

Homeric Society

The *Iliad* presents a society dominated by a warrior aristocracy. The values of this society are quite different from those which many modern readers bring to the poem, as is evidenced by the tendency of today's students to dismiss Homer's heroes, especially Achilles, as childish, selfish, arrogant, testosterone-driven brats. Who, after all, can really care about a poem that focuses on a hero who not only refuses to fight because someone has stolen his war prize (a woman, who is treated like a mute piece of property), but goes crying to his mother, hoping to see his friends and allies wiped out by the enemy, all because he feels insulted? Such a response is almost inevitable for someone raised in Canada in the late twentieth century: one of the challenges in this class will be to demonstrate just how the *Iliad* — despite these and other apparently offensive elements — still can speak directly to the modern reader about issues of real human concern. To get into the poem, however, it is necessary to come to terms with Homer's warrior aristocracy and the values it espouses. As it turns out, these values are very similar to those displayed by the heroes of other surviving primary epics— e.g., the Sumerian/Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, the French *Song of Roland*, or the Spanish *El Cid*.

The first point to emphasize is that epics like the *Iliad* and the other poems cited above are the products of unsettled, highly unstable societies. The poets of the *Iliad* and (for example) *Beowulf* portray a world in which cities, as we know them, do not exist. Instead, their world is dotted with small kingdoms wherein local peasantries are the subjects of a warrior class, itself subject to the local king. Life, as these poets portray it, is harsh: these ancient economies are quite modest (by modern standards) even in the best of times and are readily susceptible to the ill effects of drought, blight, plague, earthquake, and other natural disasters. The biggest threat, however, is that presented by human enemies. For such societies, war is a constant fact of life, and the stakes are high: defeat often means the utter destruction of one's property, the slaughter of the adult male population, and the enslavement of all women and children. Thus you will find that, while Homer is all too aware of the horrors of war, he doesn't protest against it or dream of a world where war is unknown (as a modern author might): he accepts it as an inevitable part of human existence, much as we in Saskatoon do the chilly temperatures in January. The *Iliad*, like *Beowulf* and the other poems cited above, celebrates the achievements of the aristocratic warrior class who earn their privileged position in this society through their prowess in battle. The focus is on the adult male hero, whose martial exploits are celebrated as the acme of human achievement. While they have much to tell us about military affairs, the poems show relatively little interest in women, who generally are presented in one of three roles: (1) the nurturing, supportive wife or mother, (2) the dangerous and inscrutable temptress, or (3) the helpless slave — war booty.

In the West, various justifications have been found for war over the years: love of God, love of country, humanitarian aid, the need to quell some external threat. The focus is utterly different in the poems under discussion. The heroes of these poems display an overriding concern for personal glory and its external trappings, with relatively little concern for the common good or other moral issues. The Trojan war is motivated by the desire to win back Helen and punish the Trojans, but the emphasis is more on the disgrace occasioned by Helen's abduction and the desire to take revenge upon the Trojans than, for example, on Menelaus' broken heart or any issue of

principle. The individual warriors, in particular, are not fighting for love of country (no "country," as we know it, exists for them), for "justice," or in the service of the Lord, but to win glory in battle and, thereby, the public acknowledgment of their achievements. Thus, when disgraced by Agamemnon before his peers, Achilles not only withdraws from the battle but prays for the Greeks to be humiliated in turn. [For a brilliantly satirical examination of this type of warrior society, with an existentialist twist, see John Gardner's *Grendel*.]

In describing societies such as that portrayed in the *Iliad*, anthropologists employ the term ***Shame Culture** (in contrast to the ***Guilt Culture** found in most of today's western societies). Individuals in a guilt culture tend to hold themselves up to a set of personal moral standards. In modern Canada, for example, most people are concerned about having a clear conscience, "feeling good" about themselves, and so forth. There is a conviction that the individual should live up to certain standards of honesty, fairness, kindness, etc. and that these standards are to be followed at whatever cost: public humiliation or disgrace, loss of position or prosperity, even the loss of life itself. [The influence of the Judaeo-Christian tradition is evident here, particularly its concern with the salvation of the soul and its eventual judgment before God.] The heroes exalted by the popular media (e.g., Superman, the Lone Ranger, Gretzky, Riel) are deemed admirable because they adhere to such standards unflinchingly. (Even our so-called anti-heroes [James Dean, for example] tend to espouse these values: the difference, in their case, is that the society against which they rebel is regarded as somehow corrupt.) Above all lies the notion of the "greater good" — the sense that the individual should sacrifice his/her concerns for the sake of the community: to fail to do so is to be selfish, to place petty self-interest above principle. Thus guilt cultures tend to espouse ***Cooperative Values**, which place the good of the group (whether it be a country, comrades in arms, or a sports team) above that of the individual.

