# Introduction to the Text

Welcome to the text for Early World Literature.

This is an Open Education text, and the book and reading use a survey approach.

What does this mean?

We have selected texts from many different periods and cultures. We have also endeavored to include literature from as many diverse cultures as possible to give a truly global perspective.

When it comes to analyzing these texts, however, one of the significant differences between experts and novices *in any domain* is the ability to distinguish what is critical from what is unimportant or irrelevant. Since experts quickly recognize the most critical features in any one piece of information, they allocate their time efficiently, quickly identifying what is valuable and finding the right “hooks” with which to incorporate the most valuable information into existing knowledge. We are not experts, yet though. With that in mind, **this text also attempts to provide relevant explicit cues or prompts** that assist us in attending to those features that matter most.

Thus, before we jump into the course and the literature for this semester, it would benefit us to spend some time exploring the purpose and logic of the course, the way it is constructed, and what you are meant to get out of it:

* First, this course is divided into three chapters:
  + The Drive,
  + The Warrior, and
  + The Woman.
* Each story included in these sections has been collated together because they share a similar **deep structure** or **underlying meaning**.
* These specific texts were chosen to provide a diverse, equitable look at Ancient to Early literature; however, they were also chosen because of the deep, underlying structure of each text **as it is concerned with concepts, questions, or issues that are still relevant to our lives now**.

To provide some of those “expert cues,” the text also frames each chapter with a **supplementary concept,** giving a frame of reference to the story that is relevant ways to our lives now. Many of the texts we will explore are from times, locations, and perspectives (ancient), that will be very, very foreign to many of us.

Due to this fact, this course is a bit different from other literature surveys in the following ways:

* The number of readings has been reduced to be more digestible (hurrah).
* We spend more time with each work (only one per week, usually) to explore it in more depth and create meaningful connections to the text.
* Supplementary concepts are provided to give a *lens through which to analyze the literature.*
* Each module is designed to create a relationship that makes at least one of the texts relevant to you, us, or society at large, *here and now.*

Many students may feel a little anxious coming into a course on writing, especially if they have had a poor experience in schools or classes. At its core, though, English is about a thing we all want to do: express ourselves and be understood.

With that in mind, let me clear up one central myth; there is no such thing as a person who is born a “writer” or an “English” person. Success in this class is determined by your engagement with the literature, concepts, and our Early World Literature community. The more we work together and push each other, the better our work will be. I hope you enjoy this text and can connect with these pieces of ancient literature in a meaningful way.

# Chapter One: The Drive

# Introduction:

Ernest Becker is an author and philosopher who explores the modern person who is subsisting, in western modernity, living in a complete and total abundance culture, yet is starving at an existential level.

This could mean starving for a *real* sense of recognition in this world of digital ontologies, starving for identity, starving for a system of meaning that will endure throughout their otherwise daily conjugal visits with suffering. Given the circumstances, there is also a deep irony to having these problems: we are overpopulated and yet often feel alone. We have a million paths to follow in life and often feel completely lost. However, why do we care about creating a system of meaning in the first place? Where does the desire for purpose even come from? Our internal experience is not like other animals, where they don’t seem to sit around and agonize over whether their life has meaning.

On the symbolic side of our existence, in our heads somewhere, we can do incredible things: we create societies, we write symphonies, we see billions of light-years away, we make Gods, and we can contemplate the infinite. The tension, according to Becker, lies in the fact that we are capable of all these fantastic things, and then at the same time, on the biological side of our existence, we are incredibly fragile. If we take one wrong step off a curb, we may get flattened by a bus. Or we may get some unexpected illness nobody’s ever heard of. Becker is saying that there are so many ways to die, and it doesn’t matter if we have painted the most outstanding picture of all time and touched the lives of billions; we are always just one step away from someone having to go into your Wikipedia page and turn “is” into “was.”

Becker’s main point here is that human beings cannot function in the world while also being aware of their death constantly haunting their minds. It would be too painful. Once we become aware of our mortality, if we do not do something about it, we will be living in a constant state of dread. Philosophers describe this feeling in several different ways: they may call it an ambiguity, they may call it nausea, some call it an existential paradox, but regardless of what language we use to describe it, Becker is going to call this place being in a state of terror. Terror is induced by realizing that we are *limited* animals with *unlimited* horizons.

Ernest Becker’s “**heroic systems**,” found in *The Denial of Death,* **is our first supplementary concept** and is meant to set the tone for this module. We will be looking at the texts in this module: *Works and Days* and *Popol Vuh*, *Gilgamesh*, *The Inferno*, and *Don Quixote* **through the lens of Becker’s ideas**.

The question is simple: what drives us to do the things we do, and why do we create the systems of meaning that we have?

The title says it all. For Becker, the answer is also simple: **to distance ourselves from the fear of death**; however, and perhaps more importantly, another question arises: **Do we just accept social programming “unthinkingly” and “uncritically”** as Becker suggests,and, **if not**, are those systems of heroics worth our devotion?

## Here is the breakdown of this concept:

Humans, in some ways, are like all other creatures; we share a basic biological predisposition towards self-preservation and the interests of survival and reproduction. What makes us unique is that we have got an enormous forebrain. This allows us to do many things, including thinking in abstract and symbolic terms to the point where we can create “things” that do not exist (physically) or use our imagination to conceptualize something brand new and create them.

* We are also able to position ourselves in time. We can think about things that had happened in the past, even before we ever existed. We can think about things that might happen in the very distant future. We can imagine ourselves in an infinite number of potential or possible scenarios. However, if we realize that we will someday die, that anyone can die at any time, for reasons that no one could ever anticipate or control, most of us would not be able to get up in the morning if that is all we thought about. What our ancestors did rather ingeniously, albeit quite **unconsciously**, is to solve the problem of how to manage the **existential terror** that is gendered by the awareness of death, which is, in turn, a byproduct of our intelligence. Through the narrative of human-constructed beliefs about the nature of reality that we share with other people, culture hides or minimizes the anxiety of death by assigning value and meaning to our lives. All cultures provide an account of the origin of the universe.
* All cultures have prescriptions for how we should behave while we are here.
* All cultures have some hope of immortality either literally through heaven’s souls’ reincarnations or afterlives of the world's great religions.
  + Alternatively, people may realize that they will not be here forever, but they are still comforted by the possibility that a vestige of their existence will persist over time, perhaps
    - by having children
    - by amassing great fortunes up
    - by writing great books or maybe producing great works of art or scientific discoveries.

Becker outlines two major components to our Heroic systems. The **first component** in terror management theory is that individuals need to **sustain faith in a meaningful worldview**. The **second component** intones that individuals need to **feel** as **though they are valued, protected members or objects of significance within this worldview**. People would generally call this self-esteem. If we can sustain these two psychological constructs, then we can function relatively securely in the world. If these constructs are threatened, then we are going to feel anxious and compelled to defend them.

Thus, it was Ernest Becker who developed what we call the **Mortality Salience Hypothesis**: if culture serves a death-denying function, and people are reminded that they are going to die, this **inciting incident** should momentarily increase the need for the death-denying aspects of their beliefs about reality. Furthermore, this reaction should be reflected in their reactions to others who support those beliefs or who undermine those beliefs by either being hostile to or merely different from them.

* Contemporary Example: in a study with Municipal Court judges in Tucson, Arizona, judges have a clear set of values that are part of their world, and that is to uphold the law. So, what if we make some judges think about their death?
  + According to the “Mortality Salience Hypothesis,” *they should become more punitive toward a* *lawbreaker*. The conductors of this study had judges given questionnaires on a randomized basis that ask them about their death, while others were not given such a questionnaire. Next, the judges were asked to look at an actual court case. The most common case in Municipal Court in Tucson is the solicitation of prostitution. Judges in both the control and experiment groups were asked to recommend a bond. The study found that the judges who are reminded of their death before setting a bond for the prostitute recommended a bond of $455; control judges, *who were not reminded of their death*, set up an average bond of $50.

We do not think about this all that much. Consciously, in our daily lives, most psychological activity is entirely unconscious. We **repress** our concerns and thoughts about death, but it is underneath. It is outside of consciousness. For example, when people are reminded of their mortality by completing a death anxiety questionnaire while being interviewed in front of a funeral parlor or exposed to the word death that is flashed so rapidly on a computer screen (28 milliseconds) they do not know that they have even seen anything, they change their behavior to resist this awareness by doubling down on their **heroic system**. Christians, for example, become more derogatory towards Jewish and become more hostile towards Muslims. Germans sit further away from Turkish. Americans reminded of death become more physically aggressive to other Americans that do not share their political beliefs and more enthusiastic about preemptive nuclear, chemical, and biological attacks against countries who pose no direct threat to us. Iranians reminded of death are more supportive of suicide bombing and more willing to consider becoming martyrs themselves.

The human fear of death also contributes to our often hostile view of nature. After all, everything in nature is of finite duration and will eventually decay and die. Laboratory studies confirm that intimations of mortality increase our contempt for and disregard of nature. After thinking about their death, people deny that humans are animals; they display more negative attitudes towards animals and consider it more appropriate to kill animals for reasons other than food and medical research. When people are reminded of death, they become more uncomfortable with their bodies, including essential biological functions. Even *sex* becomes more aversive after one is reminded of death. Reminders of their mortality also make people more uncomfortable in natural settings and more opposed to cultivating their surroundings. They are also more willing to exploit natural resources, *such as forests*, for personal gain.

* Dutch psychologists showed Dutch people pictures of forests and pictures of suburban neighborhoods with lawns and structures. What they found is that, in controlled conditions, the Dutch participants like the forests more than the suburban neighborhoods, but when they were reminded of their mortality, they prefer the neighborhoods to the forest.

There is a strong positive correlation between death anxiety and materialism: people with high death anxiety tend to be much more materialistic. Following death reminders, people have higher fiscal aspirations and say they intend to spend more on clothing and entertainment. Interestingly, people's death anxiety is reduced upon receiving and counting money.

Through the practice of rituals, people imagined that they took firm control of the material world while transcending that world by fashioning their invisible projects, which made them supernatural and raised them over and above material decay and death. Ritual is a preindustrial technique of manufacture.

To state this concept with brevity: when we became self-aware, we became aware of the end, which led us to feel a profound sense of insignificance this led to the crippling anxiety that we had to counter by creating culture: activities and beliefs that would give us the illusion that we are persons of value in an engineered world of meaning.

The central property of these human sources of self-esteem is that they constitute a narrowing of focus strategies. Like sainthood or being the greatest knight, It is hero-worshipping and hero-worship can be romantic, political, martial, or even fandom, looking at you *Firefly* fans. It is the obsession with money, like *The* *Wolf of Wallstreet*. Kids worship their parents. Soldiers worship honor, weapons, and a special comrade. Everybody worships sex, and our homes have magical power: they display our wealth, prestige, and value to the world. Ernest Baker calls all of these example’s **fetishes**, or our particular heroic system on which we become fixated. Realizing we are insignificant in the big scheme of things, we focus on a small or narrow aspect of regal or invented reality where we can more easily gain a sense of personal significance; this, unfortunately, makes us oblivious and intolerant of other realities, including a broader reality that would allow a more rational less destructive appraisal of the world. Our cultural fetishes give us blinders and lead to a self-perpetuating process of competition for scarce cultural resources, such as literal needs for survival to higher salaries or fashion that would grant us self-esteem.

Furthermore, the idea that history is cyclic can render any progress obtained meaningless because, if it is cyclical, then there is only *moral* gain and loss. Indeed, the idea of moral progress, believing that we have come a long way despite our destruction of other species, imbues the course of history with meaning. With recent reports of 58% of the Earth’s surface featuring unsafe levels of biodiversity, the long-term survival prospects of humanity today are worse than they were in prehistory.

All the marvels of modern technology might have only served to provide increased longevity and material resources to a few overpopulated generations of humans at the expense of perhaps hundreds of thousands of billions of humans in the future. The attempt to achieve symbolic immortality through progress will have produced the opposite effect – a vast increase in mortality, perhaps leading to the extinction of the human species.

What do you think? Is the fear of death the “worm at the core”?

For a deeper understanding of how these concepts apply to our lives now, today, take the time to reflect on the following podcast episode:

<https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/useful-delusions/>

https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/creating-god/

# Hesiod, Works, and Days

## Background



Hesiod Portrait

*Works and Days* is one of the earliest sources of Greek religion and culture that still exists. Hesiod was probably roughly contemporaneous with Homer (another author we will study) who wrote the Iliad and the Odyssey. The consensus is that Hesiod was a real person; however, the works attributed to Hesiod almost certainly contain additions from later writers, which represent cultural ideas or things that occur after Hesiod’s lifetime.

Hesiod lived some time in the late 8th to mid-7th century B.C.E. B.C.E. stands for “Before Common Era” and is the same as “B.C.,” so remember, when we are talking about B.C. or B.C.E., the numbers go backward. Autobiographical information from Hesiod from his poetry reveals to us that he was the son of an immigrant to the Greek Peninsula; his father immigrated there from elsewhere. Hesiod was a Shepherd by trade and lived on or near Mount Helicon where he was visited by the **muses**: the divine beings that Greeks believed to inspire all music, art, and stories. They visited him while he was working as a Shepherd and inspired him to become a poet. We also know that he was successful as a poet.

*Works and Days* is a mythical history of humanity but is also a very **didactic poem**: a poem that instructs either in terms of morals or by providing knowledge of philosophy, religion, arts, science, or skills. It is about the proper ways of life and the way that we should live life. It is important to note that Hesiod did not invent or originate the stories mentioned in his poetry. Instead, he seems to be closer to the later period or the end of a tradition. Therefore, his work is a synthesis or a combination of long-established preexisting stories that people would have been familiar with. What is essential is the way he put them together.

In his works, he talks about the gods, so we need to know a bit about Greek religion. Greek religion was **polytheistic** rather than **monotheistic** like Christianity, Islam, or Judaism. Followers of the ancient Greek religion believed in multiple divine or supernatural beings. The religion is also **syncretic** asancient Greeks combined religious traditions from many different sources and cultures that they met, resulting in the existence of multiple beings associated with the same objects or ideas. For example, in both Artemis and Selene, two different meanings are associated with the moon. There are many other examples of this, giving way to the many different conflicts and competitions between various gods over rulership. This may mirror, in some ways, the historical conflict between different cultures as they came together.

## Summary

*Works and Days* is primarily a **didactic** poem meant to instruct morals and behavior to the common person – the farmer, the worker, the everyday person. So, this is about human affairs far more than it is about cosmological affairs, one of the things that differentiates it from Hesiod’s other work, the *Theogony*. It is a mix of moral and ethical as well as practical advice. The framing of *Works and Days* is Hesiod addressing himself to Perses, his dissolute wayward brother, as Perses attempted to take more than his fair share of their father's inheritance by bribing the local rulers through trickery and guile. Hesiod admonishes him for his lack of discipline, his laziness, and his cheating nature. While Hesiod repeatedly tries to instruct him in virtue, the poem is not directed only to Perses. It is through Perses that Hesiod addresses all those who wish to know right from wrong.

One of the most important themes of *Works and Days* that we see early on is the decline of humanity. Hesiod lists the various ages of man while saying that this present era, *the one in which he lives*, is the most degraded. Humanity, to Hesiod, has lost its virtue, and as a result, we must suffer and toil. Labor is what the modern man must endure, and there is no hope. The great beings of the past are dead and gone, and our lot is only going to be suffering and toil with no possibility of escape until death.

The two cardinal virtues that Hesiod champions in *Works and Days* are **justice** and **work**. He says that justice is necessary for any possibility of peace and prosperity. *If there is prosperity without justice, there can be no peace*. Attempting to define what justice means, Hesiod attempts to go beyond just human law and says that there is some universal principle that defines justice. Work, on the other hand, is the lot of all humans because of our degraded nature. We must work to survive, but there is also goodness in work. The honest worker, the person who works hard, works right, and earns well through that manner, will achieve blessings and glory, while the one who achieves work through cheating or violence will ultimately be punished.

Hesiod revisits the story of Zeus and Prometheus from his previous work, *Theogony,* but in *Works and Days* Hesiod speaks about different aspects: the focus is on Pandora, the first woman, who is sent as punishment for humanity because Prometheus stole fire and gave it to humans. Furthermore, there is an excellent description of just how beautiful Pandora is and the great attributes that she has all in juxtaposition with her negative aspects and all the suffering that she brings into the world by opening Pandora’s jar or, depending on the translation, Pandora's box – a famous story that many have probably heard.

Hesiod then moves to describe the ages of men. First, there is the Golden Age, and these human beings lived a carefree life without pain or suffering.

* We should note that Pandora does not come until later in the ages, although it is not entirely clear when she shows up.

The Golden Age was all men living in peace and abundance, but for some reason, they all died.

After this, we get the Silver age, the second generation of men, and they also lived carefree lives. Hesiod describes these men as childlike, almost as spoiled, and he says they were very reckless and violent. ***They refused to honor the gods***, and for this, they were punished and killed off.

Next is the Bronze Age; these are humans of great strength and violence as well as being dreadful and mighty. Their weapons and tools were all made of bronze, and he describes them as being consumed by violence and warfare.

The Bronze Age gives way to The Heroic Age. They are similar in many ways, but the Heroic Age is better and *more* ***just*** than their Bronze predecessors. These are the great heroes of Greek legend, the heroes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*: Achilles, Hercules, Perseus, and Odysseus.

Finally, we get to the Iron Age, the modern world, of which Hesiod wishes he were not a member. He explicitly describes how his contemporaries have declined in their morals and ethics. Neighbors do not help each other; people do not honor the gods; the Kings take advantage of their subjects, and subjects defy their Kings; children defy their parents, etc. This is an age of decline and loose morality, and Hesiod says that this age, too, will eventually be destroyed.

# Popol Vuh

## Background



Popol Vuh Twins

*The Popol Vuh*, or Popol Wuj in the K’iche’ language, is the creation story of the Maya. *The Popol Vuh* is a foundational and sacred narrative of the Kʼicheʼ people from long before the Spanish conquest of Mexico. One translation of the text is: “Book of the Community,” which narrates the Maya creation account including the tales of the Hero Twins and the K’iche genealogies.

In the K’iche region of present-day Guatemala, around 1550, an unnamed Maya scribe wrote down his culture's creation myths. He wrote in the K’iche language using the modern Spanish alphabet. The book was treasured by the people of the town of Chichicastenango, and it was hidden from the Spanish, who had burned many of their texts. In 1701, a Spanish priest named Francisco Ximénez gained the trust of the community. They allowed him to see the book, and he dutifully copied it into a history account he was writing around 1715. He copied the K’iche text and translated it into Spanish as he did so.

In its original form, the work was a single, long poem. It was only divided into separate books once it was translated into European languages. The intention of the original author seems to have been to preserve the experience of hearing the poem recited and to experience the events personally as the tale unfolded. This practice is in keeping with oral traditions in other cultures such as those of ancient Greece and Mesopotamia, among others.

## Summary

*The Popol Vuh* is the Mayan story of creation as well as the Hero Twins and their victory over the Lords of Xibalba (the underworld). It begins with the origin of everything that is and proceeds to the account of this dramatic conflict. Explanations of the creation of humans, animals, the powers of the deities, as well as the relationships among gods, animals, and humans appear during the narrative. The story of the struggle between the Hero Twins – Hunahpu (One Blowgunner) and Xbalanque (Little Jaguar Sun, or Jaguar Deer), and the Lords of Xibalba also yields rich characterizations of Mayan social ethics, hierarchies, and cosmology.

