battlefield was an essential part of a leader's right to rule his people. This concept of excellence in battle is best summed up by the Greek word "*arete*." In his book Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, Werner Jaeger explains that *arete* in Homeric culture was "the strength and skill of a warrior or athlete, and above all his heroic valor" and that the idea of *arete* included not only excellence on the battlefield but also excellence of the mind and speech (6-8). Jaeger then continues to argue that *arete* was the ideal the ancient Greeks strove for. In addition to *arete*, an integral part of the Homeric warrior culture was receiving honor from other warriors, especially for deeds in battle. Less honor was received for athletic abilities and giving advice. An indication of being honored was receiving gifts (Dunkle).

These warrior values pervade the Iliad. The best example of Greek warrior values is apparent in the character of Achilles. He is referred to by epithets such as "swift-footed" (1.121) and is described as "lion-hearted who breaks men in battle" (7.228), which both suggest his physical superiority, as does the description of his being a "godlike" (1.131). In addition, the goddess Hera states how afraid the Trojans are of Achilles (5.785-790). He is often referred to as being the best of all warriors, such when Patroclus calls him "far greatest of the Achaeans" (16.21) and Iris calls him "most terrifying of all men" (18.170). As for his experience in combat, as Achilles himself explains:

Such was I, as I lay through all the many nights unsleeping,
Such as I wore through the bloody days of the fighting,

Striving with warriors for the sake of these men's women.

But I say that I have stormed from my ships twelve cities

Of men, and by land eleven more. . . (9.325-9)

All these traits mark Achilles as a great warrior, and therefore worthy of honor from his peers.

Achilles' honor is diminished when Agamemnon takes away Briseis, Achilles' prize, awarded to him in recognition of his valor. As Achilles tells his mother Thetis, Agamemnon "has dishonored me, since he has taken away my prize and keeps it" (1.356). To protect his remaining honor, Achilles withdraws from the fighting. In reconciliation, Agamemnon offers Achilles numerous and costly gifts, including seven strongholds and one of his daughters as a bride (9.120-56). This suggests the high honor with which Agamemnon regards him. However, Achilles cannot accept these gifts. His acceptance would mean conceding Agamemnon's greater status (Redfield 105). In refusing the gifts, Achilles upholds the values of Homeric Greece.

In the year 27 B.C., Rome had just emerged from a violent civil war. From this chaotic past emerged Augustus, an able emperor whose reign marked the beginning of the 200 years of peace known as the Pax Romana. A prominent philosophy in Rome at this time was Stoicism. Stoicism was founded in the third century B.C. by a Greek philosopher named Zeno (Krieger, Jantzen and Neill 146, 151-155). The Stoic philosophy appealed to the Romans because its principles were the same as traditional Roman values. As Richard Hooker explains, "Rome at its beginning was primarily an agricultural and martial culture. As a result, the earliest Romans stressed simplicity, strength, and toughness, which are all requirements of both the agricultural and martial lifestyles." These values of strength and fortitude are the same values emphasized by Stoicism. Other tenants of Stoicism included "logos," the idea that every occurrence is part of a divine plan. For this reason, Stoics believed in the acceptance of destiny. Another important idea

in Rome was “pietas,” the devotion to duty, the gods, the family, and the state (Anderson 21). All these concepts were central to Roman thought at the time of Augustus.

These ideals are reflected in the character of Aeneas, a Trojan who appears briefly in the Iliad and is the mythical founder of the Roman race. His journey is recounted in Virgil’s Aeneid, written during the time of Augustus (Krieger, Jantzen and Neill 157). Throughout the epic, Aeneas shows the fortitude, devotion, and acceptance of fate that a virtuous Roman citizen should have. Aeneas’ mission is to find a home for the Trojans after the fall of Troy. Virgil describes Aeneas as,

A man apart, devoted to his mission -
To undergo so many perilous days
And enter on so many trials. (1.18-6)

In addition, when the Trojans first land in Libya, Aeneas’ strength of character allows him to motivate his men, even though he himself feels the burden of their difficult journey (1.270-86). In both these instances, Virgil is emphasizing Aeneas’ fortitude.

Throughout the epic, Aeneas demonstrates several kinds of devotion. Two kinds of devotion he displays early in the epic are devotion to his family and to his gods. In Book 2, Aeneas recounts his escape from Troy. As he leaves, he carries his father on his back, leads his son by the hand, and also takes with him the statues of his gods (2.931-9). This shows his commitment to the continuation of his family and his religion. Over the course of his journey, Aeneas faces many trials including the wrath of Juno, the underworld, and battles with the Latins. Yet despite all the difficulties facing him, Aeneas shows commitment to carrying on the duty he has been charged with.

