10-15-1986

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The Epic Hero and Society: Cuchulainn, Beowulf, and Roland

Abstract
Compares legends of Cuchulainn, Beowulf, and The Song of Roland to determine what the portrayal of their respective heroes tells us about the different values of their various cultures.

Additional Keywords
Beowulf—Social and political aspects; Cuchulainn—Social and political aspects; Heroes (Epic); Heroes and honor; Roland—Social and political aspects; Sarah Beach
The Epic Hero and Society

Cuchulainn, Beowulf and Roland

Eleanor Farrell

The epic hero is a fascinating archetype spanning man’s entire history, from the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh that pre-dates the second millenium B.C., to today’s futuristic tales of post-holocaust society. Tales of heroes have survived from many early cultures, evolving from bardic oral recitations into (sometimes) cohesive written stories or poems. The tales survived because they were good entertainment, but they also serve the additional purpose of being a treasure-store of information about the societies where they originated. The epics show, if not actual living figures, at least the people the societies imagined themselves to be, with their codes of honor, religious beliefs and political systems; they are passionate, humorous, and surprisingly objective.

The scribes of medieval Europe have preserved several epic tales from roughly contemporary, but distinctly different, societies. Among these are the Irish Celtic tales of the hero Cuchulainn, the Anglo-Saxon epic poem Beowulf, and the Norman chanson de geste, The Song of Roland. A comparison of the heroes of these tales and of their adventures will allow us to also compare their societies, to discover differences and similarities among the peoples whose cultures fused to form, ultimately, modern Europe.

Of the three cultures to be considered, the Celtic is the most primitive, in the sense of having an interplay between the natural and the supernatural, a "tension between reality and fantasy."2 J.R.R. Tolkien commented on the "fundamental unreason" of Celtic things: "They have bright color, but are like a broken stained glass window reassembled without design."3 This characteristic can be seen throughout the surviving Celtic literature and art, but is epitomized in the story of Cuchulainn, Ireland’s greatest hero, as told in the Tain Bo Cuailnge and related tales.

Cuchulainn is clearly not human. His conception is confusing, to say the least. His mother Deichtine becomes pregnant first by the sidhe Lug (identified with the Celtic sun god), and later by the mortal Sualdam mac Roich. Added to these elements is a suggestion of Deichtine’s incest with her brother Conchobar, the king. Cuchulainn’s childhood fits the outline of the archetypal heroic figure as described by Joseph Campbell, who sees the hero’s life as a "pageant of marvels" culminating in a great central adventure.4 Before reaching the age of seven, this prodigy single-handedly defeated Conchobar’s entire boy troop and killed Culann the Smith’s savage hound, not to mention the number of heads of Ulster’s enemies he collected. But the most colorful (and very Celtic) depiction of Cuchulainn is the description of his battle-rage:

The first warp-spasm seized Cuchulainn, and made him into a monstrous thing.... His body made a furious twist inside his skin, so that his feet and shins and knees switched to the rear and his heels and calves switched to the front.... His face and features became a red bowl:
he sucked one eye so deep into his head that a wild crane couldn’t probe it... the other eye fell out along his cheek .... Then, tall and thick, steady and strong, high as the mast of a noble ship, rose up from the dead centre of his skull a straight spout of black oil, darkly and magically smoking like the smoke from a royal hostel when a king is coming to be cared for at the close of a winter day.5

Irish religion was nebulous, with numerous local deities who were rarely depicted as deserving (or receiving) veneration, and imported gods, such as Mara and Cerridwen, whose importance in the afterlife, although the boundaries between the natural and supernatural worlds were tenuous and easily crossed. Irish lore included non-human races, but the mortal side were most often described as living and fighting like humans.

