

# Sociological Norms and the Heroic Epic : A Comparative Note

ROGER W. ROULAND

It is generally assumed that aside from its artistic role, one of the primary functions of the epic poem is to justify the culture implicitly addressed in the epic, with *addressed* being a key word in understanding the breadth of this justificative function. In three heroic epics, *Gilgamesh*, *Beowulf*, and *The Odyssey*, the culture being justified includes the contemporary audience hearing the epic; and as such, this audience holds keys to understanding certain authorial motivations and underlying meanings. This relationship between audience and epic stems from the epic bard's relationship to a specific culture, from which the bard inherited his epic subject matter. As a result, the epic's subject matter represents an embodiment of that specific culture, designed to speak to or address a contemporary audience which shares a similar cultural heritage with characters in the epic. In other words, the bard's chosen tale is related through the epic and its characters so the audience can both learn and confirm what it already knows.

Beginning with the primary assumption of cultural justification, and assuming that the bard's intent in reciting the epic was, at least in part, didactic, this essay will consider how character behavior depicted in heroic epics can help illuminate sometimes subtle yet underlying meanings of the epic poem while reinforcing larger, more-overr themes. My examination of such character behavior tends to support the conclusion that heroic epics suggest exemplary but culturally-bound models of behavior to their contemporary audiences. This essay, therefore, will survey (1) the sociological factors the epic bard considered when creating the epic, (2) how the epic itself takes those factors and considerations into account, and (3) how the contemporary audience in selecting information specifically related to it is reminded of its culturally-bound roles and what is considered (at least by the bard and the culture he represents) exemplary behavior.

In comparing the societal hierarchy of the cultures in the three heroic epics in question, it is clear that each of the cultures involves lord-retainer relationship. In contrasting the same, it could be argued that *Gilgamesh* takes place in a pagan-warrior society; *Beowulf* in a Christian, military-oriented culture; and *The Odyssey* in a slightly-democratic but monarchial society. Nevertheless, despite these cultural differences, as well the periodic and geographic boundaries that separate the cultures and dates of authorship of the three poems, the epic bard in each case utilized similar sociological determinants in addressing his respective culture as subject matter and in ultimately addressing and speaking to the epic's contemporary audience. These behavior determinants could be said tagenerally fall within the categorical purview of genealogy (as a determinant of class), family or household position, age and sex. Given the epic function of cultural justification, it is assumed then that the epic bard was at least justifying the existence of such determinants of societal hierarchy.

In taking into account those sociological factors, it would be overly-simplistic to say that heroic epics themselves were created with the intention of simply preserving lord-retainer hierarchies and keeping retainers "down on the farm". For in each of the three epic poems, retainers are offered opportunities via exemplary loyalty or subservience, to climb the social ladder. At the same time, very few characters (rulers and gods included) escape the obligation to subservience without dire consequences. In other words, through cultural justification the epic does not simply attempt to sustain a static societal hierarchy per se; but rather, it attempts to reinforce a code of subservient behavior in the lower classes that nevertheless does not exclude opportunities for the truly exemplary to move up the social ladder, while reminding the ruling as well as the lower classes of their inherent cultural obligations to mastery and subserviency, respectively.

Given the oral traditions the recitation of early heroic epics and the fact that bards wouldmost likely be employed by kings and others of significant wealth, it is assumed that when considering the epic, members of its contemporary audience would likely include those largely in the upper classes, those subservient to the upper classes, and those related by kinship or friendship to the first two groups. (It is of course further assumed that kings and the wealthy as "ring givers" would allow their retainers to hear the house poets; and additionally, that those of lower classes might also be privy to epic recitations at public festivals). That is to say, the sociological

composition of the characters in these epics was likely to be representative of the audience for which the epic bard implicitly intended his poem for: namely lords, retainers and those related to lords and retainers. For the remainder of this essay, then, I will examine and consider the behavior of types of principal characters found in our heroic epics--both in terms of epic characters and their potential audience counterparts--and what message the former group might hold for the latter.

In heroic epics the right to rule typically can be traced to a character's genealogy: heroes are usually conceived by royal parentage, conceived through god-mortal procreation, or created by a god. Other more obvious cultural factors -- including age and sex -- also come into play, given that heroes and rulers are generally males in the prime of life or slightly past their prime. But the epic poet makes it clear that kings have to earn their right to rule, as in the case of Beowulf. Though he was a prince of the Geats, he succeeds to the throne because of his legendary battle experience and because the rightful heir, in contrast, was "(un)capable of guarding the kingdom" (line 2371). Similarly, Odysseus and Gilgamesh, even as the former is the son of a king and the latter two-thirds divine, through their heroism and battle prowess earn and maintain their right to rule. All three epics, we see, stress the theme that heroes must *establish a name* as a prerequisite for earning and maintaining their kingdom; thus, this name-making characteristic also becomes a determinant for societal rank. The message here for the ruling class (while multiplistic) could certainly include a reminder that being born a prince does not guarantee that one will succeed to kingship, because earning and maintaining royal status is as important as being born into royalty.

