Heroes of the Middle Ages

Heroes originate in the mists of time and myth. Morton W. Bloomfield surmises that "the original hero in early literature was probably based on the king who died for his people, the warrior who defeated the tribe's enemies ....These men ... were celebrated in song and story and.... presented again to the people so that they could participate in their magic" (Bloomfield, p. 30). In Indo-European the word 'hero' has the primary sense of 'protector' or 'helper,' but in Greek *eroe* "it came to mean a superhuman or semidivine being whose special powers were put forth to save or help all mankind or a favored part of it" (Bloomfield, p.27). The idea of the hero as the savior of his people dominates the early medieval epics such as *Beowulf* and *The Song of Roland*. Marshall Fishwick has written that style "in heroes, as in everything else, changes." In the later medieval romances, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the hero is no longer fighting for his people, but for his ideals. The study of the nature and cause of this change, then, is critical to the understanding of what, ultimately, is the essence of a hero.

> Epic literature is a stately, solemn celebration of national life in the heroic age. Its heroes are simple men, versed in the activities of common life.. .they are leaders not through class status or wealth or even birth, but through the excellencies of heart and mind and hands. Their motives are linked with the practical necessities of life. (Moorman. p.27-8)

An epic hero, such as Beowulf or Roland, possesses the qualities of valor, military prowess, loyalty, generosity, and honor. He is a man who fights because he must, for the survival of his tribe or nation. Although the hero is constantly aware of his own mortality, he never shirks "from threat or peril .... It is a hero's duty to preserve his life by valour" (Jones. p.43). It is in battle that the mettle of the epic hero is tested.

The epic hero lives in a "shame culture", or an honor/shame society, where a man's 'good name' is his most prized possession (Fenwick Jones, p.57). The society is "hierarchical, that is, controlled by a military aristocracy whose highest good is in the warrior's code" (Jones, p.50). It is partly for this reason that Beowulf needs to kill the dragon and that Roland refuses to blow the horn. Genealogy in a hierarchical society is of great importance, and to fall into shame reflects not only on oneself, but on

one's family and nation.

The field on which the epic hero performs is grounded in socio-political and historical 'reality' (Kelly, p.85). Charles Moorman writes that "the world in which Roland lives and fights is ... a very simple world, rigidly, and comfortingly, described by the laws of the Church and Emperor" (Moorman, p.23). Although elements of 'the miraculous' appear in the epic, they result in no more than a heightening or aggrandizement of reality.

> The epic heroes of *Beowulf* ... [and] of *Roland* go down to defeat and in some sense are responsible for their defeat ....However, we know that even in defeat partially of their own doing. they are heroes nevertheless—men above the common, above the average, whose drive for glory whether heavenly or earthly, raises them beyond the ordinary and the average. They are big persons who are semi-divine, larger than human, who fascinate us by their valor, courage, and even *bravura*. (Bloomfield, 31)

The heroes of both *Beowulf* and *Roland* perish and become exalted. What exalts Beowulf is his acceptance of his *wyrd*. Gwyn Jones defines this exaltation by writing:

> For if he accepts what is destined, without bowing to it, he triumphs over it. An unbreakable will makes him the equal of all-powerful Fate, and though fate can destroy him, it can neither conquer nor humiliate him. (Jones. p.43)

Beowulf does not expect to return from his fight with the dragon. Nonetheless, he enters the battle. It is such courage and loyalty to his people that will cause songs to be composed and sung about him. Being commemorated in song contains the only immortality a warrior from Beowulf's pagan society could attain.

Roland's heroic pride in refusing to blow the horn assures his demise. However, his heroic nature "is transformed into the saintly through the martyrdom of his death in a battle of ultimate Christian purpose" (Huppé. p.16). Roland was blessed and absolved by Turpin, and valiantly held the field for God and country. An apotheosis like Roland's, Huppé argues, is reserved for

> heroes who reconcile the flawed hero and the flawless saint in the testimony of their martyrdoms. and in exemplifying the providential concept of the *felix culpa*. (Huppé, p.18).

The virtues of a chivalric hero are similar to those of his epic counterpart—valor, generosity, loyalty, honor, and skill in battle—however, the sense given to 'loiautee,' loyalty, at this period is more intricate and more significant. It is a quality of the soul; 'Of coer loiall' (Mathew. p.69). The chivalric knight must also know temperance, *courtoisie*, a reverence for women, and courtly skills. It is not enough that he perform on a field of battle; he must also be presentable at court. As Jelena Krstovic writes of Gottfried's *Tristan*:

> Gottfried goes to great lengths to portray Tristan as a consummate artist: his education includes training in speech, good manners, and foreign languages, in addition to riding, hunting, wrestling, and fighting. Tristan is also a skilled musician, a master of stringed instruments. (Krstovic. p.245)

As in heroic poetry, the chivalric knight is tested through feats of arms. However, whereas the epic hero fights only when circumstances require, the chivalric hero sets out to find a test or an *aventure* in which he can prove himself. As Eric Auerbach says: "trial through adventure is the real meaning of the

knight's ideal existence" (Auerbach, p.135). The chivalric hero rarely fights in defense of his people, but in defense of an ideal or an abstraction. Finlayson asserts that the chivalric hero himself is "largely an idealization which bears little relation to social reality and certainly did not spring from it" (Finlayson, p.54).