Another important aspect of Aeneas' character is his acceptance of fate. An example of this occurs in Book 2. Aeneas is recounting to the Carthaginians his anger towards Helen of Troy. He explains he was prevented from killing her by Venus, who told him,

You must not hold the woman of Laconia,
That hated face, the cause of this, nor Paris,
The harsh will of the gods it is, the gods,
That overthrows the splendor of the place
And brings Troy from her height into the dust. (2.789-93)

After hearing this Aeneas does not fight against fate, but accepts it instead. A poignant example of Aeneas's acceptance of fate is evident in Book 4, when Aeneas must leave Dido, the Queen of Carthage and his lover. He must leave her because she impedes the fulfillment of his fated task: to found Rome. Aeneas tells Dido: "I sail for Italy not of my own free will" (4.499), and Virgil explains that Aeneas "took the course heaven gave him" (4.550). Aeneas suppresses his feelings for Dido and chooses to continue his journey because it is the will of fate. In his emotional strength, devotion, and acceptance of fate, Aeneas exemplifies the values of Rome and of Stoicism.

Towards the end of the 5th century B.C., Roman civilization collapsed and Germanic tribes supplanted Roman governments. These tribes had a warrior culture and no strong centralized government. This led to the development a society of warriors who owed loyalty only to their lord (Krieger, Jantzen, and Neill 201-203). A Germanic leader was expected to be a strong warrior and had to prove himself in battle. An important part of their culture was the relationship between "thanes" (warriors) and their "ring-giver" (lord). Thanes aided their ring-giver in battle and, in return for their loyalty, the ring-giver rewarded his thanes with gifts. Gift

giving was central to their society because it symbolized the commitment of a thane to his lord, and of the lord to his thanes. Because the Germanic culture was warrior based and was centered around a lord, strength and courage in battle, as well as loyalty were highly valued traits in a hero (Lawall 1174-1175).

These warrior values are evident in the early Medieval epic poem Beowulf. Beowulf is thought to have been written in the 9th century by a Christian monk. Although the poem was written in Anglo-Saxon, it recounts the story and culture of Beowulf, a Germanic hero who would have lived centuries before the writing of the poem (Lawall 1174). Beowulf represents first the ideal warrior and later the ideal king in Germanic society. As a warrior, Beowulf is praised for both his strength and bravery, which he demonstrates by recounting the swimming match with Brecca as well as by winning the battles with Grendel and Grendel's mother. During the battle with Grendel, the narrator describes Beowulf as "foremost and strongest in the days of this life" (789), and after Beowulf's victory over Grendel's mother, the narrator states "his courage was proven, his glory was secure"(1646). Another important quality in a thane was loyalty to his lord. Beowulf shows loyalty to his lord, Hygelac, when he returns with the treasures he has won. He tells Hygelac:

These, King Hygelac, I am happy to present
to you as gifts. It is still upon your grace
that all favor depends. I have few kinsmen
who are close, my king, except for your kind self. (ll.2148-51)

Beowulf is shown to be strong and courageous and demonstrates his continued loyalty to his lord by delivering to Hygelac the gifts he has won.

Not only is Beowulf a great warrior in his youth, he becomes an exemplary king later in life. Strength and bravery are still admired traits in a king, as is gift giving. This can be inferred from the description of Shield Sheafson and his son Beow, and later from the speech given to Beowulf by Hrothgar. At the beginning of Beowulf, the narrator states that Shield was a good king because he was a strong leader, and Beow was wise in giving gifts in order to secure the loyalty of warriors (20-4). After the battle with Grendel's mother, Hrothgar tells Beowulf an essential part of being a king is defense of the community (1770-2). As king, Beowulf shows his commitment to the safety of his community in personally attempting to fight the dragon that threatens his people (2399-402). Beowulf also demonstrates the other side of being a good king. As Wiglaf admonishes the other thanes for deserting Beowulf, he reminds them Beowulf was a generous giver of gifts, expecting in return the loyalty of his thanes (2634-40). Through the course of the epic, Beowulf evolves from a brave warrior to a strong king, displaying Germanic society's ideals of both.