Fate was an integral part of Celtic lore and literature, with druids and seers employed to make predictions, especially about battles. An Irish stubbornness can be seen, however, in the frequency with which characters cheerfully ignore these dire warnings and plow ahead into ruin. This attitude stemmed partially from a confidence in being able to get around fate through the use of fetishes, wile or good luck; but it was also characteristic of the Irish Celts to value glory and fame over a longer but duller existence. When Cuchulainn is told that his life will be short because he armed himself on a certain day, he replies, "That is a fair bargain... If I achieve fame I am content though I had only one day on earth."6

Early Irish society was homogeneous but anarchic, the Irish having "little tolerance for centralized authority, even their own."7 The aristocratic classes had a strong sense of, and concern with, identity, which is reflected in the genealogical and place-name lists so frequent in early Irish literature. The morality of the Irish Celts was based on this tribal identity and consisted of a complicated code of honor that could transcend the bonds of blood kinship. Thus, Cuchulainn is forced to fight and kill his own son Connla for the honor of Ulster and Conchobar. Cuchulainn is able to fulfill his honor code and still avoid killing his friends or kinsmen in several other episodes, notably by making an agreement with his foster-father Fergus that each of them will run away from the other in one encounter. Cuchulainn’s death, however, can be directly linked to the obligations of his honor code. As the hero goes to his last fight, he violates a geis by accepting some hound’s flesh from three crones (who are actually the daughters of his enemy the wizard Calatin), because he will not scorn the offer of poor food. During the battle, Cuchulainn is faring far better than his enemies until they claim his spear, threatening to revile Cuchulainn’s kin and all Ulster if he relieves. The third time that the crones with his weapon, his enemy Lugaid strikes the hero so that his bowels spill out. Cuchulainn fastens himself to a rock so that he may die standing up, and Lugaid waits until he is dead before cutting off Cuchulainn’s head. The hero manages to revenge himself even in death, however, for as his sword falls from his hand it cuts off the hand of Lugaid.

In considering the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf, we move into a society less steeped in magic and guided by a permeating and pessimistic sense of doom. Like the northern gods, the Germanic (or Anglo-Saxon) heroes are on the right side, though it is not the side that wins. The winning side is Chaos and the dragon.8 There are both Christian and pagan religious elements in Beowulf, but all of these are ephemeral to the concept of fate that controls the hero’s actions. The only hope of survival in this universe is the society, represented by the mead-hall, which is being directly attacked by Grendel before Beowulf’s arrival.

As in Celtic society, a code of honor was predominant in individual conduct, but here it took the form of the personal comitatus loyalty of feudal structure. The importance of this concept in Anglo-Saxon culture is clearly demonstrated by its frequency in the extant literature, perhaps most succinctly described by the vassal Byrhtwold, in the heroic poem "The Battle of Maldon":

Courage shall grow keener, clearer the will, the heart fiercer, as our force faileth. Here our lord lies levelled in the dust, the man all marred: he shall mourn to the end who thinks to wend off from this war-play now. Though I am white with winters I will not away, for I think to lodge me alongside my dear one, lay me down by my lord’s right hand.9

Beowulf displays all of the virtues of the Germanic warrior: bravery, strength, a sense of obligation (he comes to Hrothgar’s court partly to repay a family debt), loyalty to his uncle Hygelac, leader of the Geats, honor in fulfilling his oaths, and an eagerness for fame and praise. He is credited with prowess equal to that of the supernatural (but human-like) Grendel, and defeats this monster without using weapons. His greater difficulty and need for supernatural aid in conquering Grendel’s mother reflects the Anglo-Saxon pessimism: human success is ultimately impossible, and the best man can hope for is everlasting fame.

This mind-set appears in sharp contrast to that of the Norman epic, The Song of Roland. Fate is here replaced by a Christian concept of good and evil, with no room for moral ambiguities. Characters are either good or bad, mainly according to their religious beliefs. The Saracen knights are granted nobility to make them worthy opponents of Roland and the other Peers, but
one can sense that the evil natures of Marsilion and the traitor Ganelon are intended to be described using capital letters.