The world in which the chivalric hero operates is also an "imaginative idealization" (Beer, p.22). Although the world is described in the context of contemporary paraphernalia, such as clothing, architecture, and feasts, there is "little attempt to authenticate the story in terms of actual political, geographical, or economic conditions" (Finlayson, p.5 8-9). Whereas the epic is particular to a nation and a people, the romance "is exotic, the product of a particular sophisticated group, rather than a whole culture" (Moorman, p.30). Although the world of romance was an offspring of feudalism, in romance "the feudal ethos serves no political function; it serves no practical reality at all; it has become absolute. It no longer has any purpose but that of self-realization" (Auerbach, p.134). According to Kelly, the main explanation for this is that romance "meets a need that is felt by those who want confirmation of their world as they believe and want it to exist" (Kelly, p.85). The field on which the chivalric knight performs is a dream reality; a perilous landscape affording chance encounters with unnatural foes. The miraculous surprises the chivalric knight very little—whether it be a castle appearing out of nowhere in response to a prayer, or a knight who survives beheading.

The circumstances that lead to the exaltation of the chivalric hero, such as Sir Gawain, for example, differ drastically from those of the epic hero. The epic hero gets tested in physical combat against a monster or another warrior. In *Sir Gawain* the hero's task "is spiritual rather than physical" (Moorman, p.61). Gawain must pass all the requirements of the ideal chivalric knight in order to triumph. Yet even though Gawain fails—he lacks in loyalty, says the Green Knight—he does in a sense get exalted. Gawain's understanding and acceptance of his flawed nature, and his confession lead to "the Green Knight's absolution" (Wilson, p.206). Whether his epiphany and self-imposed penitence qualify for exaltation has been hotly debated. Charles Moorman, for example, thinks not only that Gawain is a failure, but: "What had been the tragedy of a single knight ... becomes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the failure of a whole social order" (Moorman, p.61).

The differences in the conception and execution of the epic and chivalric heroes can be best explained by the change of an era. Heroic poetry was the poetry of a people on constant war-footing, fighting for survival. Taylor attributes the difference in spirit between epic and romance to a "deeply significant change in the national character," (Taylor, p.7) which moved "from national unity to feudalism, and from national warfare to civil strife and fantastic Crusades" (Taylor, p.12). Moorman attributes the knight errant to a time of peace when the knight can go questing (Moorman, p.64). There arose for the first time in western Europe a large 'leisure class' that wanted to be entertained. "The new feudalism with its leisure and highly stratified class structure demanded a new hero, a man attuned to the niceties of conduct and indoctrinated in the values of courtly life" (Moorman, p.29).

> As Western Europe recovered its poise and security after the Dark Ages, it began to adopt new values and life patterns. As we have seen, the court replaced the castle. the courtly knight the brutal warrior, and the tangled thread of feudal relationships the simple loyalties of the *comites*. (Moorman. p.28)

Despite all of the differences, the epic and chivalric hero share some 'common ground.' The first of these is the honorable heroic code. The heroes never fight a foe who is weaker, or in some way disadvantaged. "Physically, the Grendels were a fair match for a man with the strength of thirty men in his grip," A. T. Hatto points out about *Beowulf* (Hatto II, p.245). Beowulf also, realizing Grendel used no weapons, doffed his own to make the fight fair. In the romance of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, Arcite equips Palamon before their duel. "It was merely the courtesy one knight owed to another" (Painter, p.134).

The second similarity between the heroes is the *rite de passage*, or what Moorman calls "the journey-initiation-quest" (Moorman, p7). Beowulf travels to Hrothgar's court to battle Grendel and subsequently his mother. Upon Beowulf's return Hygelac feels him worthy of leading his people upon his passing away. Roland travels with the rear-guard toward France and through martyrdom achieves sainthood. Gawain travels through the land for a year in search of the Green Knight, and finds Bercilak's castle through prayer when he is weariest. Moorman emphasizes that "the passage of the soul through its difficulties to its triumph, *ad astra per aspera* ... is constantly observable" (Moorman, p.6). Thirdly, the most striking similarity is the presence of *wyrd*, fate, or Providence, the failure of the heroes to some degree, and the way the epic and chivalric hero accept both their failures and 'their lots.' Also, they all stand up to insurmountable odds—Beowulf and the dragon; Roland and the Saracens; Gawain and Green Knight. This heroic courage finds astute expression by Gawain: "In destinies sad or merry, True men can but try."

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