In this story, the Creators, Heart of Sky, and six other deities, including the Feathered Serpent, wanted to create human beings with hearts and minds who could “keep the days.” Their first attempt to create people from mud failed. Their second attempt to make humans from wood also failed because they did not have hearts and minds, and the gods destroyed them with a great flood. In the third and final form, humans were created out of yellow and white maize; they could talk, worship, and glorify the gods; however, there was still a problem: they were as divine as the gods. The gods decided to put a fog over human eyes.

[Social Orders and Creation Stories](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBbTkzakiM8&list=PL8dPuuaLjXtNCG9Vq7vdvJytS-F-xGi7_&index=7)

[Hesiod Source: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0132%3Acard%3D272>

Lines 42 – 319]

[Popol Vuh Source:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/56550/56550-h/56550-h.htm#xd26e189>

The First Book (all)

The Second Book (all)]

## Analysis (Works and Days and Popol Vuh)



Popol Vuh, Creation

Several of the works in this cluster illustrate at least a rudimentary conception of natural law theory, including reference to a binding, knowable moral code that humans are obliged to follow or suffer divine retribution. In the introduction to this chapter, it was mentioned that with the techniques of ritual, people attempted to take firm control of the material world and at the same time transcended that world by fashioning their invisible projects, which made them supernatural and raised them over and above material decay and death. Ritual is a preindustrial technique of manufacture. Creation myths such as *Works and Days* and *Popol Vuh* illustrate this notion of ritual storytelling to create meaning.

*Works and Days* invoke important figures in Greek mythology, Zeus, Pandora, and Prometheus, to explain why people cannot live peaceful, uncomplicated lives. Hesiod depicts Pandora as accidentally bringing evil into the world rather than being evil herself. He gives another explanation for the presence of evil in the world, as well, depicting humanity as gradually degenerating "from the age of gold to the age of iron.”

Likewise, in *Popol Vuh*, we see this process of meaning-making played out: the failed attempt to create people from mud, the lack of consciousness of the people made of wood, and, ultimately, the people made of maize whose purpose is made clear: our meaning is the veneration of our creators. There is, however, a twist as well. Despite being the final creation, humanity requires a fog of ignorance placed upon them because the gods did not want to share their divine truths; they presumed we would no longer worship them if we knew.

Are we better off under the Veil of Maya?

# Gilgamesh

## Background



Gilgamesh

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the oldest pieces of literature in history. It is also considered the first epic and one of the greatest works of ancient Mesopotamia. The popularity of the hero Gilgamesh, as well as his struggle with meaning in the face of human mortality, account for the prolific spread of Gilgamesh throughout the Near East in ancient times, around the second millennium B.C.E. Yet, as with all things, Gilgamesh was forgotten. It was not rediscovered until the 19th century by archeologists.

Gilgamesh’s kingdom, the city-state of Uruk in South Mesopotamia, is in modern-day Iraq. The monumental walls of the city were ten kilometers long and may have had as many as nine hundred towers. Parts of Uruk, and those famous walls, can still be seen to this day. Gilgamesh, the historical king, ruled around 2700 B.C.E., but the earliest story of Gilgamesh does not appear until 2100 B.C.E. The story is written in cuneiform script: wedge-shaped characters engraved into clay or stone.

The final revision of the epic is attributed to a Babylonian priest named Sin-leqi-unninni, who lived around 1200 B.C.E. His version contains eleven chapters divided over eleven clay tablets. New fragments of the epic are still being discovered in archaeological excavations, and some pieces are still fragmented or missing.

## Summary

Gilgamesh is the quintessential epic hero. His struggle to face the mortality of his friend Enkidu’s and his own humanity, and to derive meaning from that struggle is universal. In the epic, he appears as “two-thirds divine” and “one-third human”: the offspring of the goddess Ninsun, who appears in the shape of a wild cow, and a human father.

While he may be a hero, at the beginning of the epic, Gilgamesh is the definition of a tyrant. He is arrogant, brutal, and he oppresses his subjects. He even goes so far as to demand the rights of a husband on the wedding night. When his people entreat the gods to intervene, they create Enkidu. Enkidu is raised in the wilderness, and he is Gilgamesh’s equal in strength and prowess. After Enkidu becomes a threat to the functioning of society in Uruk, Gilgamesh decides to tame Enkidu by seducing him with a harlot, who uses her wiles to convince Enkidu to bath, cloth himself, and partake of societal goods: bread and beer.

Gilgamesh’s and Enkidu’s first meeting are contentious, and they fight to a draw. This fight, however, cements their friendship. Wasting no time, they settle on their first epic feat: slay the giant Humbaba, who guards Enlil’s great Cedar Forest, in present-day Lebanon. They destroy Humbaba and float the great Cedar Forest down the Euphrates River. This success is not without punishment, however; the dying giant lays a curse on the duo, and the god Enlil is enraged.

The second remarkable feat of the duo does not turn out so well. Gilgamesh’s victory over the great Humbaba attracts the attention of the goddess Ishtar, who wishes to take Gilgamesh as her own. Gilgamesh still struggles with hubris and chides Ishtar harshly, rather than politely resisting her advances. She calls down the Bull of Heaven to destroy both Gilgamesh and Enkidu. They can conquer the Bull of Heaven but not without a price. The gods believe the duo have overstepped and that an example must be set. There is a gap in the text here, but, ultimately, the gods settle on afflicting Enkidu with death because Gilgamesh is king.

Gilgamesh mourns his friend. When a worm crawls out of Enkidu’s nose, however, Gilgamesh is forced to come face to face with the truth: everything dies, including him. He is terrified by the prospect of dying. Gilgamesh forsakes his kingdom and sets out on a journey to find Utanapishtim, the only human known to defeat death and the survivor of the Great Flood. This journey is long, challenging, and full of trials. Ultimately Gilgamesh must cross the waters of death to arrive on Utanapishtim’s doorstep. Utanapishtim and his wife recount their experience of surviving the Great Flood, which is very similar to Noah and the Great Flood in *Genesis*. They give Gilgamesh one last hope: a magic plant that can restore his youth. The plant is stolen by a serpent, however, and Gilgamesh is forced to return empty-handed and still mortal. By the end, however, he is a profoundly changed man.

[The Epic of Gilgamesh](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWppk7-Mti4&list=PL8dPuuaLjXtNCG9Vq7vdvJytS-F-xGi7_&index=29)

[Gilgamesh Source:

http://www.gutenberg.org/files/56550/56550-h/56550-h.htm#xd26e189

All tablets, excepting Tablet 8.]

## Analysis:



Tablet of Gilgamesh

At its core, Gilgamesh is the first and prototypical "**Heroes Journey**," so it should come as no surprise that this text deals explicitly with the idea of **“heroic systems**.**”** The Ninevite version of the epic begins with a prologue in praise of Gilgamesh, who is two-thirds divine and one-third human, the great builder, warrior, and knower of all things on land and sea.

This is similar to what Christian theologian Blaze Pascal says about humanity, “Man is neither angel nor beast, and unhappily whoever wants to act the angel acts the beast.” Gilgamesh's conflict is a central conflict of our species, and when we meet him, he is very much the beast.

In books like *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and *The Power of Myth*, Campbell reports on the deep structure of narrative that he found while comparing the myths and legends of many cultures using **inductive reasoning**. “**The Hero’s Journey**” was his all-embracing metaphor for the deep inner journey of transformation that heroes in every time and place seem to share: a path that leads them through great movements of departure, initiation, and returns. All these stages are divided into three larger sections. The first part, the **Departure**, includes the following stages:

1. The Status Quo
2. The Call to Adventure
3. Assistance
4. Departure

The second part, the **Initiation**, includes the following stages:

1. Trials
2. Approach to the Innermost Cave
3. Crisis
4. Treasure
5. Result

The third part, the **Return**, includes the following stages:

1. Return
2. Resurrection

When we first meet Gilgamesh, he is a bit of a bastard. Power, it seems, has corrupted him, and his people cry out for help. The gods’ answer and Enkidu are born. Enkidu is Gilgamesh's equal, and in a sense, he "tames" Gilgamesh in the same way Shamhat tames Enkidu's impulses. There is one key difference in those impulses, however: Enkidu's are fueled with purpose and compassion, whereas Gilgamesh's are selfish and cruel. Why?

# The Inferno

## Background



Dante and Virgil

Dante Alighieri, the author of *The Divine Comedy*, was born in Florence, a northern Italian city-state that was central to his political and spiritual stance. Around 1300 C.E., Florence, like many Italian city-states, was caught in a large-scale confrontation between those who thought the Papacy and the church should possess absolute power and those who thought that the city-state should be independent of the Papacy. Alighieri wrote about this conflict in *The Monarchia*, which was promptly banned for seeking to place limitations on the political power of the church. This ban was not lifted until 1881.

These two parties were referred to as the Guelphs (who supported the Pope) and the Ghibellines (who supported the Holy Roman Emperor). Unfortunately for Dante, the Guelphs became dominant within the city of Florence. There was, however, a schism in the Guelph party: The Black Guelphs continued to support Pope Boniface VIII, and the White Guelphs had come to despise his despotism. Naturally, Dante sided with the White Guelphs. However, while he was in Rome, the Black Guelphs seized power of Florence and banned Alighieri from reentering Florence in pain of being burned at stake. This sentence was not revoked until 2008, and Alighieri was never able to return home.

*The* *Divine Comedy* is made up of one hundred **cantos**, which are divided into three sections of thirty-three. The extra canto is the introductory canto at the beginning of *The Inferno*. This numerological structure is reflected in the landscape as well: Hell is divided into nine circles, each containing a different category of a sinner, each with its unique punishment. The constant play on the number three and its cube (3x3) highlights the Trinitarian theology underlying the structure of the entire *Comedy*.

## Summary

Map of the Layers of Hell according to Dante's Inferno. 

Description automatically generated

Layers of Hell

Our story begins with just Virgil, the guide, and Dante as they begin at the gates of Hell inscribed with, “Abandon all hope ye who enter here.”

They pass the gate and enter what is called ante-Inferno, which is before “we” reach what is called the layers of Hell. This area is designed for people who have had the choice between good and evil and could not choose, so they have been rejected by both Heaven and Hell. These prisoners are constantly tormented and chased by hornets and snakes, forcing them into action. There are Angels here as well, those that chose neither side in the war of good versus evil. They are also tormented.

Virgil and Dante come to a great River, which serves as the boundary of Hell and where many souls wait for a boat ride from Charon, who appears in Greek mythology on the River into Hades. You will notice a lot of Greek and Roman mythology seeping into this poem as we go on. Charon crosses with the duo, and we encounter the first real circle of Hell. This circle is called Limbo. The souls here are “virtuous pagans.” They have done great deeds, lived morally good lives, but either did not accept Christianity, lived long before it existed, or were never baptized. God granted passage of a few figures such as Noah and Moses to enter Heaven, but it is phrased as a rare occurrence. This is where Virgil, other poets, and philosophers exist, so that Virgil will return here after their adventure. There is no physical punishment but rather a general sadness that they are so close to Heaven but forever kept outside.

The second circle of Hell they approach houses those guilty of lust. These are those that gave in to pleasure and are now cursed with eternity amid a raging storm wind; it is strong enough to whip some about uncontrollably, ravaging them against the rocks.

The third circle of Hell continues to rain, but now it is filth raining from the sky, and those that were gluttonous and consumed in excess lay on the ground unable to move, forever pelted with debris and sewage. In this level, Dante also sees the monster Cerberus prowling. In Greek mythology, Cerberus is the three-headed dog that keeps souls in Hades. Interestingly, Dante continues to mix mythology and religion here.

Like those that were gluttonous, the fourth circle is dedicated to those who suffered the sin of greed. Here we find a demon named Plutus, who in Greek mythology was the God of money and wealth. The greedy are forever battling each other, rolling giant boulders into each other in a constant jousting match. There is no reprieve from the battle.

The fifth circle is against a giant river, the River Styx, where the wrathful and angry are kept fighting each other forever, clawing and biting in anger. The sullen and gloomy are also kept here, submerged under the water and forced to breathe and choked on the black mud.

Withdrawing further from the world, Virgil and Dante cross the River and approach the lower half: the worst of the worst. There is a city here, and it is guarded by fallen Angels, who turn Virgil and Dante away: “No living man may enter Dis!” the fallen angels’ shout. This is the first place where Virgil holds no sway or influence and may not be able to protect Dante. However, a messenger from Heaven arrives and tells these Angels that they should open the gates, and they reluctantly obey.

Virgil and Dante enter the sixth circle of Hell. They find themselves walking into a graveyard with tombstones covered in flames: here lie the heretics, or those who promoted other false religions, or the rejection of religious and political “norms.”

The Seventh Circle is home to violence, and there are many types.

1. The outer ring is for those who are violent to others, like murderers and warlords.
2. The middle ring is for those who are violent to themselves committing acts of suicide.
3. Lastly, the inner ring is for those that are violent against God, such as blasphemers against God and violence against nature and God's creation.

Virgil and Dante meet and ask a creature named Geryon to take them to the 8th circle of Hell. This beast is a symbol of fraud, as he is the face of a man who tricks you while he stings you with his scorpion tail. In this story, he has massive wings and flies our heroes to the next level, which is for fraud itself. Within the eighth circle is another called the Malebolge (“Evil Pockets”), which houses ten separate bolgias (“ditches”), with demons torturing people all around those that have deceived and manipulated others during their life; this includes pimps and sexual manipulators, as well as gamblers and people who created false money. We also have fortunetellers with their heads placed backward, so they can only see behind them. These punishments are terrifying yet apt to their crimes.

In the final circle of Hell, we have Satan himself: a giant 3 headed beast that is forever flapping his giant wings. Contrary to popular belief, this level of Hell is frozen, and most of Satan’s body is encased in ice. He is forever punishing the three greatest betrayers in history: Judas, who betrayed Jesus Christ, and Brutus and Cassius, who betrayed Julius Caesar. There are other men wholly frozen in ice, those that have betrayed their family, their God, or their country. As an author, Dante makes some sharp criticism in these last few circles, including referencing political parties and real people. They all exist in the deepest bowels of Hell for what they (maybe) did. Virgil grabs Dante and they climb down Satan’s frozen body until they end up at his feet, which is now somehow turned upside down. Down has become up.

[History Makers: Dante (Overly Sarcastic Productions), or](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_uFVG_9NK0Y)

[Dante’s Inferno](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LYC7Huhp7Q) (Thug Notes)

[Inferno Source:

https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/langdon-the-divine-comedy-vol-1-inferno-english-trans

Inferno I-VI, Inferno XII – XIV, Inferno XXXII – End]

## Analysis:



Satan in Hell

For the sake of this course, we are going to read *The Inferno* differently:

* as a personal account of a universal journey.

This, of course, begs the question: what kind of journey? While the theological connection to Christianity is obvious, *The Inferno*, especially in consideration of the entire *Divine Comedy*, can be read as a guide **to manifest a healthy, psychologically balanced mind**.

* **First**, we need to talk a little about trajectory and geometry. Wait, is this not a literature course? I get it but let me explain. First, a **comedy**, in the Greek sense, does not mean “something that makes us laugh.” What it does explain is the trajectory of the story:
* A comedy moves from a place of conflict (like waking up in Hell) to a place of fulfillment (like arriving in Heaven). In a sense, we can call a comedy a story with a “happy” outcome.
  1. In Dante’s understanding of geometry, the human trajectory, or the direction that we move, is **linear**. It may help to think of how we experience time to understand Dante’s point: we are born, we make decisions, we are held accountable for those decisions.
  2. Angels, however, always move in a circular trajectory because they exist outside of time; this can be seen both in the movement of the fallen angels throughout the text (constantly circling) and the punishment of Satan. When we consider these two trajectories together, both linear and circular, we are presented **with the physical structure of hell itself**: a spiral, funneling to the point of contention.
* **Second**, we also need to understand how this text was meant to be understood from a theological perspective. According to Thomas Aquinas, there are four ways that every theological text (in the Christian tradition) must be read.
  1. Historically or Literally
     1. E.g., Moses’ exodus from Egypt in the Bible. This is considered a historical event, where the Jewish people were removed from bondage on a literal level.
  2. Allegorically
     1. E.g., Moses’ exodus is also understood as an allegory for how Christ will lead humanity out of “moral” bondage.
  3. Morally or Tropological (in the now)
     1. E.g., Moses’ exodus, mirrored in Christ’s promise, is meant to be applied to the reader of the Bible at the moment: they are supposed to exit their moral bondage through personal choice.
  4. Anagogical
     1. E.g., Moses’ exodus is also mirrored in revelations, as “all humanity” is removed from the bondage of this plane of existence and enters the “promised” land.
* Thus, with one story (Moses’ exodus from Egypt), the audience is presented with four ways of understanding that story. Dante expects the same of us as we read the *Divine Comedy*.

In this way, if we read *The Inferno* with the theological framework Aquinas had in mind, every reading of the text, *aside from the historical*, not only can but should be applied to the reader, both in the present and in the future.

While we are on the subject of reading the text historically, however, we should clear a few things up: due to the inclusions of Dante's "political enemies," some critics view *The Inferno* as a pseudo fan fiction, where Dante punishes those he disagrees with.

Also, like a few of the texts we are going to study this semester, Dante made a radical choice in his choice of composition: he wrote the Divine Comedy in the “common” language of the time (Italian), rather than the “educated” language (Latin).

Why is that a big deal?

Well, most people did not know how to read Latin! Those that could were not common people, and they considered Latin to be the only viable language for those properly educated. So, if the "people" had no understanding of Latin, and all literature of the time had been recorded in Latin, could the "common" person understand all those literary references we do, e.g., Tristan and Isolde, or Achilles, Paris, and Helen (we will meet them soon)? Naturally, the answer is no. They would, however, understand all those current political references. It is always important to remember the audience. Furthermore, it is imperative for the logic of The Inferno that whoever is reading can understand the inferences because **Dante uses “Type to Anti-type” and “Figure Fulfillment” to build his allegory**. The only real difference here between **figure fulfillment** and the **Anti-Type** is one of time and direction. The story of Isaac and Abraham is a biblical story that demonstrates figure fulfillment, as the sacrifice of his son would mirror and foreshadow God’s sacrifice of his son in the future, whereas Pope Celestine V is the Anti-Type for all cowards that preceded him. Here are some related examples:

Isaac and Abraham

Pope Celestine V (Canto III)

Francesca Da Rimini (V)

Ugolino della Gherardesca (XXXIII)

Guido da Montefetro (XXVII)

The Crucifixion

The Anti-type of all Cowards

before him (e.g., Pontius Pilate)

(Examples of the anti-type?)

(Political Betrayers)

Ulysses (XXVI)Now that all the complicated background is out of the way let me outline what this work is about: **the will**. More specifically, Dante’s journey is about the weakness of the will and how to obtain **syndesis** between the will and reason. To put it simply:

* Does having, knowing, or understanding the definition of justice makes you just?
  + Then it is a problem of the will.