And, as noted earlier, even after their ascendancy to thrones, heroes and those of royal birth cannot escape culturally bonded obligations. Odysseus must make amends to Poseidon before he can find ultimate peace at home, Beowulf recognizes that he is a beneficiary of the Creator, and even Gilgamesh calls on the "heavenly Shamash" in order to receive assistance in conquering foes. Heroes and kings in heroic epics are also found to have an obligation of sorts to their retainers and underlings who act appropriately, as we see in the case of the king Hrothgar in *Beowulf*, who is a "gold-friend" (line 1171) of his people. Similar examples of generous and required behavior towards retainers can be seen in Odysseus' promise to reward the loyal cowherd and swineherd with land, cattle and wives; and Gilgamesh

providing Enkidu with the luxuries of royal life in return for Enkidu's allegiance. In other words, kings and rulers in the contemporary audience are sent a message through the epic that they are bound by a code of behavior to share the riches of their kingdoms with those who have helped win those riches. However, this message about heroes and kings could provide an equal-if-not greater impact on retainers, regarding the rewards underlings can hope to reap through loyalty to lords.

In fact, such loyalty typifies the most exemplary of retainers found in the three heroic epics. And because the nature of societal hierarchies places more people in retainer, rather than ruling roles, it is assumed that the larger didactic message of heroic epics is intended to be geared towards reinforcing exemplary behavior in the retainer audience, rather than reminding the ruling class of its obligations. Consider how mid-way through *The Odyssey* Homer writes: "Now you were furious at this, Eumaios, and answered - O my swineherd" (Book XV, lines 400-01). While open to speculation, I contend that the intent of the "you" and "my" in these two lines is twofold: it represents an addressing of Eumaios (who is certainly the most exemplary of model underlings, servants and kinsmen in *The Odyssey*), as a character in the epic, and it serves to address the retainer at-large in the epic's contemporary audience, via the genitive case of a sovereign's firstperson pronoun.

Like Eumaios in *The Odyssey*, Beowulf has his model retainer in Wiglaf, and Gilgamesh his model "friend" and "servant" in Enkidu. All three exemplary characters share certain traits, including the willingness to stand beside their lord despite particularly gloomy odds, recognizing as Wiglaf did the need to be loyal to a lord "at the hour of need" (line 2709) because "death is worthier for every warrior than days of dishonor" (lines 2390-91). For the contemporary audience, then, these retainers provide an example of how to reap rewards through culturally-bound subserviency and loyalty.

And those potential rewards extend mere material gifts. For in all three epics we see examples of what could be termed "adopted kinship": Enkidu is adopted by Gilgamesh's mother after the two become friends, thus making the heroic men "brothers although in Tablet XII Enkidu is also referred to as Gilgamesh's "servant"; and Eumaios is raised by Odysseus' mother to later be called "uncle" by Telemakhos. And while we know that Wiglaf shares a family line with Beowulf, the retainer also could be seen as adopted into a closer kinship after he comes to be regard by Beowulf as

the son the dying king never had. Thus the heroic acts of the more exemplary retainers in the three epics -- namely the swineherd's loyalty to during Odysseus' 20-year absence, Enkidu's willingness to descend to the unknown dangers of the underworld and search for Gilgamesh's "mikku and pukku," and Wiglaf's actions as the lone comrade-in-arms who comes to the aid of Beowulf when fighting the dragon -- are rewarded through an extension of kinship. And while it is somewhat ambiguous when the adoption of Eumaios took place (although certainly his loyalty to the family of Odysseus brought him closer to the royal family), it is clear that in the other two retainers the adoption occurred once the retainer had proven himself as a valued friend, thus sending a message to the contemporary audience that the model retainer can transcend bloodlines and become kin to his lord in heart, even if not kin by blood.