In the Middle Ages, a political system known as feudalism developed in Europe. Similar to the relationship between a ring-giver and his thane, the feudal system centered around the oath of loyalty between a lord and his vassals. The lord gave his vassals land in return for their loyalty, which included services in times of war. During this period, there was also a very strong presence of the Christian Church in everyday life. Important to Christians at this time was the spread of Christianity. The combination of feudalism and the strong influence of Christianity brought about an emphasis on loyalty, not only to a vassal's lord but also to the Church (Nitze and Dargan 17-20).

The Song of Roland was written in French in the 12th century A.D. It is based on a battle that took place in 788 A.D. that involved the army of Charles (the future emperor Charlemagne).

As part of this conflict, a vassal of Charles named Hruodlandus was killed while fighting the Saracens. This story eventually became The Song of Roland (Nitze and Dargan 22). The hero of the poem is Roland, a warrior under Charlemagne. He shows the admired medieval attributes of valor in battle, loyalty to his lord, and belief in fighting for Christianity. In this work, the three concepts are intertwined. In several of Roland's speeches, he emphasizes these three qualities within just a few lines. For example, in his speech before the battle with the Saracens, he says,

We know our duty: to stand here for our King.

A man must bear some hardships for his lord,
stand everything, the great heat, the great cold,
lose the hide and hair on him for his good lord.

Now let each man make sure to strike hard here:

let them not sing a bad song about us!

Pagans are wrong and Christians are right! (1009-15)

Later, he gives the same message,

Barons, my lords, Charles left us in this place.

We know our duty: to die like good men for our King.

Fight to defend the holy Christian faith. (1127-9)

Roland demonstrates these three virtues that he advocates. His speeches reflect his devotion to his king. He displays his courage in facing the Saracen army despite overwhelming odds. As the narrator states in reference to Roland and another vassal, "they will not run, though they die for it, from battle"(1096). His devotion to Christianity is evident throughout the poem, but especially after his death. Saint Gabriel, Saint Michael, and an angel are sent to carry Roland's soul to Paradise (2391-7). Although Roland displays all the characteristics of the ideal vassal, his

decisions are still questioned by Oliver, another vassal of Charlemagne. Through Oliver, the author emphasized that loyalty must be tempered with prudence (Lawall 1249). Nevertheless, through Roland the author highlighted the values of Europe in the Middle Ages.

Each of these pieces of literature is a combination of the values of the society to which the hero belongs and also of the values of the society in which the author of the work lived. However, each work shows these two influences to differing degrees. In the case of the Iliad, because of the scarcity of historical records it is difficult to assess the relative influence of the Dark Age Greek culture about which Homer wrote versus the influence of the culture in which Homer lived. On the other hand, the attributes of Aeneas show the strong influence of Roman culture during the time of Virgil, and to a much lesser degree the influence of the culture in which Aeneas would have lived. Unlike the character of Aeneas, the traits Beowulf displays are a product of the Germanic culture, and not of the culture of the Christian monk who wrote it (although other aspects of the work do show considerable Christian influence). In the case of the Song of Roland, the culture of the hero and the culture of the author are very similar. Because of this, Roland's traits belong to both the 8th century (when Roland would have lived) and the 12th century (when the work was written). In different ways, the hero in each work is a result of the influence of the hero's culture and the author's culture.

Through the centuries, the idea of a hero has evolved. In Dark Age Greece, the qualities of a hero were very well-defined. He was a strong warrior, able to lead the people and excel on the battlefield. The ideals of the Romans provide a sharp contrast to those of the ancient Greeks. For the Romans, the ideal leader was one who accepted fate, showed fortitude, and would sacrifice his own happiness for the good of the empire. Similar to the ancient Greeks, the Germanic tribes valued physical strength and also the strengthening of the relationship between a

lord and his thanes. These values are clearly defined, and the hero that represents each culture is a model of these admired behaviors. However, by the time of the Middle Ages, heroes display more faults. As the Song of Roland demonstrates, its hero (although exemplifying the valued characteristics of loyalty, bravery, and belief in Christianity) is still quite fallible. Although Roland seems to be the perfect example of a vassal, he still acts foolishly in not calling for Charlemagne's aid. The story emphasizes that qualities such as loyalty and courage are important, but adherence to them does not guarantee success because they must also be tempered with wisdom. The concept of a hero changed over time from an infallible figure to become an individual who is has shortcomings.

Each time period in history brings with it challenges. It is these challenges that shape the values of each culture. In turn, these ideals shape their literature and subsequently their heroes. Achilles, Aeneas, Beowulf, and Roland are commanding figures because they are the embodiment of the ideal of their societies. As the author of Beowulf explains: "Behavior that's admired is the path to power among people everywhere" (24-5).

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