The Song of Roland is characterized by a simplicity that is not found in the other epics, but which reflects medieval Norman culture -- a militaristic feudalism based on personal loyalty. Roland, with all his faults, is still the hero, possessing the typical virtues of the feudal knight: he is brave, loyal, generous, single-minded and rash. Charlemagne epitomizes the ideal feudal lord, a noble, wise and ageless monarch. But in addition to a cultural identity, this epic, by the time it was written down around 1100, evolved into a quasi-religious tract supporting the Church Militant's crusades against the Moslem infidels. The battle between Charlemagne and the Emir Baligant is the archetypal conflict between Good and Evil, involving the warriors of the entire Christian and pagan worlds. Roland's heroism is still applauded as martyrdom, but a sense of the shift from personal to national pride might be seen in the poet's attention to Oliver's reproaches of his friend's foolishness.

Both Oliver and Roland live according to a cultural code of honor, which is emphasized also through its opposite -- the treachery of Ganelon. Despite his persuasiveness and bravery in his first encounter with Marsilion, Ganelon is presented as being thoroughly evil and his treachery fittingly punished: he is tied to four horses and his body literally torn apart. Even in the more complex and centralized society that France is portrayed as becoming, the bonds of loyalty and honor maintain their position of predominant importance.

Although the tales of the heroes Cuchulainn, Beowulf and Roland are not completely parallel, there are several points of direct comparison that can also be used to compare the values of the respective cultures the heroes represent. The first of these is the hero's relationship to the supernatural, a characteristic common to cultural heroes. Cuchulainn has the greatest supernatural attributes, both in the particulars of his birth and in his physical abilities. Beowulf is unusually strong and is able to swim into the monsters' underwater cave, which takes an entire day -- a long time to hold one's breath! However, he has to rely on God's help and grace to kill Grendel's mother. Roland, on the other hand, has no super-human qualities; his strengths are those of ordinary human hero, purity of heart and faith in God. These different emphases reflect those of the corresponding societies: the Celtic mosaic of overlapping natural and supernatural worlds, the Anglo-Saxon chaotic reality of gods and monsters, which occasionally conflict with humanity, and the Norman Christianity where angels can counsel kings but faith is required to get things done.

One of the elements that seems to permeate all heroic literature is a sense of honor. It is this code that controls the destinies of each of these heroes, sometimes with tragic consequences, as when Cuchulainn kills his son in battle or when Roland leads his rear guard into total annihilation. However, because the concept of honor is essential to the survival of a society based on personal loyalty, the honor code is never repudiated, even when it leads to disaster, and in fact is emphasized in all of these epics. Roland might be guilty of stupidity, Beowulf of arrogance, or Cuchulainn of stubbornness, but not one of them can ever be accused of violating their personal honor.

The death of the epic hero is an integral part of his story, and reflects the cultural ideas of fate, honor and religion. It is tied to the position of the hero as being separate from, or outside of, the society in some way. The hero, as the embodiment of the society's ideals and a source of strengths unavailable to the common man, cannot live the life of an ordinary mortal.

Cuchulainn's brief life is predicted by his teacher Scathach and by the druid Cathbad; Cuchulainn himself more or less chooses fame over longevity. His death, as already mentioned, results from an adherence to a code of personal and clan honor. Roland's death, also, stems from a sense of honor, and although the hero's pride and recklessness are criticized by the more prudent Oliver, it is Roland's body that is carried into heaven by angels. Fate cannot be said to be involved here, although Charlemagne is given an allegorical vision of Roland's death in a dream, and seems to expect the treachery of Ganelon. Perhaps this is as close as medieval Christianity would allow Fate to intervene in the lives of her heroes.

In this respect, the Anglo-Saxon epic fits somewhere between the Celtic and Norman ideas of fate and death; it has some Christian elements, but hasn't incorporated these in any cohesive form. C.S. Lewis made an interesting comparison of Celtic and Germanic myth (in commenting on Matthew Arnold's On the Study of Celtic Literature):

The Celtic was much more sensuous: also less homely: also, entirely lacking in reverence, of which the Germanic was full. Then again the Germanic glowed in a sense with rich sombre colours, while the Celtic was all transparent and full of nuances - evanescent - but very bright.