In this regard, the three epics' respective exemplary retainers--Enkidu, Wiglaf and Eumaios--were in many ways more heroic than the heroes themselves, for the retainers were not endowed with godlike traits and abilities but nonetheless, like true heroes, acted without fear for their own lives. But it should come as no surprise that the retainers embodied heroic characteristics, given the epic bards' intended local audience. In illustrating how every man can be a hero, the heroic epic extends its audience to a universal level by addressing not just model cultural behavior set in a specific place and time, but model human behavior common to the human species. The epic poet then, in creating what is generally viewed as an inherent component of the epic -- the addressing of both a local and a universal audience--extends a message to both types of audience that is not geared primarily toward heroes but toward those who could be heroic in fulfilling their duties. That message, of course, illustrates the ways in which heroes and retainers are or can be similar,

This theme of similarities between heroes and model retainers is found throughout the heroic epic, underscoring and reinforcing the notion that heroics stem from deeds, not kinship, although heroics involving loyalty can build a special kind of kinship. Consider, for instance, how another type of culturally prescribed behavior addressed in the three epics -- namely that of common courtesy to strangers -- is shared by the three epics' heroes, by good rulers and by model retainers. Beowulf initially receives a courteous welcome from Hrothgar, although certainly for numerous reasons beyond simple grace. But Beowulf himself later reinforces the notion that in Hrothgar's eventual gift-giving to the hero, "the national king followed best custom"

(line 2144). Similarly, Odysseus and his son Telemakhos are the benefactors of the "best customs" of their days, and were received with courtesy even when their royal identities had not yet been revealed. Of course one of the more memorable of such receptions is when the swineherd welcomes Odysseus who is disguised as a beggar, noting that "rudeness to a stranger is not decency, poor though he may be, poorer than you" (Book XIV, lines 67-68). In fact, courtesy can be attributed to subserviency, given the remarks of the swineherd that "all wanderers and beggars come from Zeus" (Book XIV, lines 69-70). The message here to the contemporary audience could be one designed to reinforce common courtesy, although, at the same time the message could also be viewed as a warning to retainers: be on your best behavior, because you never know when a lord or god is present in humble disguise, as your guest.

The three epics also present character models in various stages of maturity, offering cues to the epic's contemporary audience on how age affects one's ability for heroics and subsequently how one's age determines how much respect individuals deserve. Consider how by the end of *Beowulf* we recognize that contrary of the hero's wishes, Beowulf has reached an age where he cannot conquer the dragon on his own, and requires help from retainers. In taking note of younger characters' behavior, in *The Odyssey* we see Telemakhos reach an age where he begins to command household servants in a "soldierly way"; and we also see that Odysseus' father, once a great warrior, has been reduced to the status of a "greybeard" in Book XXIV, though along with an old servant both "could be fighters in a pinch" (line 554). And while elders are often revered in *The Odyssey*, *Beowulf* and *Gilgamesh* for their wisdom, ability to prophesize or ability to read signs, they are eventually relegated to a role subservient to others currently in their prime. For instance, consider the scene Gilgamesh laughs at elders' warnings not to go to the cedar forest, and subsequently the elders bless they young hero's journey. Thus in the three epics., which could in some ways be categorized as "coming-of-age poems" rooted in cultural ritual and rites, we see characters such as Telemakhos behave in a manner less than commanding and "soldierly" before adulthood, and characters such as the counsel of elders (a social body presumably comprised of those well past their prime) in *Gilgamesh* responding to the hero-come-of-age with eventual subserviency. In depicting characters in various stages of maturity, the epic, then, not only justifies the notion that age should be a determinant of societal rank, but also reinforces the culturally-accepted notion that both the young and the

old should recognize their place in society, and be subservient to the wishes of those in their prime (although because of genealogy, certainly kings and those of the ruling classes such as the aging Beowulf, prove to be exceptions).

In similar ways the heroic epic speaks to the general "place of women" in their respective cultures, and specifically to the role of females as wife, mother and even goddess. Generally speaking, model women in the heroic epic are, as in *The Odyssey*, seen in roles subservient to males; they are assigned roles of bath giver, food and-drink server and partner in bed. In *Beowulf* -- where women characters are conspicuously sparse except for queens (and monsters) --; we see that the ideal woman is also found to be mindful of domestic chores as social graces, as illustrated by Wealhtheow who is "careful of courtesies" (line 614) and active filling mead cups at the banquet hall.

In addressing and justifying more specific female roles, the heroic epic reminds its contemporary audience that the role of mother is primarily one of advisor to, and nurturer and protector of, children. But the heroic epic further reinforces the notion that mothers -- like Gilgamesh's mother Ninsun and Telemakhos' mother Penelope -- should eventually become subservient to the wishes of their male children after the latter have reached adulthood. In both cases, where the sociological determinants of sex and family position come into interplay, we see that the male-of-age gains ascendancy over his mother, with both Telemakhos and Gilgamesh ignoring their mothers' wills which would have kept them safe at home and prevented the males' "heroic" journeys.