Syndesis is concerned with one’s reason and one’s will being joined: that what one says is the right thing (adultery is a sin), and what one does (not committing adultery for any reason) are the same. It is also worth noting that, through the geometry discussed above, it is also apparent that Dante based the structure of Hell on a common practice at the time: Labyrinthian meditation. Author DeAnna Evan’s puts it this way:

“Just as Theseus, without the guidance of Ariadne’s thread, would have been entangled in the labyrinth at Crete, hopelessly lost, facing certain death, so Christians would become entrapped and lost in this world, unable to attain salvation, without the divine grace extended by Christ. This grace was the thread by means of which the faithful negotiated their way through a sinful, perilous world, ultimately triumphed over evil, and reached Paradise, symbolized by the defeat of the Minotaur in the myth and by reaching the centers of the church labyrinths.”

The Inferno is a labyrinth of the mind; it is a labyrinth in which we are meant to confront the gap between our reason and our will and achieve syndesis.

# Don Quixote

## Background



Don Quixote and Sancho

We are going to be discussing one of the most important and influential works in all classic literature: *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de La Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes. A little background on the author himself: Miguel de Cervantes was born on or around September 29th, 1547. Not a lot is known about his early life; it is theorized the young Miguel studied under the Jesuits, learning to read and write. His father was a Hidalgo, a part of the nobility; the family itself was poor, and we do know that Miguel ultimately left Spain in 1570. As a result of disagreements with local law enforcement, young Miguel had wounded a man in a duel. Making his way to Italy, he joined up with the Spanish forces stationed there. While there, he fought in the naval battle of Lepanto in 1571 against the Turks. Cervantes served with distinction despite injuring his left arm, a wound that would plague him throughout the remainder of his life. He continued to serve for the next five years until 1575. He was ultimately furloughed and was making his way back to Spain when, despite having served with the military for five years, Miguel was captured by Barbary Pirates and taken to Algiers to serve as a slave for another five years. Miguel attempted to escape three times but was unsuccessful each time.

In 1580, he was finally ransomed and did make his way back to Spain. It was at this point that he began to write plays, and because he was ultimately unable to make his living through his pen, he a job as a tax collector in the province of Andalucía. Tax collecting proved to be just as unpopular a job in the 1580s as it is today, and a young Cervantes wound up in several tussles and disputes. He served time in jail several times. It was while he was imprisoned in Sevilla that he wrote the introduction to the first part of Don Quixote and came up with the idea for his ingenious Hidalgo. Don Quixote appeared before the public in 1605, the first part having been printed in 1604. The book proved successful and sold out several printings. Cervantes spent the following ten years in crafting the second part of his famous novel. Unfortunately, before Miguel could publish his genuine second part, a false second part of the adventures of Don Quixote appeared before the public in 1614. The book was written under the pseudonym of Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda. Cervantes published his actual second book shortly thereafter.

In Don Quixote, Cervantes draws attention to how the imagined “realities” of chivalric legends gained credibility in Spanish society and literature. Instead of indicating their fictitious components, chivalric romances often presented themselves as historical accounts and referenced other well-known sources to add realism to the imagined “realities” they created. In the prólogo to Don Quixote, Cervantes complains “to a friend” that he does not have enough learned references for anyone to take his story seriously. His friend replies, telling Cervantes, “no hay más sino que vos procuréis nombrar estos nombres, o tocar estas historias en la vuestra, que aquí he dicho, y dejadme a mí el cargo de poner las anotaciones y acotaciones” (12) “all you have to do is to manage to quote these names or refer to these stories I have mentioned, and leave it to me to insert the annotations and quotations” (Ormsby 12). The author also prefaces his story with sonnets and letters from fictitious persons of importance. Cervantes mimics both the **archetypal** tale of the chivalric knight with his tale, as well as how writers of chivalric tales would fabricate many references to produce ethos. By filling the physical reality of his novel with a prólogo full of references to the Bible and antiquity and fictitious sonnets and letters, Cervantes invites his readers to read the work as a parody of the mythos of chivalric culture and books of chivalry.

## Summary

### Part 1 – 1605

When the story finally opens, we meet the protagonist, a man named Alonso Quijano. This guy is old, and he is not your typical protagonist; we do not get his actual age, but we will say he is sixty or so, about the age of our author. For the 16th century, that age would be well into the nineties in modern life expectancy. He is described as old, scraggly, and tall. Quijano spends all his time reading books, and not just any books: Romantic novels with the Knight Errant hero, in shining armor, and the damsel in distress. He spends his days obsessively reading these books. The narrator intones that Quijano has lost it, or at least, according to those around him. He is to the point that not only does he read the books all the time, but he starts to believe that they are real and that he himself is a Knight in shining armor.

Thus convinced, he decides that he is going to fully embody his role as the Knight in shining armor and go out into the world and live out the stories in his books. The first story is about how he gets ready to go out into the world: he commandeers his grandfather or great grandfather’s armor (from a time when the Knight Errant was a significant part of Spanish society); this old, rusted armor has green oxidation all over it, and he twines it together with string. He tries to test how durable it is, so he runs with this Lance that he also picked up from his grandfather’s stash, and the armor crumbles apart. He ties it up again with more string (and maybe some duct tape, or whatever the equivalent duct tape was in the 16th century), and this time he does not even try to test it. This demonstrates the depth of Quijano’s delusion. He cannot test it anymore because if he sees it is falling apart, he is going to start falling apart.

When Don Quixote arrives at the inn, he thinks that it is a castle, and the prostitutes are beautiful maidens. The dwarf opens the drawbridge for him to enter his imaginary world. Everyone in the inn laughs at him because of his ridiculous thoughts and actions except for one man who decides to play along with Quixote’s imagination and knights him so that he can leave immediately without hurting anyone else.

The innkeeper advises Don Quixote that knights need to carry some extra clothes and money. On his way back to La Mancha, he hears someone crying from a bush. He discovers Andres, who says that John Haldudo the Rich is whipping him for no good reason. The master claims that Andres owes him unpaid wages, but Andres insists that the master is lying about this. Quixote sides with the boy against his master and thinks justice has been served when the master agrees to pay him promptly. However, once Don Quixote leaves, it becomes clear that justice has not really been done at all because Haldudo continues beating up on poor Andres.

Every Knight must possess three things: an appropriate name, a big noble steed, and the most important, a fair maiden with an appropriate name. Don Quixote de La Mancha is born. La Mancha is a place in Spain, but La Mancha also means stained, so Cervantes is suggesting naming him Don Quixote to mean “of the stained one”, or of the marked one, which will be important to the Analysis. He has a horse, but here is the problem: his horse is not a noble steed but a work horse. He is not only a workhorse, but he is also an antique. Finally, a knight needs a proper lady in waiting to dedicate all his victories to. He knows a woman in town whose name is Aldonza Lorenzo. While this sounds like a nice name, back then, it was the equivalent of a “commoner,” so he knows that she is going to need a better name. When Quixote is extolling his deeds to everyone and other knights ask what his lady's name is, it must be proper. Thus, Aldonza Lorenzo becomes Dulcinea del Toboso.

Don Quixote has returned to his home in La Mancha, but he still believes that he is a knight. His niece and the others try to convince him otherwise, but they cannot. When they discuss which, books need to be burned, Don Quixote interrupts them. Specifically, Don Quixote is upset because they have blocked his entrance into the library. After Don Quixote is put to bed, the housekeeper burns all the books. Shortly after leaving again, Don Quixote meets a man named Sancho Panza, when Don Quixote realizes that he needs a squire because all the nights in old Romance novels have a squire who accompanies them. He therefore convinces Sancho to join him as his squire. Sancho Panza follows Quixote because Quixote promises him an island to rule. Sancho Panza, who is Quixote’s foil, is in many ways the exact opposite of Quixote: he is a short, fat, and little man who rides a donkey. Later in their adventures, the duo come into a field full of windmills, which, off in the distance, Don Quixote has mistaken for giants. He turns to Sancho Panza and commands him to charge the giants with him. Sancho, of course, disagrees. Quixote is quickly defeated by the windmill after attempting to charge it with his lance. Quixote looks at the whole situation and immediately comes up with a new story. He says that a wizard must have enchanted these Giants to look, act, feel, and behave physically like windmills. In this scene, we see how far Don Quixote is willing to go.

The two continue their adventures, which are incredibly funny but also have dark satirical undertones. In one of them, he attacks a group of monks, thinking that they have imprisoned a princess; in another, he battles a herd of sheep. In almost every encounter in the first book, Don Quixote, Sancho, or both end up being beaten. In one such encounter, we meet a shepherdess, Marcela, who refuses to be courted or married despite her beauty, which makes all men angry at her for rejecting their advances. Don Quixote listens to all the lonely shepherds who have been rejected by Marcela. However, there is a twist: Marcela shows up in person to flatly reject everyone’s argument, saying that God has created her beauty, so he is responsible for giving her such an amazing gift while at the same time making sure nobody takes advantage of it. Marcela continues to argue that although many men may have fallen in love with her because of her looks, it does not mean that she owes those men her body or life simply because it is their desire. Quixote, notably, sides with Marcela. Later, Don Quixote acquires a metal washbasin from a barber, which he believes is a helmet once worn by a famous knight. He frees a group of convicted criminals at the end of this encounter. There is usually a victim whose lives Quixote is trying to change, and some whose live he does change, because he is living this fantasy life of valor and knighthood.

Don Quixote subsequently encounters Cardenio, who lives wild and, in the woods, because he believes that Luscinda, the woman he loves, has betrayed him. Don Quixote decides to imitate him to prove his love for Dulcinea is just as great and sends Sancho to deliver a letter to her. When Sancho stops at an inn, he finds two of Don Quixote’s old friends, a priest and a barber, who are looking for him. They decide that one of them should pose as a damsel in distress to try to lure Don Quixote home. En route, they come across a young woman, Dorotea, previously betrayed by Don Fernando, who married Luscinda. Dorotea agrees to pretend to be a princess whose kingdom has been seized by a giant, and Don Quixote is persuaded to help her. They stop at the inn, where Don Fernando and Luscinda soon arrive. Luscinda is reunited with Cardenio, and Don Fernando promises to marry Dorotea. These complicated telenovela-style digressions carry an essential message about wealth, class, and freedom.

Later, the priest and the barber put Don Quixote in a wooden cage and persuade him that he is under an enchantment that will take him to Dulcinea. Eventually, they return him home.

### Part Two – 1615

Part two finds Don Quixote a month older and eager to set out on his third sally, but this time many of the characters have already read the first part of Don Quixote’s adventures and know about Don Quixote. He learns from a student named Carrasco, who becomes his antagonist, that his adventures thus far have been recorded in a very popular chivalry romance, which has made him and Sancho very famous. Within a few days, Quixote and Sancho set out for El Toboso to obtain Dulcinea’s blessing. Nevertheless, neither of them knows where Dulcinea lives. When they are confronted by the reality that there is no such person – only a peasant girl named Aldonza, Quixote becomes convinced that Dulcinea is under an enchantment that has turned her into an ordinary peasant girl.

When they get back on the road, Quixote battles with the Knight of the Forest, who is Carrasco in disguise, trying to trick Quixote into returning to the village. Quixote wins the battle, and Carrasco skulks away in dishonor. Don Quixote and Sancho then meet a duke and duchess who are prone to shenanigans. In one such ruse, they persuade the two men that Sancho must give himself 3,300 lashes to break the curse on Dulcinea. The duke later makes Sancho the governor of a town that he tells Sancho is the isle of Barataria. There Sancho is presented with various disputes, and he shows wisdom in his decisions. However, after a week in office, he decides to give up the governorship.

The two friends continue to meet many interesting strangers. They become friends with a gallant captain of thieves and a wealthy nobleman in Barcelona. Quixote battles with a mysterious Knight of the White Moon, who, again, turns out to be Carrasco. This time, Carrasco wins the battle and, as his prize, demands that Quixote and Sancho return to the village. Quixote grows sadder and sadder and begins to lose hope of Dulcinea’s disenchantment. When they return to the village, Quixote becomes very sick. One day, after a long sleep, he announces that he has regained his sanity. He now scorns knighthood and detests chivalry romances. There is no more Don Quixote; he is Alonso Quijano again, and, soon afterward, he dies.

[Don Quixote by Miguel de Cervantes (Animated Books), or](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0_ptatf6Lc)

[Don Quixote (Thug Notes)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVkzxDJo9-Y&t=426s)

[Don Quixote Source:

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/996/996-h/996-h.htm>

Vol 1 Preface, Ch 1-4, Ch 6, Ch 9, Ch 12-13, Ch 22, Ch 52, Vol 2 Preface, Ch 1-4, Ch 12, Ch 53, Ch 74]

## Analysis



Don Quixote

“It is not doubted, but certainty, which drives us insane.”

Nietzsche – Ecco Homo

First and foremost, we must address that this text, often credited with being the first novel of the Western world, is also the first meta-fiction. **Meta-fiction** is not easy to define; however, although characteristics of metafiction vary as widely as the spectrum of techniques used within them, a pattern of several common traits can be traced. These techniques often appear in combination but can also appear singularly. Metafiction often employs intertextual references and allusions by:

* examining fictional systems,
* incorporating aspects of both theory and criticism,
* creating biographies of imaginary writers,
* presenting and discussing fictional works of an imaginary character.

Authors of metafiction often violate narrative levels by:

* intruding to comment on writing,
* involving his or herself with fictional characters,
* directly addressing the reader,
* openly questioning how narrative assumptions and conventions transform and filter reality, trying to prove that no singular truths or meanings exist ultimately.

Metafiction also uses unconventional and experimental techniques by:

* rejecting conventional plot,
* refusing to attempt to become "real life,"
* subverting conventions to transform “reality” into a highly suspect concept,
* flaunting and exaggerating foundations of and the instability of their ideas,
* displaying reflexivity (function which enables the reader to understand the processes by which he or she reads the world as a text).

Another overarching theme of Don Quixote is the blending of reality and fiction, both in the real world in which we live and the fictional world in which Don Quixote lives. In the case of Don Quixote, it is impossible to discuss the real-world events behind the book without delving into some of the themes of the book itself because Cervantes himself blends reality so effectively. By the end of the book, even the reader does not know what truth or fiction is. Don Quixote, the character, himself is perceived as being a madman, although he is also described as being very sane. For example, there is a clear contrast between Don Quixote’s perception of roadside Inns as castles, of himself as a Noble Knight errant, and the fact that he is often remarked as being philosophical and wise when remarking on any subject *except* for knight-errantry. This duality of Don Quixote provides the basis for the blending or blurring of reality itself.

One of the first and most notable uses of this blurring technique comes from the author of the book, *and by the author, I do not mean Miguel de Cervantes*, although he was the man who wrote the text. He claims in the prologue to the first part of Don Quixote that he is not, in fact, the “father” of Don Quixote; he is the stepfather, merely stumbling across the manuscript and translating it. Thus, he acts not as the actual creator but simply as the messenger. Now, this narrator becomes a character within the book itself and will be separated from the action described within the text; however, he often remarks upon it, noting several passages as being apocryphal, commenting upon the narrative itself, why he translates certain things the way he did, or why he puts certain parts of the book in certain places.

Now, this narrator character even goes so far as to further distance himself from the actual author of the story by saying that he only found the first eight chapters of the manuscript. At the beginning of chapter nine, he says that he ran out of manuscripts and ultimately tells a long-winded tale of how he came across the rest of it. He stumbled upon the notebooks and loose leaves of paper comprising the manuscript accidentally and bought them from a local. The manuscript was written in **Arabic**, however, which the narrator character does not speak. The narrator, “Cervantes,” describes going to the local cathedral and finding an Arabic **moor** to be able to translate the rest of the text. Thus, he is not even the translator anymore; he is just the Messenger. He does continue to act as a character within the book.

If that was not enough to blur the lines of the reality of who on earth is writing this text, Cervantes offers himself up as an actual named person within the book! At the end of the first part of Don Quixote, there is a character known as the captive, and his story, or “The Captives Tale,” tells of his being captured on the Mediterranean by Barbary Pirates and taken to Algiers, serving as a slave. The captive makes the escape of his own accord, though, something Cervantes was never able to achieve. Cervantes was ransomed, however, and all these experiences harken back to Cervantes’ own. He weaves his own story into the text, even going so far in the tale of the character to name himself as one of the officers involved in the original scuffle. His full name was Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, and the captive makes mention of having served with an officer Saavedra, so Miguel de Cervantes ultimately injects even his person and his namesake into the book.

It gets even stranger. The first part of the book, which Miguel de Cervantes published in 1605, ultimately becomes the **MacGuffin** **device** that moves the narrative within the second part of the book. Early in the second part of the book, Sancho Panza comes to Don Quixote and says that he ran into a man in town who says he has heard of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. The reason that he is familiar with their adventures is that he has read them in a book. Within the book, Don Quixote says to Sancho that he must summon this man to him. Samson Carrasco enters the story and becomes a prominent character within the second part of the book. Carrasco says that he read the first part of the adventures of Don Quixote. All the characters that Don Quixote meets in the second part of the book are familiar with him already because they too have read the adventures of the first part of Don Quixote. The book that we are reading is the device in the book that we are reading! It is upside down.

Cervantes’ initial (overt) purpose is to satirize the romances of chivalry, to create a parody of a literary type characterized by supernatural deeds of valor, implausible and complicated adventures, duels, and enchantments. The literature that expresses the medieval spirit of chivalry and romance has degenerated by Cervantes’ time.

* His method of showing the inherent silliness of chivalric romances is
  + “to show what extraordinary consequences they would lead a man insanely infatuated with them, once this man set out to live ‘now’ according to their patterns of action and belief.”
* In addition to chivalric romances, Cervantes parodies the pastoral novel in the section about Marcela, the shepherdess who is unmoved by her shepherd admirers.

Don Quixote is known for being a satire, which means it employs irony, exaggeration, ridicule, or humor to provide a criticism of something. It is not just one satire, however; it is two competing satires in the same story. We have the main story: Don Quixote, his exploits, and how they affect the people around him, and then there is another encompassing super story on top of it. Miguel de Cervantes tries to enforce the idea that the story is actual history by narrating through the voice of a fictional Moorish translator. These characters, and apparently Cervantes himself, harbor overwhelmingly negative opinions of the romantic literary traditions of Spain, specifically the books of chivalry we mentioned earlier. In the words of Cervantes’ friend, the author's purpose in writing this story is the fall and destruction of that monstrous heap of ill-contrived romances, which though abhorred by many, has so strangely infatuated the greater part of humanity.

To say that Don Quixote is a satire and leave it at that would be a terrible disservice. Here is why: **Satire** is not a genre so much as it is a style. It is also important to note that in contemporary terms, the word satire is often best known as a type of comedy, but it does not have to be. George Orwell’s *1984*, for instance, is a far cry from funny, but it is providing criticism.

Looking at the hyper vitriolic language Cervantes uses to describe romantic literature; it is easy to assume that Don Quixote is a satire of the books of chivalry. However, if we read closely, we will notice a contradiction: there is a disparity between the authorial input and **the subtext** of the story itself. Don Quixote is Cervantes’ representation of Spain’s romantic traditions. Quixote often appears to be inept, ineffectual, even minorly harmful in some cases, but the result of his adventures is positive. He brings lovers together, provides simple entertainment to a great many people, as well as helps his closest and most involved friend – his squire Sancho Panza – to discover himself and embraces his place in the world. Quixote becomes a genuinely sympathetic character by the novel's end, and the cruelty of his audience, represented by the Duke and Duchess, becomes the subject of criticism.