[For a more nuanced discussion of the distinctions discussed here, see the introduction to D.L. Cairns, *Aidos* (Oxford, 1993).]

In a shame culture, by contrast, the focus is not on a set of personal standards but on one's public standing. The overriding concern is to save face. Concerns center, not on matters of conscience or morality, but on public esteem as opposed to public humiliation, praise as opposed to blame. What matters is not what you think of yourself, but how you are thought of and treated by others. In contrast to guilt cultures, shame cultures tend to espouse ***Competitive Values**. As in war, success is everything in such a society: good intentions, high moral standards, fairness, a peaceful conscience — none of these count in the face of public disgrace. The competition for public honors is often intense and takes the form of what is known as a zero-sum game: that is, honor is won only at someone else's expense. Thus the notion that winning or losing might be less important than how one plays the game is utterly foreign to such a culture. Winning is everything: results are much more important than means. The crucial thing is to prove one's superiority and to have that superiority publicly acknowledged by one's peers. This intense competition inevitably leads to factionalism. The Greeks divide the world very clearly into "friends" and "enemies," with the understanding that one should do everything in one's power to aid one's friends and to harm one's enemies; failure to do so results in disgrace. Thus the Greek equivalent of the Golden Rule ("Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.") is, "Help your friends, harm your enemies." The contrast between these two aphorisms nicely captures the

gulf that separates a guilt culture, with its cooperative values, from the competitive values of a shame culture.

In Greek, the innate quality that renders one superior to others is called **aretê*; (often translated "excellence" or, less happily, "virtue." The masculine, aggressive connotations of the word can be seen in its etymological connection to the name Ares; compare the English "virtue," which derives from the Latin *vir* ["man"] and originally meant "courage" or "manliness.") For the Homeric hero, war provides the occasion for the display of *aretê*; and the winning of glory (or **kleos*). In a shame culture, however, mere success is not sufficient (it is not enough, for example, to know in your own mind that you are the best); public acknowledgment of one's superiority is essential. The Greek term for such acknowledgment is **timê*. *Timê* refers to the public, concrete acknowledgment of *aretê* by means of prizes. In a pre-monetary society like that of the *Iliad*, such prizes are not financial in nature but symbolic: they represent, not income, but honor. As such, they have a strong emotional significance that is difficult for the modern reader to appreciate. (Students often think of the contract disputes of professional athletes.) You must remember: the hero's position in society is based upon his *aretê*; the surest sign of that *aretê* is the *timê* offered to the hero. Modern readers would prefer a hero who was "above" such concerns, but it is clear that the Greeks did not. Even as late as the 4th century (when cooperative values have sprung to greater prominence in Greek society) the philosopher Aristotle is able to describe the *megalopsychos* or "great-spirited man" as one who is innately superior to others and demands to be treated accordingly. For Aristotle, humility on the part of such an individual is a character flaw, a sign of some defect in his (note the masculine pronoun) personality.

Here lies the source of Achilles' distress when Agamemnon deprives him of Briseis: Agamemnon has publicly humiliated him and robbed him of his *timê*. To fully appreciate Achilles' position, you must consider his motives for joining the war (see 1.149ff.). The Trojans have not wronged Achilles, so they are not personal enemies of his. He owes nothing to Agamemnon or Menelaus, who are merely fellow kings whose realms are quite distant from his own. (Again, there is no "Greece" to which Achilles might owe allegiance.) He has come to Troy solely to win honor (*timê*) and glory (*kleos*). The former will assure him status in this life; the latter after he dies. The *Iliad* does not hold out the hope of an afterlife for its heroes [see the [Homeric Gods](#) page]: for the most part, death is treated as a final end. The one hope for immortality open to Homer's heroes (besides that provided by the begetting of sons) is the possibility that they will be remembered and celebrated after they are dead (read the important speech by Sarpedon at 12.307-328). This celebration takes particular form in the epic poems of Homer and his fellow bards, who (like Achilles at 9.185-91) sing "of men's fame (*kleos*)." (Achilles is performing an epic poem, the very sort of poem that he hopes will be sung of his own deeds after his death.) In dishonoring Achilles, Agamemnon commits an act of outrageous folly. The irony is that, while Achilles fears that this humiliation will rob him of *kleos*, in fact it leads to the tragic events that will cause Achilles to be one of the best remembered and most celebrated of all Greek heroes.

Notes

[FN 1] A primary epic is one that, like the *Iliad*, is the product of an oral tradition, as opposed to a secondary (or written) epic like Vergil's *Aeneid*, Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, or Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which is the product of an individual poet's imagination. In their preserved form, of course, all of the epics cited above are "literary"; each preserves clear traces, however, of its roots in an oral, bardic tradition.