Model wives in heroic epics are similarly expected to respect the wishes of their husbands. Consider how in *The Odyssey* where themes on the value of family life abound, the epic stresses the need for wives to be faithful to husbands in the absence of the latter, as seen in the contrast presented between the unfaithful wife of Agamemnon who plots her husband's death and Odysseus' wife Penelope. And certainly Penelope is exemplary in her faithfulness. What Penelope receives in return for her faithfulness, and receives from Odysseus after his return to Ithaca, is one night with a man who has been absent for 20 years and (who, meanwhile, has had the pleasure of sleeping with nymphs and goddesses), before he hero is again off to take care of other affairs (admittedly meeting threats to Penelope as well as the couple's house, but also to see his father

and subsequently to fulfill the prophecy of Teiresias). Thus the heroic epic suggests to its contemporary audience that the wife's first obligation is to respect her husband's wishes. Perhaps this is why Gilgamesh refused the offer of the goddess Ishtar to become her consort. But despite the obvious wily nature of Ishtar, Gilgamesh's reaction can be read in at least two ways beyond his intention not to get involved with a goddess who is known to be treacherous and who is unlikely to be respectful of his, a mortal's, wishes. For one, marriage does not appear important in the culture of Gilgamesh (and of course Beowulf does not take a wife either); and two, males (perhaps only male heroes) apparently are not expected to be subservient to immortal females. Consider Athena's role as goddess in *The Odyssey*, like mortal females she too serves as help-mate (albeit a help-mate to heroes) and ultimately as arbiter in bringing peace to Ithaca. Further consider the interrupted battle in Book XXIV between Odysseus' loyal band and the angered townsmen. While the townsmen turned to flee following the command from Athena to stop fighting, Odysseus "reared himself to follow" (line 601) and only abandoned the fight after Zeus sent a lightning bolt to the ground.

While in general the message that model women in heroic epics send to their counterparts in the contemporary audience reinforces the notion that women should be subservient to men, females do receive one apparent distinction in these epics: they are often found to have the gift of prophesying or reading signs. This is most apparent in *Gilgamesh*, where nearly all the female characters, the courtesan included, are endowed with powers of prophecy and/or dream interpretation, or at least the ability to give sage advice. Likewise Wealhtheow in *Beowulf*, an exemplary female character, is seen giving sound advice to Beowulf. And in *The Odyssey*, while Menelaos "groped in his mind for the right to say" (Book XV, line 209) when asked to read the sign of a bird, Helen quickly offered an ingenious interpretation. Similarly, in the Homeric epic we see the accuracy of Penelope's dream which foreshadows the return of Odysseus and the demise of the suitors. For the contemporary audience, then, it could be argued that validity in the stereotyped notion of "women's intuition"--or the notion that women are endowed with the ability to receive and/or interpret signs carrying meanings hidden to most men -- is reinforced.

As noted earlier, individual characters' behavior can be seen as a subtle vehicle for epic themes. But in some respects, the epic bards are overtly clear in methods of emphasizing the importance of being appropriately subservient. The coastguard in *Beowulf*, for instance, is dutiful in



guarding the hero's ship and because of this Beowulf gives the retainer a new sword guaranteed to bring prestige. The boatman in *Gilgamesh*, on the other hand, is banished to the shores after he violates his duties and brings the hero across the waters to the home of Utnapishtim. The matter of "rewards" for appropriate action is perhaps driven home most graphically in Book XXII of *The Odyssey*, where maids who had taken to the beds of suitors were first made to clean up the bloodied hall of Odysseus' home, and then hung. As for the suitor Melanthios, who although of royal parentage had defiled the home of a king :

From the storeroom to the court they brought Melanthios,  
chopped with swords to cut his nose and ears off,  
pulled off his genitals to feed the dogs  
and raging hacked his hands and feet away (lines 527-30).

While it is thus apparent that heroic epics provided their contemporary audiences with models for individual behavior based on culturally-accepted roles, it should not be overlooked that heroic epics also outlined pictures of model relationships and institutions, including : model examples of friendship, as in the case of *Gilgamesh*; model examples of marriage and the family unit, as in the case of *The Odyssey*, and model examples of entire kingdoms at a glance, as seen in *Beowulf* when Wealhtheow, in giving advice to the hero, says :

... Warrior be happy  
While life is yours ! May you from my wishes  
Grow rich in treasures. Be good to my son,  
Act in charity from your store of joy.  
Here every man is true to his fellow,  
Humane of mind and loyal to his lord  
The retinue are as one, the people are eager,  
The heroes are wine-glad and quick to (their lord's) beckon (lines 1224-30).

If only the disloyal suitors, servants and maids in *The Odyssey* would have taken heed of such advice, their fate would have been different when Odysseus came home.

(My thanks to Dr. George Kurman, Western Illinois University, for his insights on my subject.)

### Sources Cited

Heidel, Alexander. *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1949.

*Beowulf* Trans. Edwin Morgan, Berkeley and Los Angeles : U of California P, 1952.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald, New York : Vintage, 1990.