**Juvenalian Satire** is a satire that attacks its subjects with personal invective and general cynicism. It seeks change through outrage, attacks superfluous academic jargon, and can be seen in the (outer) frame of our story, where Cervantes has provided fake reviews for his own work.

* Juvenalian satire style was named for an early Roman poet Juvenal, whose work criticized figures and institutions of the time through personal invective, angry moral indignation, and general cynicism. Juvenalian satire attacks its subject to incite change through outrage. This style of satire is crucial in understanding Don Quixote because, through metafiction, the Juvenalian satire comprises the bulk of the story's first layer of satire. Throughout both the first and second parts of the novel, Cervantes interjects, in the guise of fictional narrators, a relatively stark perspective on the state of Spanish literature at the time. Cervantes draws particular attention to the romanticizing of Chivalric texts at the time by juxtaposing Cervantes’ hyper vitriolic tone toward Chivalric texts with the emphatic praises of his metafictional translator (which is also him); this stark, biting criticism creates the first half of the book's fascinating satirical dynamic.

**Horatian Satire** is a satire that uses indulgence, tolerance, amusement, and wit to make the **readers laugh at themselves**. Chivalry and art are the targets, and this can be directly applied to the tale within the frame.

* As potent and eye-opening as it can be at times, Juvenalian satire lacks a degree of subtlety. It can often be hard to distinguish from pure scrutiny, which is less than desirable when the author is trying to use it as a rhetorical tool. Sometimes a gentler approach is more effective. At least, that is the philosophy behind the more playful counterpart, Horatian satire. This style is also named for an early Roman poet, Horace. Horatian satire is about indulgence, tolerance, amusement, and wit. The aim is to make the reader laugh not only at the subject of the criticism but also at themselves when they bear a resemblance to it. This is what we see in the tale of Don Quixote; at every turn, there is another absurd satiric parable about the dangers of romantic idealization. For instance, when Quixote sets the galley slaves free, he believes them to be unjustly punished. As repayment for his service, he asks only that they make a pilgrimage to his imaginary Princess and tell her the story. They instead beat him up and run off into the countryside with his things. We expect some form of gratitude, but their ironic reaction gives us a taste of how impractical his behavior truly, which is related to the fruits of romantic gallantry.

**Menippean Satire** uses a variety of styles and tones to create a **critical discourse about a high concept**; Bakhtin, a widely renowned Russian philosopher and critique, lists the following characteristics:

1. It is usually more comic than Socratic dialogue.
2. Its fantasies create extraordinary situations for the purpose of testing philosophical truth, primarily through the manipulation of perspective.
3. It mixes the fantastic, symbolic, and even quasi-religious with a "crude slum naturalism."
4. It is "a genre of 'ultimate questions,'" combining bold invention with broad philosophical reflection.
5. It uses "experimental fantasticality," that is, "observation from some unusual point of view."
6. It often represents unusual states of insanity, split personality, dreams, excessive passion, creating a "dialogic relationship to one's self."
7. Scandal, eccentricities, inappropriate speech, violations of politeness, and social expectations are very characteristic.
8. It is full of contradictory behavior and characters.
9. It combines elements of social utopia with other satiric elements.
10. It inserts a variety of other genres, often to parody them.
11. Hence it is "multi-styled" and "multi-toned."
12. It is concerned with current topics.

Cervantes managed to employ both the biting criticism of Juvenalian satire and the gentle ridicule of Horatian satire. Nevertheless, the difference between the two is, in this case, only stylistic: they both have the same effect of criticizing the romantic traditions of Spain and the greater scale of Romance itself. However, underneath the actual text, we find a highly sympathetic subtext: though a fool and a nuisance, the character of Don Quixote is ultimately a force of good. His romantic mania inspires bravery, hope, joy, and initiative. Cervantes may portray him as exuberant and brash in the first part, but in the second, he becomes moderate, thoughtful, and helpful; the villains turn out to be those who scorn and abuse the dreamer, robbing him and the rest of the world of his great impossible dream.

Interestingly, this also implicates Cervantes and his metafictional cast. By ridiculing Don Quixote for dreaming unrealistically, Cervantes is also criticizing those who are inspired by Don Quixote.

Thus, rather than a simple satire meant to ridicule one subject, the entire piece becomes a dialogue, urging the audience to think critically about the subject in multiple ways. Don Quixote is therefore primarily a Menippean satire; that is, it is similar in style to the work of the third-century Greek poet Menippus. This style of satire utilizes a variety of tools and styles, prose verse, and variations in tone to create a critical discourse about a high concept rather than a specific person or institution. This is the simplest way to explain the genius of Don Quixote: Cervantes gives us satire of both Romance and its critics, but the story itself is about the value of Romanticism in a changing world.

While Cervantes is employing all three types of satire, it is Menippean satire that speaks to the deeper meaning behind his satirical approach. Here are some ways we can explore this concept:

* Our hero, Don Quixote, dons the mask of a chivalric knight to make his life more exciting and bearable.
  + We can see the influence of Greek comedy on this novel: a crazy idea is proposed, and the rest of the work concerns how it plays out in the real world.
* The humor lies in contrast between Don Quixote’s ideals and the real world around him.
  + French Jesuit Francois de la Noue warned against the dangerous influence of chivalric books on the young and claimed they were as harmful to the young as Machiavelli was to the old.
  + Plato made very similar claims.
* Don Quixote is not a knight but an impoverished country landowner.
  + His ideals include love as ‘service,’ adventurousness, loyalty to valor, and generosity. He tries to seek out wrongs and correct them, to help those in need, and to be full of valor in honor of his Lady (courtly love).
* Like Greek heroes, he wants his marvelous deeds to be sung.

Don Quixote is described as a wandering hero whose insanity is caused by reading too many books about chivalry (literature corrupts).

While class and racial prejudice are at the heart of Cervantes’ satire, in context, these critiques cannot be directly spoken as “truth to power,” at least not for Cervantes. For a frame of reference, one of his targets was the Spanish Inquisition, who tended to burn its detractors at the stake. He also takes aim at the slave trade, which was not a position to take for the faint of heart and was very dangerous.

To put this in perspective, Quijano, the name Cervantes chose for the protagonist, is notably and distinctly middle class; this is our inroad for understanding Cervantes’ complex critique of the politics and economics of the time:

* First, consider Quijano himself: his Grandfather was once a hidalgo, but the days of that prosperity are reflected in the condition of the armor that Quixote ultimately dons: this ideal Spanish knight is now nothing but rot.
* Then there is Rocinante, whose name translates to “the best of all workhorses,” which reflects the economic situation that the knight is forced to ride upon, not a true steed. Now, this may seem tangential, but consider the line when Cervantes refers to Rocinante’s hoof, that it possessed “with more quartos than a real and more blemishes than the steed of Gonela.” This is a nearly untranslatable pun on the word "quarto," which means a sand-crack in a horse's hoof, as well as the coin equal to one-eighth of the real. This is a direct reference to the terrible inflation that had occurred in Spain.
* The scene with Quixote’s friends: the priest, a family friend, secures the keys to the library from Quixote’s niece and attempts to sort the offending books from the innocent ones. The niece implores him to pile them all in the corral and set them on fire, but the Priest insists on examining the titles to avoid the risk of destroying good books with the bad. Nevertheless, he soon tires of the effort and orders the housekeeper to take all the “large books” to the corral. This is a direct reference to the Spanish inquisition. There is no real way for the inquisition to know who is a heretic in their minds, and Cervantes mirrors how the process for identifying who or what was “good” quickly devolved as they ultimately burned whatever book they could.
* This text is also rooted in real-world politics and history. Quixote himself references another text we will read this semester, *The Song of Roland*. This is important for two reasons: first, when we read Song of Roland, you may be confused that all the Spanish are depicted as heretics. For instance, Bernardo del Carpio, whom Quixote celebrates as an iconic knight, is the same knight that killed Roland! This is also relevant to the fact that the actual author of Quixote’s story wrote this in Arabic, and it was translated by a Moor. These Arabs are the very “heretics” that the government is attempting to expel via the Inquisition, even though they had been a part of the Spanish culture for hundreds of years, peacefully.

# Chapter Two: The Warrior

# Introduction:

In cultural anthropology, the distinction between a guilt society, an honor/shame society, and a fear society has been used to categorize different cultures. For the purposes of this chapter, we will only discuss the guilt and honor/shame societies, however. These different types of societies are called **Cultural Areas**, or broad areas of the globe where social patterns have developed over millennia and share common social patterns. Culture Areas occur because the people in those regions are in some measure responding to a similar environment. These differences can apply to how behavior is governed concerning government, business, the rule of law, and social etiquette. Cultural classifications get their namesake from the emotions that are predominantly used to control an individual and maintain the social order by swaying them into obedience and conformity. That is, guilt is the core emotion behind one’s adherence to societal rules and standards in a guilt society whereas honor and its counterpart, shame, are the major motivating forces underlying socially applauded and norm-conforming behavior in an honor society. Although guilt and shame are often used interchangeably, they refer to very different psychological experiences. The feeling of guilt arises when we violate our own moral standards and conscience; it reflects how we feel about ourselves. Honor and shame, on the other hand, are often resulted from the judgement of one’s action, appearance, or behavior against the norms and standards of the society/culture of which they are apart. Therefore, an individual may suffer from guilt without anyone ever knowing about their wrongdoing while honor and shame by definition require others’ perception and evaluation of one’s action.

So, why are we talking about this? Well, this is important to us is because in a guilt society, control is maintained by creating, and continually reinforcing, the feeling of guilt for certain condemned behaviors, and:

* If you are from what is often referred to as the “Baltic Culture Area,” which by transference and immigration is much of modern North America and Northern Europe now, which by transference and immigration is much of modern North America and Northern Europe now. Northern Europeans and North Americans are classified under the Baltic Culture Area due to high commonality of cultural values and patterns among them. **The Baltic Culture Area that many of us have lived in our entire lives is a guilt culture**.
* The guilt/innocence worldview focuses on law and punishment. A person in this type of culture may ask, “is my behavior fair or unfair?” This type of culture also emphasizes individual conscience.
* For example, in Beowulf, our first English text, we can see that the story is focused on “justice” and vengeance rather than honor. Heroes seek justice, and in the Anglo-Saxon culture, believe in vengeance as a form of achieving it, which leads us to the idea of “**Wergild**.” This is a term that refers to making a payment for taking someone's life. If you killed someone, you could pay a Wergild to make restitution for the death. This idea emphasizes fairness and taking ownership for one's actions in a social structure, with a strong belief in vengeance as a form of justice. Wergild often takes the form of monetary payment or punishment/jail time pre-determined by laws (and not quite “an eye for an eye”).

Many of the texts we have studied already (*Works and Days*, *Gilgamesh*), the leading text for this chapter (*The Iliad*), many from the third chapter (*Medea*, *Lysistrata*, *Arabian Nights*), and even *The Bible*, originate in what some call the Mediterranean Culture Area.

In the Mediterranean Culture Area, we find people living in and around the perimeter of the Mediterranean: everywhere from southern Spain, Southern France, southern Italy, Greece, and Turkey, as well as all the way across and around the end of the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and across North Africa. There are common patterns of agriculture (wine grapes and some wheat) and domestication of smaller animals. Inside of this cultural area, a variety of social patterns and values originated and developed over the millennia, many of which, in fact, still exist today in many of the regions in that part of the world. The Mediterranean Culture Area resembles an honor and shame society rather than one built on guilt.

* In an honor society, the means of control are the implication of shame and the complementary threat of ostracism. When shame is applied to a subject of this worldview, they often seek balance, which can lead to **revenge** dynamics.
* A person in this type of culture may ask, “shall I look ashamed if I do X,” or “how will people look at me if I do Y”? Shame cultures are typically based on the concepts of pride, honor, and appearances.

Naturally, in order to understand the *Iliad* and other texts and derive meanings from them, we must understand the social contexts in which they were created. Honor cultures dominated the actions and interactions of the Mediterranean people, especially in the periods we are studying. To define it: one’s honor is determined by the public’s perception of them. It is a measure of the individual or family's level of respect and esteem in comparison with other members of society. According to Levi Strauss, **honor** is **the gaining of status from others**, while **shame** is **the loss of it to others.** Wealth was never the singular indication of honor but could be considered the vehicle by which to gain honor, though this has changed in the modern era.

For example, a person could be rich and dishonorable, like a tax collector who became wealthy by enacting shameful deeds against their people and hoarding their wealth; however, those who spent their wealth as benefactors for the improvement of the municipality, such as using their money to build temples, bars, gymnasiums, theaters, and such, would have very favorable honor within the community. Unlike guilt, which is an internal understanding/acknowledgement of one’s shortcoming, honor and shame had to be **publicly acknowledged** for them to be truly granted. One could not just walk around believing they had honor because **the community had to recognize their honor for it to be valid**. Whatever honor someone was paid reflected on their entire family or group. Likewise, whatever shame was carried, insult paid, or misconduct done by one person reflected upon the whole family. A family would strive to improve their honor in any way as a unit, but if a member were to bring shame to the family, that member may be disowned to protect the reputation of the rest of the family.

So how did one gain honor to begin with?

Well, it was either ascribed to an individual, which refers to an **ascribed** lineage that generated one’s honored status according to birth, or it was acquired or earned according to one’s deeds, character, and conformity to the laws and expectations of the society.

* For instance, we can look to Jesus, who is quite detailed in his ascribed lineage.
  + Matthew 1:1-16 lists the most honored forefathers, like Abraham; anointed Kings like David; prophets who remained faithful during the exile such as Hezekiah and Zerubbabel; all the way through to his Carpenter father Joseph and his mother, Mary.

Honor could also be acquired through deeds, daily interactions, and public challenge. **Honor was not something that could be equal, shared or bought**. A schema for an order that commonly develops under these circumstances is defined by “the rule of retaliation”: If you cross me, I will punish you. According to Nisbett and Cohen (1996, p. xv), “to maintain credible power of deterrence, the individual must project a stance of willingness to commit mayhem and to risk wounds or death for himself.”

As a result, a citizen of an honor-based society must be steadfast and vigilant for affronts that could be construed by others as disrespect. In a culture of honor, if someone allows herself or himself to be insulted or disrespected, they give the impression that they lack the strength to protect their position. In the absence or near absence of any trusted governing body to punish selfish behavior—including theft of property that could destroy the subject—the individual must respond with violence, or the threat of violence, to any affront.

An honor-based culture is reliant on a zero-sum system, and this will be a key concept for this section. A zero-sum system (often referred to contemporaneously as a zero-sum game) is a system, either at the governmental or cultural level, in which **one person’s gain is equivalent to another’s loss**, and **there is no other way of obtaining the finite “honor” other than by taking it**. A zero-sum system may have as few as two players or millions of participants.

* Poker and gambling are popular examples of zero-sum systems since the sum of the amounts won by some players equals the combined losses of the others.
* In game theory, the game of matching pennies is often cited as an example of a zero-sum game. The game involves two players, Player A and Player B, simultaneously placing a penny on the table; the payoff depends on whether the pennies “battle” (have the same face). If both parties are heads or tails, Player A wins and keeps playing. If they do not match, player B wins.

Many of the cultures we will study in this course are from an honor-based society (with the exception of *Beowulf*, *Song of Roland*, and *Hamlet*, which are guilt-centered), and all honor-based societies are structured around the zero-sum attitude towards resources. Due to this, many of the literary works from this period are about the great Warriors who achieved the height of that honor.

For a deeper understanding of how these concepts apply to our lives now, today, especially for a deeper understanding of honor culture in the South and its effect on our military, take the time to reflect on the following podcast episode:

<https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/made-of-honor/>

https://www.npr.org/2021/06/03/1002957250/home-front-battle-lines

## Achilles in Vietnam

In his book *Achilles in Vietnam*, clinical psychiatrist Dr. Jonathan Shay makes the connection to the honor-based cultures of Homeric Greece to our modern military, where honor codes, morality, and hierarchy are still closely tied together. This will be our inroads for understanding the ancient warrior and his or her way of life in a meaningful way.

Many in the public, including the press and branches of our government, refer to the umbrella term Post-traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD as anything bad that happens to a soldier during her or his deployment to war zones. According to Dr. Shay, PTSD is often stigmatizing. In the world of military forces, it is entirely honorable to be injured in the service of your country; however, to fall is also considered unlucky, if not dishonorable, and in a world of violence and luck, once one has been stigmatized, nobody wants to share a fighting hole with an unlucky soldier.

For the sake of understanding PTSD from a civilian perspective, we need such vocabulary to understand the psychological injuries affecting the ones we love. Psychological injury is the general term for what happens when an emotionally or mentally traumatic experience negative affects or changes somebody. Psychological injuries can lead to changes in how the mind and the body work, which can be understood as the individual’s adaptations to the traumatic, often life-or-death, situation. PTSD attempts to describe how these adaptations resulted from the primary injury (the actual traumatizing event) persist into normal life after the mortal danger. Thus, we need to think about this concept in this way:

* The “uncomplicated” psychological injury can be compared to an “uncomplicated” physical injury; uncomplicated in the medical sense that, if a mortar fragment slices across a soldier’s arm, whether it breaks the bone or not, that wound is the uncomplicated, simple, or **primary** **injury**. However, that primary injury is often not what would kill that soldier. The hemorrhaging or infection resulting from the primary injury might.

The persistence of a “moral,” or psychological, injury into civilian life after a battle, as an extension of the “simple” or primary injury after a soldier is no longer on the battlefield, as well as the persistence of valid adaptations that the soldier formed to allow themselves to survive at home with PTSD is what we are concerned with.

We will be borrowing the following concepts from Dr. Shay for this purpose:

1. the Betrayal of What is Right,
2. the Shrinkage of Moral Horizons, and
3. the Death of a Special Comrade.

### Betrayal of What is Right

Dr. Shay opens his chapter on Betrayal of “What is Right” by saying, “We begin in the moral world of the soldier—what his culture understands to be right—and betrayal of that moral order by a commander” (3). He goes on to frame the chapter with a real story from a real soldier who was part of a LURP team (Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol) team. On a mission in the South China Sea, the team watched as three boats came in; those boats were identified as enemy ships that were unloading weapons. The soldier being interviewed related that they fired on the boats until every ounce of the ammunition was gone, on orders from “up high.” All that ammo was spent on killing fisherman and children. Even after this realization, the soldier quoted his colonel saying, “Do not worry about it. We will take care of it,” and the unit was showered with medals, citations, and ceremonies, especially for the colonel (4).

This soldier, despite doing four combat tours and serving honorably, still felt deeply dishonored by being officially rewarded for killing civilians, something that should have been considered a crime and a severe intelligence error. It is important to note that there is not a sufficient word, or words, in English to define any culture's definitions of right and wrong. Dr. Shay notes that “we use terms such as moral order, convention, normative expectations, ethics, and commonly understood social values. The ancient Greek word that Homer used, *themis*, encompasses all these meanings” (5). It is effective to think of the term “what is right” in the same way that Homer uses **themis**.