He continues:

One sees that the Celtic is essentially Pagan, frivolous under all its melancholy, incapable of growing into religion, and I think - a little heartless.

In considering Beowulf as an epic hero figure, I have chosen to consider only his youthful exploits at Hrothgar's court. The
later part of the poem -- the aging king's battle with the dragon -- presents Beowulf in a completely different role, that of the wise but failing ruler, the guardian of the land's well-being. Although Beowulf dies a noble death, it is an unusual end for an epic hero. The essential position of the hero as outside the society normally leads to his dying (young) in glorious battle or riding off victoriously into the sunset. Looked at in this way, Beowulf does the latter. He travels to Denmark, kills the monsters, and then leaves, having gained gifts, gratitude and fame but not attempting to become part of Hrothgar's court. The combination of roles in Beowulf is one of the most curious inconsistencies between this and the other epics studied. Perhaps not enough time had elapsed between the history and the epic for the characters to develop fully into heroic archetypes.

Or, perhaps Anglo-Saxon society had a shortage of wise kings, and the epic heroes had to do double duty in these roles. It is interesting to note that the age of the epic heroes was also a time of great decline in the society. Various tales in the Irish Ulster cycle have warriors awestruck by the feats of a seven-year-old boy (even if he is Cuchulainn's son), or fighting over a dog, while the king himself is openly treacherous. Charlemagne can find only one knight to support him when he confronts Ganelon's obvious treachery. Hrothgar's hall is besieged for twelve years by Grendel while the entire Danish court has no heroes to combat the monster. Beowulf himself predicts the total destruction of Danish society, which takes place in his lifetime.

These examples support the idea that the role of the epic hero is to bring some kind of order to an anarchic, decentralized society, one either in decline or which hasn't yet developed a strong political-social structure. The hero himself is individualistic, and thus in opposition to the goals of a society, but he can bring to the society some unique talent that will help it function.

The epic hero is a universal concept, found not only in the tales of primitive societies throughout the world, but also in contemporary mythology (preserved on celluloid instead of parchment): the wandering gunfighter in "Shane", the masterless samurai of "Yojimbo", the amoral loner cruising through a post-apocalyptic outback in "The Road Warrior". They all have the qualities of a Cuchulainn, a Beowulf or a Roland: bravery, loyalty, and most of all, honor -- values that transcend any single time and place.

FOOTNOTES

1For societies such as these being considered, which span several centuries, the "contemporary" quality may be ascribed to the period during which they were all put into writing. However, the values and customs of the particular cultures still remained, and are reflected in the medieval accounts.


6Kinsella, The Tain, p. 85.

7Gantz, Early Irish Myths and Sagas, p. 14.


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Certainly, his work, too, makes its bow to philosophy and the "great pagans." As Ransom lands on Malacandra, for example, he is surprised to discover that in the moment of touching down on an alien planet, he is wrestling with a philosophical problem. Much later, he finds in the faces of the sorns a reminder of Confucius and Parmenides.

[10] Certain of Lewis' remarks on the Commedia form an obvious link with his own space trilogy: "The Commedia combines two literary undertakings which have long since been separated. On the one hand, it is a high, imaginative interpretation of spiritual life; on the other it is a realistic travel book about wanderings in places which no one had reached, but which everyone believed to have a literal and local existence. If Dante in one capacity is the companion of Homer, Virgil, and Wordsworth, in the other he is the father of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells." A Preface to Paradise Lost, p. 114.

[11] Though Reason sponsors the first stage of both Dante the Pilgrim’s journey and Ransom’s, both journeys have been inspired by the Order of Grace. We learn in Canto II of the Inferno that the Virgin Mary, St. Lucia, and Beatrice have been responsible for Virgil’s rescue of Dante from the Dark Wood. As for Ransom, Oyarsa expresses the thought that "it is not without the wisdom of Maleldil that we have met now" (p. 143) and suggests that Weston and Devine have helped to bring about great events of a kind very different from what they intended.