

The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Odyssey, and the Warrior-to-be

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While the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Odyssey* both present narratives of young warriors, the respective epics offer different definitions of the warrior-hero and the necessary steps in the narrative trajectory of the warrior-to-be. The narratives tell the story of a coming of age for a protagonist, Gilgamesh, or secondary character, Telemachos, as they move from immaturity to maturity, as well as showing the move from disorder to order in their respective communities. Both epics involve characters experiencing physical triumphs as well as intellectual growth, but they have different emphases based on their cultures of origin.

The narratives of Gilgamesh and Telemachos begin in similar contexts, with their respective cities in a state of disarray. The status of their cities is due in part to the immaturity of the respective characters. Gilgamesh himself prevents the city from functioning by exhausting the men with endless games of sport and taking girls from their homes and ravishing them (Gilgamesh I.65-73). He is a bad king to his people, and he is abusing his strength because nobody can contend with him. Telemachos is in a difficult situation caused by the absence of his father without definitive news about his fate in the war. The men of the island precipitately want Telemachos's mother to re-marry, even not knowing the status of her husband (Odyssey II.46-59). Though the suitors are exhausting Telemachos's estate and abusing the rules of hospitality, he is unable to force them from his home. He is also unable to force his mother to a decision both because he would have difficulty paying back her dowry and because he fears that his mother would call the furies down on him (II.134-37).

In both epics, the gods intervene, creating an impetus to the career of the warriors-to-be. Athena advises Telemachos to go on a journey to find news of his father. She then

helps implement the plan, as in the form of Mentor she brings together a ship and sailors for Telemachos. In *Gilgamesh*, the gods intervene by creating Enkidu to be Gilgamesh's companion, making him "mighty in strength" (I.92) and that "to [Gilgamesh's] stormy heart, let [Enkidu's] be equal" (I.97). With Enkidu to keep him busy, his mind turns from disrupting the city towards a task of greatness.

The epics show the warrior-to-be leaving his home as a necessary part of gaining warrior-hero status. On their respective quests, Gilgamesh and Telemachos earn reputation as they face challenges. Gilgamesh and Enkidu first face Humbaba in battle in order to cut down a cedar tree from the sacred mountain. Benjamin Foster writes in his commentary to the epic, "Felling evergreen trees on distant mountains was a well-known demonstration of kingly power in early Mesopotamia" (Foster 18). On their journey, Gilgamesh is forced to take care of himself more than he ever had before, though with the assistance of Enkidu. In battle he is able to overcome his initial fear and fight the forest guardian. After their return from the mountain, Gilgamesh and Enkidu best the Bull of Heaven. This success in battle signals achievement for the warriors-to-be as they make the transition into warrior-heroes. Unfortunately, it also creates the circumstance for failure, as the two insult the gods, leading to the death of Enkidu.

For Telemachos, his journey from Ithaca signals that he is a person who can act independently for the first time in his life. Telemachos's challenges on his quest are not physical but social, as he visits the courts of Nestor and Menelaus to ask about his father. He gains reputation not through battle, but by making favorable impressions on the kings, which could be give him leverage and support in expelling the suitors from his home. This is what the suitors fear, and they set an ambush for him on his return (Odyssey

IV.663-672). He also learns more of his father and the respect the other veterans have for him, a status that reflects on him as Odysseus's son. He learns to use discourse and rhetoric to enforce his will. Upon his return, Telemachos is able to demonstrate the maturity and knowledge he has gained on his journey, his success at which is shown in the reaction of the suitors, as in one instance the narrator tells us, "So [Telemachos] spoke, and all of them bit their lips in amazement/ at Telemachos, and the daring way he had spoken to them" (XX.268-70). He has grown from a child to a man.

Though on their initial journeys the young warriors make great progress towards becoming warrior-heroes, both Gilgamesh and Telemachos have greater tasks ahead of them. For Gilgamesh, it is his quest to escape his own mortality, which has been brought to the forefront of his mind with the death of his friend Enkidu. He travels beyond where any human has gone before and seeks knowledge from Utanapishtim, as Utanapishtim is the only human to achieve immortality. Utanapishtim gives him knowledge of the great flood which had been lost to his people, as well as the knowledge of a plant that will make the eater rejuvenate to youth. Though he loses the plant on his journey home, he has learned to accept his failure, another signal of his gained maturity, and returns to become a better king. As the narrator says in the opening to the epic, Gilgamesh is remembered for bringing this knowledge back, as well as becoming a great king. He has transitioned from an immature young warrior into a respected warrior-king, and his city is brought to order again and thrives underneath his rule.

On his return from his voyage, Telemachos still has to restore the *oikonomia* to Ithaca. At this point however, his narrative trajectory shifts as his father returns home. Because he is not the primary protagonist, Telemachos never achieves on his own a great

success to signal his transition from warrior-to-be into a warrior-hero. With his father home, he no longer needs to be the mature adult who sets his home back to rights. A metaphor for his situation is shown with the stringing of Odysseus's bow, the challenge set to all of the suitors. Telemachos struggles with the bow trying to string it unsuccessfully, when finally "pulling the bow for the fourth time, he would have strung it, but Odysseus stopped him, though he was eager, making a signal with his head" (XXI.127-30). If the Odyssey were Telemachos's story and not Odysseus's, this may have been his moment of great triumph, but as he is not the protagonist he is pulled back from what would have been a signal of his transition into warrior-hero status. Instead at this point he shifts into the role of helper, assisting his father to set his home to rights.

Each epic shows young warriors making the transition into being warrior-heroes with varying levels of success. Each experiences some failure. Gilgamesh loses Enkidu as a result of hubris, as he is chosen to die for not respecting the gods. Gilgamesh is also unsuccessful on the final quest of the epic and does not become immortal, though he still becomes a great king. Telemachos does not quite achieve his full potential because Odysseus has returned and taken that honor as his own.

The epics show that the warrior-to-be will experience failures along the way and may not always make the transition to full warrior-hero during the narrative, as in real life it is not just a binary condition that is easily changed. Instead they show that there are many degrees of meaningful success that the young warrior can attain.

Works Cited

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