It is through the Iliad and Achilles that we will explore this notion of betrayal of what is right. The Iliad demonstrates how “when a leader destroys the legitimacy of the army’s moral order by betraying ‘what is right,’ he inflicts manifold injuries on his men” (6) immediately and devastatingly. This moral injury, of course, does not apply to the military alone, and we will discuss another way of understanding this perspective a bit later.

### Shrinkage of Moral Horizons

“Through [themis] humans can make themselves stable… annihilation of convention [themis] by another’s’ acts can destroy… stable character… it can, quite simply, produce bestiality, the utter loss of human relatedness.”

Martha C. Nussbaum,

The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy

Dr. Shay opens the chapter on the Betrayal of What’s Right, with the extraordinary claim that Achilles’ experience of betrayal by Agamemnon, as well as his reactions to that betrayal, are “identical to those of American soldiers in Vietnam” (3), and we will take this one step further and include the recent veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars as well (something further supported by the fact that more soldiers have died to suicide upon return than in actual combat).

When a soldier experiences this Betrayal of What’s Right, there is a devastating and often permanent effect: Dr. Shay notes that “soldiers sometimes lose responsiveness to the claims of *any* bonds, ideals, or loyalties outside of a tiny circle of immediate comrades” (23), which often does not include their own family. A healthy soldier's “social horizon” will often include his family, civilian friends and ties, as well as a wider map of his military formations, such as his whole battalion, even though the soldier would only work tangentially with many of these acquaintances. Due to betrayal, however, this social map of the soldier’s world will dramatically shrink.

Dr. Shay gives one soldier’s recollection as an example (**warning: harsh language to follow**):

You see, what you’d do is you’d set up an ambush. Now, Bravo Company’s probably three miles away from you. And you make contact [with the enemy] and run towards Bravo Company. So what happened is we got into a fucking ambush and we couldn’t get out of the ambush. And the mother fucker’s wouldn’t move… So from then on, we didn’t fucking [inaudible]. Y’know, you wouldn’t fucking tell them nothing. “Fuck Bravo Company. I hope all them motherfuckers die.”

(Shay 24)

This soldier’s moral horizon, to use Dr. Shay’s terminology, had shrunk; before it included Bravo Company, now, it no longer did. Shay goes on to note that this soldier’s moral horizon shrunk even further. In the end, the soldier above ended up “watching the other five guys” (24) like they were his “children.”

The shrinkage of the moral horizon often results in an “us-against-them mentality,” in which the soldier's understanding of the world becomes starkly black and white. Either one is an absolute friend, or one is an absolute enemy. It does not matter how close one was prior to the shrinkage, and the simplification or shrinkage of those loyalties stems directly from the betrayal. We see this dynamic play out for our hero Achilles in two stages: he ceases to care about his fellow Greeks after betrayal by his commander, and then he loses all compassion for any human being after the death of Patroclus.

To end this section, let us look to a statement by Professor Martha Nussbaum from Brown University; she makes this statement about how social betrayal can undermine our humanity:

Annihilation of convention [Homer’s themis] by another’s acts can destroy… stable character…it can, quite simply, produce bestiality, the utter loss of human relatedness.

### Death of a Special Comrade

It is perhaps impossible for anyone who has not experienced war to understand the bond that Achilles and Patroclus, as well as any soldier who has fought and bled with another, have with each other. It can be one of the deepest and most emotional human connections. As Dr. Shay notes, however, while the battlefield nourishes this deep connection, it can also amputate it.

When that amputation occurs, especially after a Betrayal of What’s Right leads to a Shrinkage of Moral Horizons that may include only the special comrade, there is an “emergence of rage out of grief” (40), and such a soldier affected by this PTSD can end up imprisoned in “endless swinging between rage and emotional deadness as a permanent way of being in the world” (40).

I would prefer to let a soldier speak for himself:

It’s a closeness you never had before. It’s closer than your mother and father, closest [sic] than your brother or your sister, or whoever you’re closest with in your family. It was… y’know, you’d take a shit, and he’d be right there covering you. And if I take a shit, he’d be covering me… We needed each other to survive. (40)

It is important to understand, as in the example above, that this is not the normal friendship we are accustomed to. Dr. Shay argues in his book that this is much closer to the Greek understanding of *philia,* or “the very strongest affective relationships that human beings can form” (41), so, not leisurely of a viewpoint many modern humans take, which views friendship as a lucky occurrence that arises amongst people we are acquainted with (at work, school, church, etc.).

The depth of this love can be a cause of further alienation (for our soldiers, not Achilles, as the Greeks did not have the same hang-ups) because “our culture insists upon the gender association of nurturance and compassion as maternal” (49), which refers to the conflict between such an expression of love (via grief, anger, emotional distress), which is unfortunately often considered maternal in the modern U.S. society, and the masculine-centric culture of the U.S. military. The latter doesn’t allow for the former, which further alientates the soldier experiencing those strong emotions. Why should we care about this love between comrades? Well, upon Patroclus’ death, we read of how Achilles “tore his hair with both hands,” which leads to Antilochus having to stop Achilles in the act of trying to slash his own throat. Suicide, however, does not rear its ugly head anywhere else within the Greek epic; this is likely because Achille’s grief is accepted and communalized.

Dr. Shay’s work makes it clear that “the events that drive soldier’s berserk are betrayal, insult, or humiliation by a leader; death of a friend-in-arms; being wounded; being overrun, surrounded, or trapped; seeing dead comrades who have been mutilated by the enemy; and unexpected delivery from certain death” (80), and all of these, save the last, play a role in the Iliad’s **aristeia**. Furthermore, examining these aristeia help illustrate how “our virtues and our dignity rise from our morality, from our humanity—and not from any success in being God [this is a reference to feeling Godlike and beyond death when in a berserk state]. The godlike berserk state can destroy the capacity for virtue” (86).

Thus, we can see that Homer’s *Iliad* both comments on and corroborates contemporary soldier’s account that a “Betrayal of What’s Right” is the event that primes a soldier to enter a berserk state, but this is also true of the rest of the texts in this chapter as well.

### Code of the Streets

Elijah Anderson provides us, through his illuminating work explaining inner-city gang violence *Code of the Streets*, with a more contemporary method to understand the foundations of a society built on honor and shame and governed by a zero-sum system.

Anderson is steadfast in the truth that “there are often forces in the community which can counteract the negative influences” of the “the streets” and that these “good, decent” residents are prevalent. However, this does not change the fact that the despair those residents feel **due to being abandoned by the society that is meant to protect them** “is pervasive enough to have spawned an oppositional culture, that of ‘the streets,’ whose norms are often consciously opposed to those of mainstream society.” Likewise, he goes on to point out that knowledge of, and participation in, behavior that the code of the streets dictates as necessary, is “largely defensive” and “is literally necessary for operating in public.” Anderson explains the code this way:

…a set of informal rules governing interpersonal, public behavior, including violence. The rules prescribe both proper comportment and a proper way to respond if challenged. They regulate the use of violence, and so allow those who are inclined to aggression to precipitate violent encounters in an approved way…

…At the heart of the code is the issue of respect--loosely defined as being treated "right" or granted the deference one deserves.

… respect is viewed as almost an external entity that is hard-won but easily lost and so must constantly be guarded. The rules of the code, in fact, provide a framework for negotiating respect. The person whose very appearance-- including his clothing, demeanor, and way of moving--deters transgressions feels that he possesses, and may be considered by others to possess, a measure of respect.

This boundary represents where the “societal structure” ends (the world as accepted by the predominant culture), and where the world defined by the streets begin.

The code of the street allows residents of a given community to reestablish control over a world which they feel has abandoned them.

Defined by a sense of insignificance to the outside world due to a **sense of personal abandonment**.

Society at Large

The Streets

That last part of the code should sound similar as well; not only is it an example of what Dr. Shay termed as a “Betrayal of What’s Right,” it also mirrors the pageantry of many of the warrior cultures: Achilles’ armor, the creation of his new shield, Beowulf’s sword(s) and armbands, etc. We will see many similarities between the honor-based warrior cultures of the past, the honor-based military culture of our present, and the honor-based environment of “the streets,” which only exists due to a systemic abandonment of an entire group of people. Thus, our sympathies and understanding for any one of these cultures also allow us to empathize with the other cultures.

Below is a graphic designed to help visualize how the culture of the streets can exist alongside the larger society that is neither zero-sum nor honor based.

Q q

The Code provides a framework by which one can negotiate existence in “The Street”; respect is the primary regulator.

The Streets

The Code of the Streets

The lack of (deferred) redress results in a feeling the one must take care of oneself.

Institutional Superstructure

* Police
* Courts
* Government

No Redress – the streets have no access to the superstructure.

Respect:

* Must be negotiated in real time.
* Is hard to obtain.
* Is quickly lost.
* Has a quasi-material basis.
* Is constantly under negotiation.
* Is defined by the “group.”

Respect is therefore an intangible coat of armor bent on producing fear.

# The Iliad

## Background



Achilles presenting Hector

Homer’s *Iliad*, a major founding work of European literature, is usually dated to around the 7th century B.C.E. It is an epic poem written in Ancient Greek, but assumed to be derived from earlier oral sources, and tells a section of the legendary Trojan War between the Achaean’s (as there was no “Greece”) and the city of Troy, in Asia Minor. The poem itself centers on the figure of Achilles, the greatest of the Greek warriors, his quarrel with King Agamemnon, the Achaean leader, the death of Achilles’ friend Patroclus, and Achilles’ ultimate defeat of the Trojan warrior Hector, in vengeance for slaying Patroclus. The quality of the writing, the thoughtful treatment of warfare, and the thematic interest of the material have made the *Iliad* the most influential early work of Western literature, certainly from the time of the Renaissance onwards. Modern archaeological investigation has substantiated Homer’s account of Troy’s location and importance.

Although Homer's Iliad is the text that most people associate with the Trojan War, it is not the story of the “Trojan War” but one of the *rage* of Achilles. We are in the region of modern Greece, very similar to when we talked about Hesiod, but we are a little *further back* in time. While the events described in Iliad happened five centuries prior, the text itself was written in the 7th century, sometime between 750 and 600 BCE. That does not mean Homer lived 150 years, but rather that it has been a matter of debate. In the debate on whether it was Hesiod or Homer who came first, it usually swings toward Homer being the older of the two, but they were writing around the same time, at the beginning of the rise of the Greek city-states, which would culminate in the fifth century B.C.E. cities of Athens, Sparta, and Thebes. Homer lived in The Iron Age (noted in Hesiod), a time when iron technology was the major new technology at the time, which distinguishes it from the Bronze Age, the previous millennium.

Homer's writing more closely resembles the time of the 5th-century civilization of Escalus and Socrates than the time that he describes in the *Iliad*. The time of *Iliad* is called the Bronze Age because, as we will see from the descriptions, most of the weapons and armor are made from bronze. Bronze is easier to smelt, melt down, and reforge, although that also means it is softer and easier to strikethrough and damage than iron. Iron technology exists, but it is rather clunky. It was possible to make large, heavy objects with iron, but warriors would not be wearing an iron breastplate, nor would they be carrying an iron sword. Such objects would be too heavy and too hard to fashion into the types of weapons that a warrior would need in the Bronze Age. In the Bronze Age of the *Iliad*, the eastern Mediterranean was dominated by three superpowers: the Egyptian empire, the Babylonian empire, and Mesopotamia, which will later be replaced by the Assyrian empire of the same area, and then the Hittite Empire, which became a major player around the 17th century B.C.E. We have also talked about Gilgamesh and that it has also been trading with these other empires. We have clay tablets coming from the Hittite Empire, specifically from the city of Hattusa, which was its capital. One of those tablets is composed of fragments of the middle Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, which dates back to around 1500 to thirteen hundred B.C.E. So, this is a major literate empire. Unfortunately, we may not have heard of it as much as the Mesopotamians and the Egyptians because it is not described in the Bible. We have a couple of Hittite’s references, but these are single individuals because they had disappeared as a power by the time the Bible was written.

The Hittite Empire is located on the peninsula of modern-day Turkey. At the time, it was called Anatolia before it was Turkey. Moreover, at the western edge of this landmass where it meets the Aegean, there was a city that the Hittites referred to as ‘Wilusa,’ a name related to the Greek ‘Ilios’/’Ilion,’ Homer’s other name for Troy. During the late Bronze Age (1750–1180 B.C.E), the city was by far the most important settlement in the area, but it was still only a small player on the world stage. Towards the end of the Late Bronze Age, Wilusa was a small vassal state (a state without independence) of the mighty Hittite Empire of Anatolia. The word “Ushuaia” also shows up in Greek, and it is where we get our modern word: Asia. The term “Ushuaia” itself originally refers to this place, this western end of Anatolia, and it is later that it begins to be called Asia Minor, which implies that everything east of it is the larger Asia.

## Summary

The *Iliad* tells the story of a war fought between the city of Troy and its allies against a confederation of Greek cities. The conflict began when Paris, son of King Priam, abducted Helen from King Menelaus’s kingdom. The Greeks raised an army to fight for Helen’s return and sailed to Troy to win her back by force, but we do not see any of this in the Iliad. That is because the *Iliad* is a **small** part of the overall story.

There are a total of seven texts that make up the entire Trojan war: *Cypria* (Preamble: Paris, Helen, and the first Nine Years), *Iliad* (Achilles’ Rage), *Aethiopis* (Achilles takes the arrow to the heel), *Little Iliad* (Odysseus and the construction of the Trojan horse), *Ilious Persis* (Troy is destroyed), *Odyssey* (*Nostoi* comes first, everyone but Odysseus journeys home, and Agamemnon gets axed), *Telogony* (In the final chapter, Odysseus is killed by his illegitimate son).

Our story, then, is only about one thing: Achilles’ rage. The story begins with a priest asking the leader of the Achaean army to release his daughter, Chryseis, from slavery. Agamemnon refuses, and so the priest, Chryses, prays for help. He gets it in the form of a plague on the Achaean army.

The plague ravages the Achaean army, and they ask the prophet Calchas about it, and he tells them to return Chryses’ daughter. Agamemnon agrees to this reluctantly but demands compensation in the form of Briseis, the girl given to Achilles as a slave by Agamemnon himself.

Achilles is **enraged** by this demand and refuses to fight for him any longer.

Achilles, the greatest fighter of the Achaeans, wants revenge on Agamemnon. He asks his mother Thetis to ask Zeus to help them win the war against Agamemnon and his men. Achilles is fated to die a glorious death in battle, so if they succeed, it will give him glory and make him more famous.

In the meantime, Paris and Menelaus agree to duel to end the war between the Trojan and the Achaean forces. Paris is defeated, but the Trojans attack anyway. The Achaean army fights back, with many soldiers distinguishing themselves, and the tide of battle turns several times before the Trojan forces finally push the Achaeans back toward their ships. Meanwhile, a proxy war is being waged between the gods: Athena, Hera, and Poseidon support the Achaean forces, while Apollo, Aphrodite, Ares support the Trojans. Zeus decides to end the war by himself, so he helps engineer a Trojan advance against the Achaean forces.

The Achaeans are fighting the Trojans, but they have lost their leader, Achilles, and without him, they are in dire shape. He is not cooperating with them because he now only cares to protect his myrmidons. The Achaeans ask Nestor – an older man who has fought many battles – to convince Achilles to return to battle so that they can get back home safely. However, even though Nestor is very persuasive, he fails at convincing Achilles because his honor does not allow him to give in.

Achilles’ companion, Patroclus, wants to take Achilles’ place in battle because he is worried about the destruction of the Achaean forces. Eventually, Achilles agrees, and Patroclus dons Achilles’ armor. When Patroclus leads out the army dressed as Achilles, he frightens all of Troy. He fights well and drives back the Trojans. However, when Patroclus disobeys orders by going after Hector instead of returning home after defeating the Trojan forces, Zeus allows Apollo to knock down Patroclus so that Hector can kill him on the ground without armor or a weapon.

Achilles’ grief over Patroclus’ death is so immediate that he wants to go back home. Grief quickly transforms into a rage, and Achilles decides to rejoin the war instead. Thetis goes to get the shield from Hephaestus, who makes it for Achilles. Meanwhile, the Trojans stay outside their city walls because they think Achilles is not as strong without Patroclus. Achilles kills many of them on the plains of Troy while wearing his new armor and using his new shield. The Trojans are frightened by Achilles and run inside the walls of Troy. Hector is the only one who stays outside. Achilles kills Hector and then drags his corpse behind a chariot as revenge for Patroclus’ death.

Achilles grieves over Patroclus’ death by holding an elaborate funeral for him, which is followed by a series of games in his honor. After the games, Achilles continues to drag Hector’s body around Patroclus’ corpse for nine days. The gods sends Hermes to escort Priam to ransom Hector so he could be buried properly. It is Priam’s plea to Achilles that reminds Achilles how much it hurts when someone dies before their time. Achilles is finally able to grieve truly, and he assents to give Priam Hector’s body.

Book 1

Homer calls upon the goddess of poetry and inspiration (the muses) to sing of Achilles' anger.

Chryses, a priest of Apollo, comes to the Greek camp to ransom his daughter, Chryseis, held captive by Agamemnon. He is insulted and sent away, and Apollo sends a plague on the Greeks.

Inspired by the goddess Hera, Achilles calls an assembly to deal with the plague while the prophet Calchas reveals that Apollo was angered by Agamemnon's refusal to return the daughter of his priest. Agamemnon reluctantly agrees to give her back but demands compensation, which provokes Achilles' anger. After the two exchange threats and angry words, Agamemnon decides to take Achilles' "prize," a captive woman named Briseis. The goddess Athena prevents Achilles from killing Agamemnon by promising that he will one day be compensated with three times as many prizes.

As Agamemnon's men take Briseis from Achilles, he prays to his divine mother, Thetis, for help. He says he will not fight and asks her to persuade Zeus to make the battle go badly for the Greeks so that they will see that they should not have dishonored him.

Odysseus leads a group of Greeks to Chryse (the place!) to return Chryseis (the daughter!) to Chryses (the priest!). Meanwhile, Achilles isolates himself from the other Greeks.

Thetis begs Zeus to honor her son Achilles by turning the battle against the Greeks so they will see that they need him. Afterward, Zeus' wife, Hera, bickers with him over his plan, and the lame god Hephaistos tries to make peace among them.

Book 5

Diomedes' exploits on the battlefield dominate this section. After he wounds Aphrodite, Ares, the god of war, intervenes to help the Trojans. The goddesses Hera and Athene, join in on the Greek side.

Book 6

Diomedes and Glaucus, an ally of the Trojans, meet but do not fight because they discover they are "guest-friends": their grandfathers had visited each other and exchanged gifts. Hector returns to Troy to ask the Trojan women to make a sacrifice to Athene to win her pity. He visits Helen and scolds his brother, Paris, for abandoning the battlefield. In a moving scene, Hector explains his duty to fight and says an emotional goodbye to his wife, Andromache, and their baby before returning to battle.

Book 8

The battle resumes. Zeus orders the gods to stay out, and the Trojans gain the advantage. Hera and Athene try to help the Greeks but are stopped by Zeus, who foretells Patroclus' death and Achilles' return to the fighting. At nightfall, Hector persuades the Trojans to camp outside of the city in the hope of decisively defeating the Greeks the next day.

Book 9

The Greek leaders hold an assembly. Agamemnon proposes to go home, but Diomedes and Nestor dissuade him. The aged king, Nestor, convinces him to return Briseis to Achilles and offer him gifts in reconciliation. Odysseus, Ajax, and Phoenix, Achilles' tutor, go to Achilles' tent and offer him many gifts from Agamemnon if he returns to battle. Achilles rejects their appeals.

Book 16

Following Nestor’s advice, Patroclus persuades Achilles to let him wear his armor and lead their troops, the Myrmidons, into battle. Achilles warns him to return once he has driven the Trojans from the ships. The Trojans are routed, and Patroclus kills one of their great allies, Sarpedon, a mortal son of Zeus. Zeus is persuaded by Hera not to intervene to save his son. Patroclus ignores Achilles' warning and is killed by Hector with Apollo's help.

Book 18

Achilles learns of Patroclus' death, and Thetis, his mother, consoles him. He wants to join the battle, but Thetis reminds him that he has no armor. She promises to get new armor from Hephaistos, the smith of the gods. Achilles' war cry drives the Trojans away, and the Greeks finally recover Patroclus' body. In the Trojan camp, Hector rejects the advice of a counselor that they withdraw to Troy. In the Greek camp, Achilles mourns over Patroclus. Thetis asks Hephaistos to forge new armor for Achilles, and Homer describes the elaborate decoration of the shield.

Book 22

Priam and Hecuba beg their son, Hector, to return to the city, but he prepares to fight Achilles. Hector panics, and Achilles chases him around the walls of Troy. He makes a stand when Athene tricks him into thinking that one of his brothers is with him. Achilles kills Hector and abuses his body by hitching it to his chariot and dragging it around the walls of Troy. Hector’s parents and wife look on and mourn his death and the inevitable destruction of Troy.

Book 24

The gods are outraged that Achilles continues to mistreat the body of Hector by dragging it around the Greek camp every day. They decide that Priam must be allowed to ransom the body of his son. Thetis tells Achilles, and the gods inspire Priam to visit Achilles' tent and beg him to accept a splendid ransom for the body. Priam and Achilles grieve together, the body is returned to Troy, and the Trojans mourn Hector’s death.

[Troy Story: The Iliad](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cx0tQojZNIU) (1 of 2), and [Troy Story: The Odyssey](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBGO0T-JE8A) (2 of 2), and

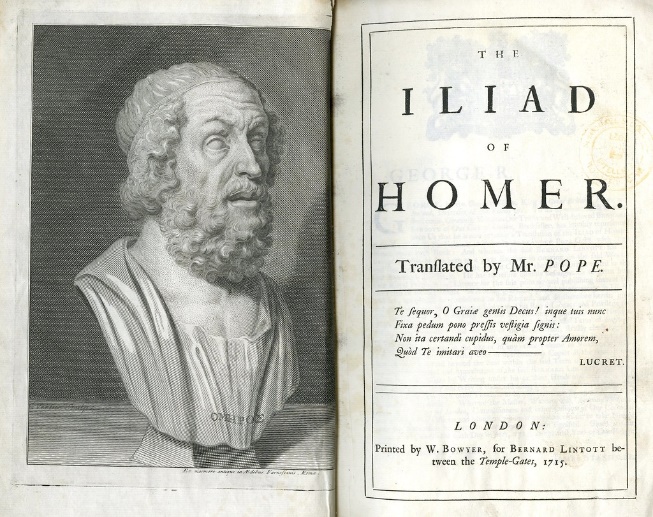
[Did Ancient Troy Really Exist? (Ted-Ed)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQbZX9JEQsQ)

[The Iliad Source:

<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/Ilhome.php>

Books: 1, 5, 6, 8, 9, 16, 18, 22, 24]

## Analysis



Portrait of Homer

“The *Iliad* gives an unvarnished portrayal of the human will to power and the psychological damage that warriors sometimes suffer on the battlefield.”

Within the opening lines of the *Iliad*, we find that Achilles has recently sacked several cities, and after the sack, both he and Agamemnon are each awarded a concubine: Briseis and Chriseis, respectively. Calchas, Chriseis’ father, arrives at the camp and tries to ransom his daughter. Agamemnon brusquely dismisses the priest, who retires to the beach and prays to Apollo for revenge, the result of which is a plague that kills many Greeks. So far, everything proceeds according to a clear and orderly causality and is a model of linear narrative; however, the rest of the text can be puzzling in more than one way, and most of this misunderstanding occurs when we try to understand the *Iliad* with our cultural assumptions. Let us try to clear that up.

Agamemnon eventually concedes to return his concubine Chriseis to end the plague, but he also demands that the Achaeans provide him with a prize, “so that I am not alone amongst the Achaeans without a prize,” since that would be unseemly for a commander. Achilles is quick to rebuke Agamemnon, but Agamemnon doubles down: he informs Achilles that he will take either his or Odysseus’ prize. Achilles notes that no one will follow Agamemnon in the future, for the Achaeans only came to Troy to secure honor for him and Menelaus, but now Agamemnon has threatened to take Achilles’ prize, which he has earned through direct deed and is representative of the honors the Achaeans have bestowed upon him. This action at the center of Agamemnon’s betrayal is hard to understand from our cultural point of view, but there are some inroads.

To focus our discussion on the psychology of this situation: when we recall that Chryseis and Briseis are slaves and that Achilles later declares he wishes Briseis had died rather than cause the quarrel that resulted in the death of Patroclus, *someone he plainly cares even more deeply about than her*, it may seem strange that Achilles reacts so violently to losing a woman he is not attached to emotionally. Patroclus is his **special comrade**, so this means that Briseis must have some other value. If Briseis is less important than his Myrmidons, why do Achilles nearly kill Agamemnon over her in the opening of the text? The answer to this question highlights the continued relevance of Homeric poetry to understanding some of our issues today and why they can feel so foreign.

While a societal system such as the one the Achaean display here may be foreign to many readers, it is not a thing of the past. There are many alternative societies, or a society (cultures) that exist within a larger society but are clearly defined as a nonmember of the larger society. Marginalized groups, minorities, or subjected cultures are examples. This can result from a variety of causes:

* a lack of law enforcement
* corrupt or counter-intuitive enforcement
* little or no support from society at large
* a lack of institutional superstructures to protect individuals
* internalized contempt and projection of society at large
* general poverty, helplessness, and hopelessness.

In short, the situation giving rise to a zero-sum system, like the one described in *The Code of the Streets*, requires not just an individual but a community to assume a general or worldview of personal abandonment because of a hostile world. Its effect is a community-wide sense that there is little respect to be had, and therefore, everyone competes to get what little they can of what little it is available. As soon as one decides to gain respect by being feared, structures emerge, leading to a formation of “**the code of the streets**”; features of the code include, above all, an obsession with respect. In other words, the code is a form of intimidation designed to produce respect, which in turn serves as an intangible coat of armor. Respect is not, however, simply based on self-preservation but equally on the need to be compensated for a sense of insignificance, powerlessness, and abandonment in the wider world.

This phenomenon is defined as an oppositional model, in which a group is structured by respect, turns its back on mainstream culture, and regains its meaning through this currency of respect. In this honor-based system, negotiations go on at a symbolic level that involves clothing, grooming, gate, demeanor, and facial expressions; it is a form of presentation in which physical objects assert the respect one is owed: “I wear this jacket because I can.” “Dissing” is also a part of the symbolic exchange of respect, but it can quickly translate into violence.

As we can imagine, an insult does not need to be true. All that matters is that the speaker is believable. The code may be centered on the concept of provoking difference; however, as people increasingly feel buffeted by forces beyond their control, the code provides a framework for negotiating respect. In a world governed by respect, **violence simply exists and is a matter of everyday life**. The code is therefore not the cause of the violence but a method to regulate it. A person's clothing, or armor ala Achilles, is designed to prevent aggression. The goal is to perform an identity that prevents others from challenging your respect. The code is based on physicality and intimidation, and it is ruthless.

In this light, appearance is reality, and there is a interesting counter point to be seen here between *Don Quixote* and the culture of respect in the process of creating an identity. Respect must also be negotiated in real-time; it is hard to obtain, is defined by the group on a quasi-material basis, can be quickly lost, and is constantly under negotiation. People obsessed with respect often have thin skins, and disses are therefore possible precursors to actual violence, and this is exacerbated by their sense of alienation from society.

The Greek obsession with honor, then, implies a wider feeling of insignificance, helplessness, and poverty. These may seem strange to say about such proud warriors, but please consider that this is a normal human response to such feelings as in an oppositional model. We can see in the Homeric tradition that the heroic code is the product of largely environmental factors, noting that modern humans, for the most part, are insulated from nature. The average ancient persons found themselves subject to incomprehensible, harsh, and often hostile forces in nature that they preceded to personify and sacrifice to gods that control those hostile forces to appease that same feeling of insignificance.

Achilles also demonstrates an eloquence in insulting Agamemnon, and this diss is a fundamental part of the symbolism of honor. In other words, it owes its importance in part to the fact that honor is a symbolic economy. On the other hand, Achilles quick to infer that Agamemnon will take Briseis before he loses Chryseis because it is a cultural assumption that both will engage in such activity for the same reason. Agamemnon wrongly infers that Achilles is engaged in a naked power grab. It is also clear why Achille’s motivation for acting is not important, and all that matters is that Achilles delivers an authoritative performance that Agamemnon cannot refute. In the end, Agamemnon could only attempt to nullify the effect of his loss by taking Briseis.

We also see that honor here is very much a zero-sum system, and that Agamemnon only understands losing his honor in terms of Achilles gaining it, in relative, or even absolute, terms. As honor is negotiated in real-time, it is difficult, if not impossible, for Agamemnon to accept the deferral of compensation that Achilles offers him. Please note how the lack of institutional superstructures that could be used to manage their conflict as a third party does not exist either (the gods are too fickle). It is clear that honor is concretely embodied in physical objects, as well, and Briseis is, in effect, similar to a pair of sneakers. Achilles and Agamemnon are engaging in blood sport over who gets to wear them, hence the insistence on calling her a prize. It is also hard to overlook the misogynistic portrayal of Briseis here. Such tension between Achilles and Agamemnon implies the rhetoric and reality of material scarcity. To lose honor is to become vulnerable. It is an outcome even worse than death since honor is the only thing worth living for. For Agamemnon, his entire enterprise for sacking Troy is at stake. For Achilles, however, what is at stake is the meaning of his existence. Following our discussion on Don Quixote, we can add Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, who note that the **will to power** defines us as human; thus, Homer is probing a very central nerve. In other words, the epic allows us to analyze the basic drives that exist within all of us, which Homeric society simply attempts to regulate, rather than to disguise or to suppress those inclinations.

Status, or honor, in an honor based culture, is the result of a series of competitive exchanges that establishes one's rank by competing until meeting one’s match. To refuse to compete is to lose while status is properly acquired by competitive means, including gift exchange, marriage, and violence. Athletic competition is also viewed as domesticated combat. No status can be acquired by competing with someone beneath you. Conversely, aiming too high is a recipe for death. There is a relentless pressure on the individual to measure his abilities and those of his possible opponents, and such competition requires witnesses because the function is social: the opinions that count are the ones most grudgingly bestowed.

* Agamemnon believes he is the best of the Achaeans because he rules the most people.
* Achilles believes that he is the best because he is the greatest fighter.

Achilles thus believes he is owed compensation that will acknowledge his true worth, and Agamemnon believes he cannot jeopardize his social standing by giving Achilles what he wants. The situation between Achilles and Agamemnon leads to bitterness and anger, further shortening their fuse. There can be no deferral in the system, both because of the possibility of violence and equally because there are no institutional superstructures in place to offer deferred redress. This lack of a superstructure creates a profound sense that one must take care of oneself.

There can be no deferral because a person’s self-worth is based on the group's perception of who they are. In a similar situation, many would think to simply walk away from being degraded because of our self-image and precisely because our identity is protected from outward hostility. Our identity is not often subjected to real-time public negotiation. A gang member, by contrast, must respond at once because, like Achilles, if he loses respect in the eyes of the group, he is vulnerable. If Achilles or Agamemnon allowed themselves to be dissed without response, there would be instant pressure by the rest of the group to lower his status still further. Therefore, if he loses an encounter, he may feel compelled to seek revenge to restore his honor.

The gang member and the ancient warrior, then, face a double bind: high status invites challenge, and low status is worse; however, as it invites spite, gang members learn the rudiments of the code already on the elementary school playground. Aggression has a social meaning that defines the voices of individuals and structures the group. There is no place for humility or mercy in this system. The code involves self-preservation, and public identity is what matters, so an individual’s sense of self-worth counts for nothing. For this reason, for the gang member, for the soldier, and Achilles, the code is a performative measure: “I am strong, I can take care of myself, and I love to fight, so do not even think about it.”

We can also understand modern combat veterans by reading the *Iliad* closely. We have already discussed the many connections this text has with PTSD, but it also displays ways of preventing and mitigating PTSD; this includes honoring the enemy, proper grieving for the dead, and communalizing grief and trauma through narratives, such as the *Iliad*. Dr. Shay overtly expresses that the ancient Greeks are much more effective at dealing with PTSD than the modern day Americans. Part of this is due to the tendency of modern western religion to demonize one's opponent, and the rest is due to the unfortunate fact that war was a way of life for the Greek world, which engendered effective strategies for dealing with psychological trauma as a simple matter of survival.

Dr. Shay also identifies a Homeric scene known as the aristeia, or lone hero dominating the battlefield, and notes that it is the formal narrative structure for berserking. The aristeia tends to follow the same general structure and shows the warrior at their best. It is also used to structure all the major battle sequences in the *Iliad*; its typical features include:

* The **aristeia** is an example of a personal narrative of the traumatic experience that allows soldiers to communalize their experience.
* It emphasizes that *individuals matter*.
* This term **(Greek, aristos, "best")** refers to the soldier's highest moment of glory in war, when he fights so bravely and single-mindedly as to experience **no fear** and to **appear nearly invincible**.
* It is an account or excursus which describes this moment of glory, "the preeminent deeds of one particular hero," such as Diomedes (Books 5-6) or Achilles (Books 20-22).
* The emotional state of the warrior is a **fighting frenzy that borders on madness** and may ultimately threaten the hero's own life, tempting him to over-reach himself, even to forget which side he is fighting on, and to **fall into moral blindness**.

We have drawn connections between the ancient Greek warriors, our modern warriors, and marginalized groups who must turn to violence to regulate their world, and through that connection, Achilles offers us an important lesson.

Achilles raged until there were floods, fires, and God-like battles of rage, but he does not find peace. He avenges Patroclus and vents his rage on Hector by dragging his body behind his chariot, but he does not find peace. They bury Patroclus, but he does not find peace. He is even able to express how much he loved Patroclus and how devastated he was to lose his friend, but he still does not find peace. There is one scene, however, that does bring Achilles peace: Priam, a frail older man, and the king of Troy, covertly visits Achilles in his camp, which is a tremendous risk; Priam finds Achilles, enters, kneels at his feet, and kisses the hands that murdered his son:

Fifty sons I had when the sons of Achaea came,

nineteen born to me from a single mother's womb

and the rest by other women in the palace. Many,

most of them violent Ares cut the knees from under.

But one, one was left me, to guard my walls, my people—

the one you killed the other day, defending his fatherland,

my Hector! It's all for him I've come to the ships now,

to win him back from you-I bring a priceless ransom.

Revere the gods, Achilles! Pity me in my own right,

remember your own father! I deserve more pity…

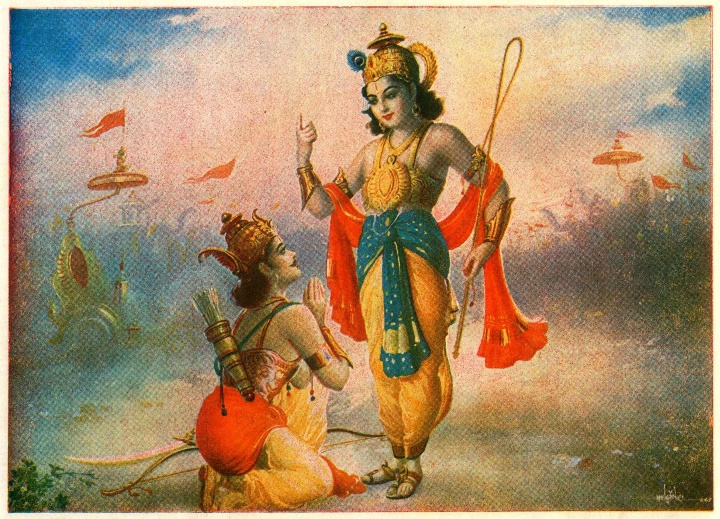
I have endured what no one on earth has ever done before—

I put to my lips the hands of the man who killed my son."

It is in this moment that Achilles finds peace through the forgiveness of an older man and the realization that Priam felt just as much pain over the death of his son Hector as he did about Patroclus. There is an important lesson here for everyone.

# Bhagavad Gita

## Background



Krishna and Arjuna

The *Bhagavad Gita*, “The Song of the Lord,” is the chief devotional text of most Indians. This text is part of a larger epic of *Mahabharata*, an ancient story that took literary form between the fifth BCE and third century CE. The *Gita* refers to *dharma*, which is the right ordering that supports the cosmos. *Dharma* is equivalent to natural law and conscience. In the *Gita*, Arjuna, the protagonist, loses his will to fight and has a discussion with his charioteer Krishna, about duty, action, and renunciation. The *Gita* has three major themes: knowledge, action, and love.

*The Bhagavad Gita* was written in the first century CE, but it tells a story that was ancient even at that time. The *Gita* is at once an independent story and part of the larger epic, the *Mahabharata*, that recounts a great civil war that, according to legend, took place in northern India around 3000 BCE.

Northern India was experiencing real war and turmoil when the *Gita* was written. The mighty Mauryan empire had fallen, and there were constant battles for power between the smaller kingdoms that sought to take its place. The basic problem Arjuna faces in the *Gita*—**how to justify killing one’s own family in a civil war**—must have been lived by much of its contemporary Indian audience.

The *Gita* is a Hindu text that has also influenced Buddhism. Buddhism was originated in India in the sixth century B.C.E., during the lifetime of Siddartha Guatama (563? — 483 B.C.E.), and thus younger than Hinduism, which developed over the centuries of 800-500 BCE. Both religions were practiced by Inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent. Long after the fall of the Mauryan empire, the *Gita* remained an important text for all Indians, including Hindus. One of its most important readers was Mahatma Gandhi. For Gandhi, the text was not just to be read but lived: “I have [made] an effort to enforce the meaning of the *Gita* in my own conduct [for] forty years… It is a misuse of our intellectual energy and a waste of time to go on reading what we cannot put into practice.”

This may seem surprising since the *Gita*teaches that war and violence are acceptable in the service of *dharma*, while Gandhi completely renounced violence of any kind, even for the noblest of causes. Krishna teaches throughout the text that one can fight a real war and kill real people without sin so long as it is done in support of *dharma*, one’s sacred duty to the good order of the universe. Gandhi believed that when Krishna talks about killing, he is speaking metaphorically. What people should do is “kill” the negative thoughts and motives inside their minds, even though these thoughts and motives are so familiar that we may see them as “friends” or “family.” This is a kind of violence that is in line with *ahimsa* or non-violent protest. Using this interpretation, Gandhi swayed the Indian independence movement away from violence and saw India become a sovereign nation in 1947 without firing a shot.

In order to get the most from the text, it’s important to understand what each character represents:

* **Arjuna**: us in our human form, with all our doubts, worries and habits. He represents you and I as we stand on the battlefield of life facing all the different parts of ourselves that prevent us from realising our true nature.
* **Krishna**: the ‘higher Self’ or ‘divine’.
* The **Pandavas**: the great virtues within us.
* The **Kauravas**: the opposing forces within us.
* The **Chariot**: our physical body.
* The **Horses**: our five senses that need to be skillfully guided and controlled by the self in order for us to be able to realize our true nature.

## Summary

Five thousand years ago, in ancient India, the Royal lineages come into conflict over who should ascend to the throne. There are two sets of cousins: the Pandavas, consisting of five Noble brothers, on one side and the Kauravas, the Hundred sons of a blind Regent, on the other. Each side believe they are the rightful heirs and cannot agree on a successor through peaceful means; the factions go to war with the battle lines drawn and the armies mustered. It seems impossible to tell which side will win. The Pandavas have some special help, however. The battlefield is a fearsome sight to behold. Drums beat on, shells blares, and Lords and Kings shout orders. Elephants adorned in gold trumpet amidst gleaming Chariots, with each convoy the size of a small city. Armor glittering with embedded gems blaze like fire in a rainbow of battle standards, but as the two mighty forces stand ready for War Thunder, Prince Arjuna *falters* for when he looks out at the two armies, he does not see foot soldiers, archers, and charioteers, but fathers, grandfathers, teachers, sons, and friends.

Arjuna is not alone on the battlefield, however. Alongside him, disguised in the form of a mortal companion and charioteer, stands the god Krishna. Arjuna tells Krishna that when he sees his family ready for war, his knees go weak, and he cannot stop shaking. There is moral conflict within Arjuna, and in this way, he is a foil for one of our later protagonists: Hamlet. As a Prince, Arjuna wants nothing more than to fight and win. However, as a man, he cannot see what good can come from killing his own family. He drops his weapons and weeps, but Krishna cannot help but *laugh*.

He has come to this battlefield to guide Arjuna to a higher path and help him understand this moral struggle. With a smile on his lips, Krishna explains that there is a divine self, eternal and untouched by the physical world. It is never boring, it never dies, and it is not killed when the body is killed; just as we change clothes, the divine-self changes bodies, according to Krishna. Thus, Arjuna should not worry about fighting his family, for their true essence cannot be killed.

Seeing how this wisdom begins to calm Arjuna, Krishna continues revealing more truths about the universe. He explains that those who make sacrifices in their life simply to gain pleasures in the afterlife are misguided. **The ultimate spiritual pursuit, he says, should be to detach oneself from material things and dedicate himself to his Dharma, their inherent nature in the universe**. Krishna points out that Arjuna’s inherent nature is that of **a warrior**. His purpose in life is to fight for what is right. At this point, Arjuna admittedly is a little overwhelmed and tries to wrap his head around it: “but how can you demand that I act if you believe that enlightenment comes from detaching myself from my actions?” Arjuna asks of Krishna.

Knowing this question was coming, Krishna tells him that he must not act for his personal gain, but rather for the welfare of the world. **Desire**, Krishna explains, is the obstacle to seeing this, which invades our senses and clouds our intellect. Then Krishna mentions that he is incarnated on the earth for a reason, and whenever there is an imbalance in the universe, he manifests himself there.

At this point, Arjuna has rightfully begun to suspect that Krishna is more than a mere charioteer, so he boldly asks Krishna who he is. Krishna responds that his current form is made of the five elements: earth, fire, water, air, and space, as well as mind, intellect, and ego. He may be manifested here on the mortal plane, but Krishna also has a higher nature, a true cosmic form. Planets spin in the heavens. The seasons change. There is an unseen force that makes things happen. Furthermore, Krishna is that force. As part of this revelation, Arjuna sees Krishna’s infinite mouths, eyes, and limbs shining with jewels draped in celestial robes. Krishna possesses thousands of arms, raising thousands of divine weapons, a body anointed with the perfume of the gods, and terrifyingly, Arjuna could see all of the enemy soldiers on the very battlefield where they stood rushing into Krishna’s many fanged mouths to die.

Previously, Arjuna worried about the battle because of the consequences, but Krishna shows him that the battle is already over, and his enemies have already been slain. Krishna has already accomplished everything, and it is simply up to Arjuna to act according to his Dharma on the spot. Arjuna bows and swears fealty to Krishna then.

Returning to the form of his bold, gentle, but humanlike persona, Krishna implores Arjuna once more to fight, but Krishna **also reminds him that ultimately the choice is his alone**. Upon hearing this ultimate mystery, Arjuna feels his fear dispel because he knows now that the becoming and unbecoming of all creatures is inevitable, and he trusts in the divinity of his companion. Arjuna is ready to fight. Arjuna squares his shoulders takes a deep breath and looks deep inside himself. He considers all that he has learned from Krishna and then looks outward to the Resplendent battlefield. He is a warrior and a Prince. This is where he belongs. Confident in who he is and his role in the universe, are Arjuna leads his troops into battle with newfound wisdom.

[The Gita’s Message (Epified)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnbBrMfDpDA)

[Eighteen Chapters of Bhagavad Gita – an Overview (The Sanskrit Channel)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UovzO-TkTCU&t=431s)

[The Gita Source:

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2388/2388-h/2388-h.htm>

Ch I – XVIII]

## Analysis



The Bhagavad Gita

There are three major themes that the Bhagavad Gita illuminates: **knowledge** (*jnana*), **action** (*karma*), and **love** (*bhakti*):

1. **Knowledge**: Krishna shows Arjuna that his grief is misplaced since the eternal soul, unlike the body, cannot be slain.
   1. Krishna urges Arjuna to acquire discriminative wisdom (i.e., the ability to distinguish the eternal from the transient).
   2. One acquires this wisdom by cultivating steadiness of mind, which Krishna compares to a lamp unflickering in a windless place.
   3. Attainment of the mental stability requires practice, especially yoga postures (“stopping the whirlpools of the mind”), which help to concentrate the mind. The body is a vehicle for helping the mind come to repose.
2. **Action**: Acting without getting enmeshed in the results of action.
   1. Krishna asks Arjuna to renounce not the worldly life or action itself, but instead the fruits of action. One must bring steadiness of mind into action: yoga is “skill in action.”
   2. The four *purushartas* or goals of life are *kama* (please or passion), *artha* (wealth or power), *dharma*, and *moksha* (freedom).
   3. On the field of *dharma*, one should act without passion (*nishkama*) and without desire for the fruits of action (*nishphalaratha*). Through yoga, one can cultivate a disinterestedness in or detachment from the outcome of action.
3. **Love**: Dedicate your action in devotion to God.
   1. God – *Bhagavan* – is the supreme reality that is both ultimate and personal.
   2. Krishna teaches a lesson of divine presence: “Though I am unborn, I come into being in age after age, whenever *dharma* declines and *adharma* is on the rise” (*Bhagavad Gita* 4). This is the first articulation of divine descent or *avatara*.
   3. At Arjuna’s request, Krishna reveals his supreme form, which Arjuna perceives with a special third eye.
   4. Arjuna responds with love to Krishna’s revelation. Only through love can one perceive Krishna’s true form.
   5. Krishna reveals his love for Arjuna, saying: “Abandoning all *dharma*, come to me alone for refuge…”
   6. Love can subvert *dharma*; there is no need to consider *dharma* when one consecrates one’s acts to God.

Arjuna is worried about entering the battle and destroying his own family, so Krishna begins by explaining five reasons why Arjuna should not be troubled by this. Essentially Krishna shows Arjuna why he will not get bad *karma* from taking part in the war.

1. The first reason Krishna mentions is that because *atman* (the Self) is eternal, it is a mistake to think that one can kill someone. What happens is that people are sent to the next stage of reincarnation.“[Krishna speaking] One believes he is the slayer, another believes he is the slain. Both are ignorant; there is neither slayer nor slain. You were never born; you will never die. You have never changed; you can never change. Unborn, eternal, immutable, immemorial, you do not die when the body dies.” (*Bhagavad Gita* 2:19-20)
2. The second reason why Arjuna should fight is because of **honor and duty**. (The root of the word *dharma*, commonly translated as “duty,” is from the Sanskrit root *dhr* – meaning “what holds things up or sustains. *Dharma*, here refers to the way in which aligning one’s decisions to *dharma* duty hold together the proper order of things, and this is why Krishna the sustainer, is the manifestation appearing now to Arjuna.) Arjuna is a member of the warrior class; the battle is the very reason for his existence within this particular order now.
3. The third reason Krishna gives is that **inaction is impossible**. Withdrawing from battle is in itself a conscious decision; **not choosing is still a choice**. This is, in a way, a criticism of some worldviews, such as asceticism, which claim that leaving everything behind is inaction. Withdrawing from society is always a deliberate act.
4. The fourth reason given by Krishna is that the source of evil is not in actions but in passion and desires, the intentions behind the actions. This brings the dialogue to the last reason.
5. The fifth and last reason is that there are ways to act where we can do what we have to do without getting bad karma.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna explains three ways to act without getting bad karma.

1. The first way is ***Jnana yoga*** (**the way of knowledge**). This idea is based on the *Upanishads* and holds that life and death are not real. Selfhood is nothing but an illusion. All we see are manifestations of the one. Once we realize that the one is behind all things, we can escape the bad karma from acting: “[Krishna speaking] I am ever present to those who have realized me in every creature. Seeing all life as my manifestation, they are never separated from me.” (*Bhagavad Gita* 6:30)
2. The second way is ***Bhakti yoga*** (**the way of devotion**). This is an idea developed in great detail in Hinduism and holds that our actions can be dedicated to Krishna by surrendering our will to him, and he will take upon himself any bad karma.
3. The third way is ***Karma yoga*** (“**the way of action” or “the way of works**”). The idea behind Karma yoga is acting without attachment; in other words, to act without being so concerned about the outcome of our actions. According to this view, if we act in such a way as not to get attached to the fruits of our actions, we can be more effective. Sometimes emotions like fear, embarrassment, or anxiety can interfere with the outcome of what we do.

It is essential when we approach the *Gita* to understand that it is not literal. The battlefield is not the actual battlefield but the battlefield that exists in our minds. However, the concepts Krishna touches on should be taken seriously, and whether to kill or not is at the core of Arjuna's struggle. Like our subsequent text, *Beowulf*, this text is a guide for **proper action**. *Beowulf* will explore what it means to be a good, generous king in an Anglo-Saxon culture that centers around "guilt and fairness" while the *Gita* examines what it means to be a warrior within an honor-centered culture, like the *Iliad*.

***Dharma***, in a non-religious sense, can also be understood as a duty on a grander scale. We have explored the implications of what it means to live and function within a zero-sum honor culture and, viscerally, how inaction is impossible through Elijah Wood's *Code of the Streets*. Here, however, I would like to take a different focus: when is it wrong to kill, and why does Krishna push Arjuna towards the annihilation of his own family? Let us look at these lines from Chapter II:

…but wrongful deem  
The speech of those ill-taught ones who extol  
The letter of their Vedas, saying, "This  
Is all we have, or need;" being weak at heart  
With wants, seekers of Heaven: which comes--they say--  
As "fruit of good deeds done;" promising men  
Much profit in new births for works of faith;  
In various rites abounding; following whereon  
Large merit shall accrue towards wealth and power;

…

Look! like as when a tank pours water forth  
To suit all needs, so do these Brahmans draw  
Text for all wants from tank of Holy Writ.  
But thou, want not! ask not! Find full reward  
Of doing right in right! Let right deeds be  
Thy motive, not the fruit which comes from them.  
And live in action! Labour! Make thine acts  
Thy piety, casting all self aside,  
Contemning gain and merit; equable  
In good or evil: equability  
Is Yog, is piety!

**Do your duty, but do not concern yourself with the results.** Here Krishna informs Arjuna that we have the right to do our duty, **but the results are not dependent only upon our efforts**. Several factors come into play in determining the results according to Krishna—our efforts, destiny (our past karmas), the will of God, the efforts of others, the cumulative karmas of the people involved, the place, and situation (a matter of luck). If we become anxious for results, we will experience anxiety whenever they are not according to our expectations. So, Shree Krishna advises Arjun to give up concern for the results and instead focus solely on doing a good job. The fact is that when we are unconcerned about the results, we can focus entirely on our efforts, and the result is even better than before.

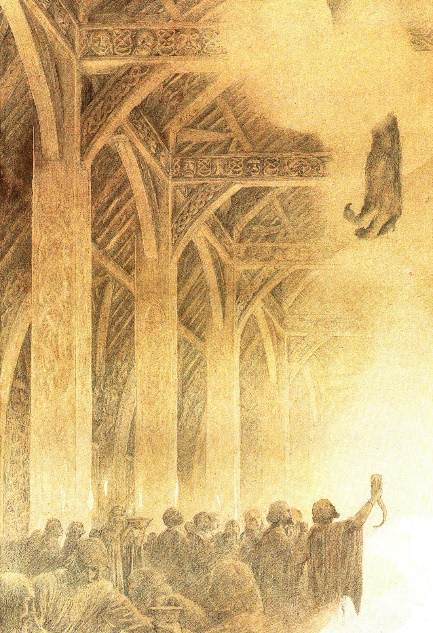
**Similarly, the fruits of your actions are not for your enjoyment.** To perform actions is an integral part of human nature. While performing these actions, we must remember that we are not the enjoyers of the results. Thus, a primary determiner of what is right or moral is **intent** rather than the result. How does this apply to war and death? Please keep this in mind for context with one of our later texts, *Song of Roland*, where the epic's entire purpose is to destroy an idea: someone else's faith.

Here Krishna is outlining why and how it is wrong to desire to kill an idea.

We often mistake our distaste for emotion or an idea as a dislike of the person and for killing the body. For example, if someone makes us feel angry, we may think to ourselves, "I want to kill this person." However, the thing we want to "kill" is that angry thought within our heads. We wish to eliminate the thought that vibrates within the person's head, not necessarily the person we may end up killing. If we are part of a party, like a political party, for example, and then someone stands against the party's ideals, the consensus may be to kill that person. However, we could not stop with one, could we? Since it is the idea we wish to kill, it would require killing every person who had that idea.

# Beowulf

## Background



Grendel's Arm on Display

*Beowulf* survives in a single medieval manuscript. The manuscript bears no date, and its age must be calculated by analyzing the scribes’ handwriting. Some scholars have suggested that the manuscript was made at the end of the 10th century, others in the early decades of the 11th, perhaps as late as the reign of King Cnut, who ruled England from 1016 until 1035. The most likely time for Beowulf to have been copied is the early 11th century, which makes the manuscript approximately 1,000 years old. Nobody knows for certain when the poem was first composed.

For centuries, the Roman Empire had ruled much of the world, but by the start of the fifth century, the Roman Empire had lost much of its power. Years of civil wars, political chaos, and successful invasions by Germanic tribes, like the Visigoths and Vandals, forced the Romans to abandon lands that were once under their control. The Roman retreat from the island of Britannia allowed several nomadic tribes from Denmark and northern Germany, the Jutes, Saxons, and Engels, to claim this land as their new home. When the first Anglo Saxon migrated to Britannia, they brought with them their religious beliefs: Norse mythology, wherein they worshipped the gods: Thor, Odin, and Freya, among many others. Evidence of these religious beliefs can still be found in the English names for the first six days of the week, which are all named after gods of Norse mythology.

The Nordic influence did not outlast the lingering Roman influence, however, and the religion of the Roman Empire was Christianity. Due to the efforts of St. Patrick and other Christian missionaries, the Celts who controlled nearby Ireland and parts of Scotland were predominantly Christian. As Anglo-Saxon cultures spread across the island, marriage between the pagan immigrants and the Christian Celts became common. This intermingling, combined with the missionary work of St. Augustine of Canterbury, resulted in the rapid spread of Christianity among the Anglo-Saxon.

Because many of the tales and histories of these cultures were spoken or sung and never written down as part of an oral tradition, *Beowulf* could have been lost or forgotten, which is exactly what happened to many ancient cultures that were once vibrant and flourishing. We know nothing of their languages today, and the stories and histories we have of them are recorded by other cultures. So, what made the Anglo-Saxon language different? Well, we have mentioned that the Anglo-Saxons adopted the religion of the Romans. They were also influenced by other aspects of the Roman culture, including the values that the Romans placed on writing. Like the Greeks before them, the Romans were proud of their accomplishments and their culture; men who could record their histories and their stories were held in high esteem. The works of Roman writers Ovid, Horace, Cicero, and Virgil are widely read even today. If not for this Roman influence, the Anglo-Saxon language would likely not have survived.

There is not, of course, one single person who can be credited with the survival and preservation of the English language, but there are individuals who stand out in history as playing a major role. One of these is Alfred the Great. The first king of the Anglo-Saxon, Alfred, gained fame for defeating a Viking invasion in 1878, and he remained king until he died in 1899. During his reign, Alfred promoted education by requiring literacy of all men who held positions of authority by establishing a court school where lessons were taught in English as well as by writing and translating works into English himself, partly due to his influence and the value that he placed on education and writing in the common language.

We have over 400 surviving manuscripts written in Anglo-Saxon or Old English, as we call it. One of these manuscripts, called the Noel Codex, contains the earliest example of English poetry. That poem is *Beowulf*.

*Beowulf* is the oldest epic poem written in English. It was probably written down by monks sometime between the 8th and 11th century, and Beowulf is also the first epic hero in English literature, even though the character Beowulf is not English himself. He also happens to be the first dragon slayer in English literature. The poem employs many of the literary devices that writers still use today, and it contains some of the earliest English language examples of metaphor, irony, foreshadowing, understatement, **alliteration,** and more. Furthermore, even though many Christian elements have been added to the original Anglo-Saxon tale, *Beowulf* gives us a glimpse into the Anglo-Saxon society in the Middle Ages, and it is written in the common language of the Anglo-Saxon people, although it was written in England.

The story is set in Denmark and Sweden since the early Anglos and Saxons passed stories down orally, as we saw earlier. *Beowulf* is likely a great deal older than the period in which it was written down. It gives us insight into the structure of society in everyday life, including the concept of a **comitatus**, which refers to the bond of loyalty between Germanic rulers and their warriors. The warriors, or **thanes** in the Anglo-Saxon story, must honor, respect, serve, and *defend their ruler to the death*. He, in turn, *provides them with protection and a share of his wealth*. It is a relationship of camaraderie and brotherhood with a strong emphasis on loyalty and kinship.

When speaking of kindship, we must also speak of lineage. Lineage refers to a person's family line. A hero fights and gains glory not only for himself but for those who went before him and for those who will come after he brings honor to his family name. In the poem *Beowulf*, lineage is important. Beowulf is descended from a brave warrior, while the monster Grendel is of a fatherless race and is referred to as the descendant of Kane. This contrast underscores how important the idea of lineage and family loyalty is to the Anglo-Saxons. Concerning lineage, it is also important to understand the sections of *Beowulf*’s edited cultural background due to Christian influence. Here is some historical information about *Beowulf* from a *contemporary* historian **Saxo Grammaticus**:

Thora, who has not stopped grieving over her lost maidenhead, invents a wicked deception to take hideous revenge… she deliberately sends her daughter… down to the shore, instructing her to defile her father in fornication.

Helgi (or Halga): Inadvertently marries his daughter Yrse, and the hero Hrolf (Hrothulf) is their offspring. When Yrse learns she has married her father, she runs away and marries the Swedish king Adils (Eagdils). Hrolf attacks Eagdil’s kingdom to revenge his father’s, Halga’s, death at the hand of Eagdil.

Yrse and Onela: Onela goes on to kill Beowulf’s lord, Heardred, putting Beowulf on the throne. Beowulf has him killed in revenge.

Sigemund and Fitela Digression: Signy seduces her brother (Sigemund) without her brother’s knowledge to produce a warrior capable of revenging their father.

## Summary

*Beowulf* begins with a description of the life of Scyld Scefing, the legendary ancestor of the Scyldings or the Danish royal family. The narrator then lists several descendants of Scyld before getting to Hrothgar, who rules from the hall of Heorot. Beowulf and his thegns arrive at Heorot to assist Hrothgar against the monster Grendel. Grendel is described as a descendant of the biblical Cain (evidence of the Christian layering to the text by the scribe) and is an outsider among men. It is clear, through instances like this, that the poet was Christian writing for a Christian audience. Grendel, for example, is explained by the poet-narrator as a diabolical descendant of Cain, the first murderer, from whose off-spring, according to the Old Testament and Judeo-Christian Apocrypha, arose the various races of giants.

The narrator explains that the sounds of celebration and joy coming from Heorot agonize Grendel. Grendel begins attacking Heorot on a nightly basis, killing and devouring Hrothgar's warriors. Beowulf hears about Hrothgar’s plight while at home in Geatland. He receives the permission of the Geatish king to travel with his warriors to Denmark and fight Grendel. Beowulf and his followers are welcomed by Hrothgar and his wife Wealhtheow. Unferth, one of Hrothgar's warriors, is skeptical about Beowulf's abilities. As the two fling insults at each other, Beowulf recounts the reason he lost a swimming competition: he had to battle some sea monsters is all.

Before his battle with Grendel, Beowulf announces he will fight Grendel alone and unarmed, so he pretends to sleep while waiting for Grendel's arrival. When Grendel appears, Beowulf attacks him, and they begin to grapple with each other. When his warriors try to attempt to help, the swords are unable to pierce Grendel's skin. Beowulf ultimately rips Grendel's right arm off, and the monster flees and dies alone. The arm is hung up as a trophy, and Beowulf's victory is celebrated.

The following night, Grendel's mother arrives. Infuriated by the death of her son, she attacks Heorot. Grendel's mother drags Aeschere, Hrothgar's most trusted warrior, out of the hall and kills him. Beowulf and the other warriors track Grendel's mother to her lair under a lake. The warrior Unferth presents Beowulf with his sword, Hrunting, and Beowulf prepares with Hrothgar should he be killed in the coming fight. Beowulf then plunges into the water. After sinking for days, he discovers a cave where Grendel and his mother have been living.

In the cave, Beowulf finds Grendel's body. He engages Grendel's mother in combat, but Unferth's sword cannot pierce her skin. Beowulf eventually finds another magic sword forged by a giant in Grendel’s mothers’ horde, and uses it to decapitate Grendel’s mother. He then takes their heads Grendel and his mother back to Hrothgar. In reward, Hrothgar showers Beowulf in gifts, including his ancestral sword, Naegling. **What follows is a lengthy speech by Hrothgar, urging Beowulf to remain humble and to be generous to his thegns**. In essence, Hrothgar *is espousing the proper behavior of a successful king and warlord*. This would have reflected the values of the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy more so than their counterparts in the other early Germanic kingdoms.

Beowulf returns home to the Geats, where his hard-won glory is celebrated and rewarded by his uncle King Hygelac. Fifty years pass, and Beowulf, now an older man, is the king of the Geats when his people are menaced by a fire-breathing dragon. An elderly Beowulf is forced to confront a rampaging dragon. The narrator explains that a slave stole a cup from the dragon's hoard. This prompts the furious beast to leave its lair and attack the countryside. *The image of the dragon hoarding its treasure can be contrasted with generous kings and lords who properly reward their warriors and thegns for their faithful military service*. Beowulf leads an expedition to the dragon’s barrow, where he intends to fight the creature in single combat (as in the days of his youth and glory). A key difference in this battle, which we will cover further in the analysis, is that for the first time, *his warriors* (except Wiglaf) *run away because they do not believe Beowulf can win*. The old king is overmatched but seized by the neck in the dragon's mighty jaws; Beowulf achieves victory with the help of his young kinsman Wiglaf and at the cost of his own life.

Such a bare summary makes the plot and structure of the poem sound straightforward, but one of the distinctive characteristics of Beowulf is the way the poet skillfully moves back and forth along the linear narrative timeline, **interweaving the main events of the poem with a plethora of inset and secondary historical narratives**. Foreground and background merge in this consummate example of **'interlace' structure** so that the exploits of Beowulf himself are inextricably immersed within a richer background of the heroic legend.

This is the breakdown of the plot structure into its “principal parts.”

A Sections: Historical

A1) Descent of the Scyldings / Approach to Heorot / Unferth and the Breca Story

A2) Sigmeund and Heremod / The Finn Episode / Wealthow’s Intervention

A3) Hrothgar’s “Sermon” / Edgy Partying / Return / The Fremu Story / The Ingeld Story

– 50 years Jump / Last Survivor

A4) Death Speeches / Prophecy of the Messenger / Funeral

B Sections: The Action

B1) The Fight with Grendel

B2) The Fight with Grendel’s Mother

B3) The Fight with the Dragon

With the historical digressions removed, this story is not only straightforward, but it probably is also familiar: it directly inspired a famous author, Tolkien. The language that Beowulf employs provides an astonishing level of creative and poetic verbal inventiveness—particularly evident in the use of uniquely-occurring descriptive compound words: **A kenning,** which is a figure of speech in which two words are combined to form a poetic expression that refers to a person or a thing. For example, "whale-road" is a kenning for the sea. **Kennings are most often found in Old Norse and Old English poetry**—and by a layer of verbal formulas and “type scenes,” which recur throughout both the poem and the surviving corpus of Old English poetry.

Tolkien was not just a fan, he was also a published “critic” of *Beowulf*. He even wrote his translation of the text. The similarities between Beowulf and Tolkien’s work do not stop there. However, it is more explicit than we might think.

**Beowulf**:

Both heroes’ journeys include confronting terrible monsters.

Beowulf battles three “monsters.”

And, well, the dragon.

**The Hobbit**:

Both heroes’ journeys include confronting terrible monsters.

Bilbo battles three “monsters” (Trolls, Gollum, and the Dragon).

**Beowulf**:

* It is divided into three sections: each with its own climax and resolution.
* Beowulf gains something each time he completes said “quests.”
* There are three main “parties” and “rest stops” on the road of each of these journeys.

**The** **Fellowship**:

* It is divided into three sections: each with its climax and resolution.
* The fellowship also gains something each time he completes said “quests.”
* There are three main “parties” and “rest stops” on the road of each of these journeys

Speaking of (Lord of the) rings: a "ring-giver" (< OE beag-gefa) is a word with much significance, as it denotes a generous lord.

The term "ring" here, however, is not the same kind of ring we think of. Our modern English word 'ring' comes from an Old English word, hring. A "beag" (is modern English for 'ring') is a ring worn around the arm, rather than the finger, and served somewhat as a monetary unit in early Germanic societies.

[Classics Summarized: Beowulf](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DcqMp_D5pdE&t=1s) (Overly Sarcastic Productions), or

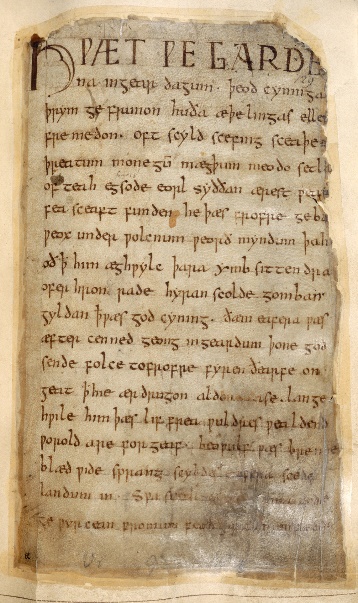
[Beowulf](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xh8akuq-MDI) (Thug Notes)

[Beowulf Source:

<https://heorot.dk/beo-intro-rede.html>

Ch. I-V, X – XV, XVIIII – XXIIII, XXXI – XLIII]

## Analysis



Beowulf in Old English

In this text, Beowulf, as a warrior and a king, fulfills the **Anglo-Saxon** idea of heroism in the epic poem through strength, humility, and essential goodness.Some critics, on the other hand, argue that Beowulf resembles an **Aristotelian tragic protagonist**, one whose **hubris**, or god-defying pride, leads him to nemesis—an ultimately destructive force—and catharsis—the emotional release a champion achieves at his tragic end.

I disagree.

This popular reading of *Beowulf* ignores the function and purpose of the epic poem as being both allegorical and instructive to its audience, the Anglo-Saxons, or whom we now call British. We can, however, garner a better understanding of *Beowulf* by applying the logic of Dr. Shay’s work on **superstructures** (for example, government, overarching systems) and how they influence the warrior (please recall the role the “commander,” or REMF, plays in the betrayal of one’s moral code by deeming it “moral”) by dissecting something that may surprise you: the complex interplay of **gender** within *Beowulf*.

To understand the historical and thematic underpinnings of the text, it is also important to acknowledge the obvious connection between **Beowulf** and **Grendel** (in an interesting comparison, this is the inverse relationship of Enkidu and Gilgamesh). From the outset, it is obvious that the poet meant to create an immediate comparison between Beowulf and his foes, for the author describes the hero and the antagonist in parallel terms. Upon close examination, Grendel is the focus of the literary poem and likely the underlying oral tradition, for neither the mother nor the dragon was "around long enough to be named."

* It is no accident that the Anglo-Saxon term "aglǣca" is used for both Beowulf and Grendel. The two are both "fierce fighters," equal combatants, and the true test of one another's might.
* Considering the structure of the poem, we see that Grendel, who is so central to the poem and dominates so many of its lines, should be the creature who is given a name and a vivid identity.
* Grendel may be related to Old English gryndal "fierce, angry" and Old Norse grindill "storm, wind"; it may also be derived from the Old English verb grindan "to grind, destroy.”
* The text states "Grendel nemdon foldbúende," which translates roughly to "the earth-dwelling people named him Grendel." So, he was specifically named Grendel by the Danes.
* The text often refers to Grendel with additional monstrous qualifiers (e.g., "wæs se grimma gaést Grendel háten" or "this ghastly demon was named Grendel").

So, it is not as if Grendel was a generic "grendel," nor is it that there were more of his kind out there. Grendel was a monster with the name "Grendel." This marks him as distinctly different from both his mother and the dragon.

There is also the matter of numbers:

* Grendel can “genam thritig thegna” (“he can seize thirty men at once”).
* According to Hrothgar, Beowulf has “thritiges manna magencruft on his mundgripe” (“the strength of thirty in his hand”).
* A point further illustrated later on when Beowulf swims off with thirty suits of armor from Hygelac’s battle against the Franks.

And their murderous progenitors:

* Beowulf’s father, Ecgtheow, was on the run for killing Heatholaf of the Wulfings (and not paying wergild).
* Grendel descends from Cain, who is likewise on the run for his crime of killing another.

Furthermore, in preparation for their battle, Beowulf notes that since Grendel “for his wonhydum waepna ne recceth” –or “does not use a weapon, armor, or shield,” nor will he, **thereby directly casting himself as Grendel’s equal**. Beowulf and Grendel also come from essentially single-parent families and have mothers who are never clearly named. For these reasons, that the primary purpose of this text is tied up with the difference between Beowulf and Grendel.

Another important aspect for understanding *Beowulf* is the role of women. The role of a woman in *Beowulf*, as in Anglo-Saxon society, primarily depends on **peacemaking**, either *biologically*, through her marital ties with foreign kings as a **peace pledge** or mother of sons, or *socially* and psychologically, through her role in **cup-passing** and **peace-weaving** as the Queen within a hall. So, yes, Wealhtheow is a walking peace treaty. Whom Wealhtheow gives the cup to, and when, at dinner is part of that “peace.”

This societal function is unfamiliar to many modern readers, perhaps, so it requires us to make another comparison, between Wealhtheow and Grendel’s Mother:

* Wealhtheow: described as “fithu-sibb folca” or “Peace pledge between nations”– Which nations? All “good” women in *Beowulf* act as “peace weavers.” She is the picture of the “Perfect Queen.”
* Grendel’s Mother: Described as “ides agaewif,” ides = lady; algaeca = a monster, fighter, or hero. Both the Mother and Beowulf are described as “gaest” or guests. Is she a monster? A warrior? Is she a monster because she does not weave peace? Is this ideal pagan or Christian?

Grendel’s mother’s “action section” is also situated between the Finnsburg Episode and the scene wherein Wealhtheow seeks protection for her sons. It is worth exploring the dramatic irony of this historical digression because:

* Modthryth is a foil for Hygd.
* Moreover, Modthryth is only “monstrous” **as long as she is single**.

By pitting the women in the digression as foils to one another and demonstrating Modthryth’s transformation into an acceptable woman through marriage, the text’s structure pits the two main women of our story against each other. This begs the question, is Grendel’s mother, then, a foil for Wealhtheow? Please consider that Grendel’s mother may be acting as a mirror for strong Norse women like Brunhild of the Nibelungenlied, which would not have been in keeping with the Christian society, which was of a “guilt” culture in this region of the Saxony (the British Isles).

Critics have discussed Grendel's Mother as a peculiar brand of monster and have generally been uneasy with her femininity.

* Broadly speaking, the association between the categories of monster and woman developed into criticism of Grendel's Mother as a hyper-masculine female, who is an extension of Grendel, and criticism of her as a representative of the threatening archaic feminine.
* In this way, Grendel’s mother has a lot in common with Euripides’ Medea, coming later, and is more widely a representation of Christian ideals moving throughout Europe and designating the role of women as submissive, which was not the case in the Norse tradition.

As a monster, she is a threat in her very similarity to the hero; if she were truly "other," she would be beyond description. As Hala and Overing point out, the text makes her secondary to her son when she must be logically prior and excludes her from the **symbolic** by not giving her a name. Beowulf opposes Grendel's Mother, and she is Overing's "nameless woman" (Overing 73); her femininity is dubious at times since she is only "idese onlicnes" or "in the likeness of a woman.”

The danger, however, is never done away with. It is the oppositional relationship between Beowulf, as the protector of “society,” and Grendel’s mother, or the “**other**,” that is unstable and dangerous, rather than the sex of either. That is, of course, because Grendel's Mother also embodies the threat of "the monstrous woman," the maternal excess, the avenger, and the imitation man. However, she is more than the dark Valkyrie, or female other, so frequently found (or suspected) in medieval texts.

To explore this further, let us consider the Finnsburg episode and how it acts as a foil for Beowulf and the Danes. After Grendel’s death, Hrothgar even speaks of adopting Beowulf. This is both strange and important. First, it is strange because Beowulf is not a Dane! Hrothgar is acting well outside of Norse's custom to offer a bond of peace and honor without marriage. Furthermore, **despite Beowulf being described as “lof-geornst” – keenest to win fame**, having stated that “glory before death…will be his best and only bulwark,” and that “it is always better to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning,” **Beowulf acts as a “peace-weaver” between the Geats and the Danes.** This act is central to the text and notable because such vengeance often led to blood-feuds, and Beowulf’s actions are in opposition.

In the Hildebruth episode, the lay identifies Hnæf's last struggle as the aftermath of a battle described as Fres-wæl (the "Frisian slaughter"), and it describes the mourning of Hildeburh after a surprise attack by the Frisians on the Danes.

Hildeburh, Hnæf's sister, was married to Finn, leader of the Frisians, **to make peace between the two tribes**, though this attempt was unsuccessful and today is seen by many scholars as to the source for tragedy in the piece.

She mourned for the loss of her brother, Hnæf, whose funeral pyre was shared by her and Finn’s son. After the battle, Finn and a character named Hengest make a loyalty pact. Hengest is a leader among Hnæf's surviving warriors.

By cleansing Heorot of the curse of Grendel, Beowulf achieves a trusted friendship and bond between the Geats and the Danes–**similar to what would have been expected if he had been exchanged between the two nations as the modified bride**. Indeed, Beowulf's deeds create a bond with Hrothgar more durable than most of those in the poem established by intertribal marriage.

Thus, when Beowulf crosses tribal lines to aid Hrothgar's Danes, even though his conduct includes some sweaty brutality, Beowulf becomes distinctly feminized.

* This is especially important when considering that genders are not constructed onto pre-existing sexed bodies; gender construction is not an act that can be deemed "finished" at a certain point (Bodies 9).
* The performativity of gender depends on an understanding of gender construction as an ongoing process (or performance) that is never ultimately complete.

Within the poem, at least, male loyalty across tribal lines is very seldom cited as a virtuous trait. When cross-tribal relationships between men are mentioned, they are usually cited within the context of a female peace-weaving bond that has failed or is highly fragile. Women in Beowulf are, as Enright puts it, the "mortar that cements the bricks" (Enright 202); they facilitate relationships among men. Beowulf's meaning is clear enough in the poem:

* "As a rule, the murderous spear will rest only for a short time under such circumstances [as a marriage bond]" (Klaeber 203)

It does not matter how good the bride may be. Beowulf's skepticism is hardly surprising in a poem that repeatedly emphasizes how human life is made up of transitory days. Accordingly, the other intertribal marriage discussed in the poem—that of Hildeburh in the Finnsburg episode—ends in slaughter and vendetta.

* In Chance's words, "The efforts of the peacemaker, while valuable in worldly and social terms, ultimately must fail because of the nature of this world" (Chance 106-7).

Even Wealhtheow, with all her virtues, is unable to prevent the later conflagration at Heorot and the death of her entire family. Ultimately, the poet draws such strong associations to highlight not how threatening and dangerous the monsters are but rather how threatening and dangerous human beings are, or at least can be.

Despite their monstrous nature, the strength, appetite, and terror of the Grendelkin—and even the flames and poison of the dragon—the monsters are ineffective and defeated. The greater, more threatening force in the poem is people; Grendel can terrorize Heorot and Hrothgar, but he does not destroy the hall nor kill Hrothgar and his kin. Heorot awaits destruction in “lathan liges,” the “hateful flames” that will come in the feud between Hrothgar and his son-in-law Ingeld of the Heatho-Bards. Then Hrothulf, Hrothgar’s trusted but treacherous kinsman, will seize the throne from his cousin, Hrothgar’s son.

Grendel’s mother, as monstrous as she is, is only acting out the approved social code of revenge, a code reaffirmed in the lay of Hildeburh, told the very night Grendel’s mother attacks. Furthermore, while Grendel’s mother is hunted down for seeking revenge for the death of her son, Hildeburh is stripped of all right to such revenge for the death of her son, brother, and husband.

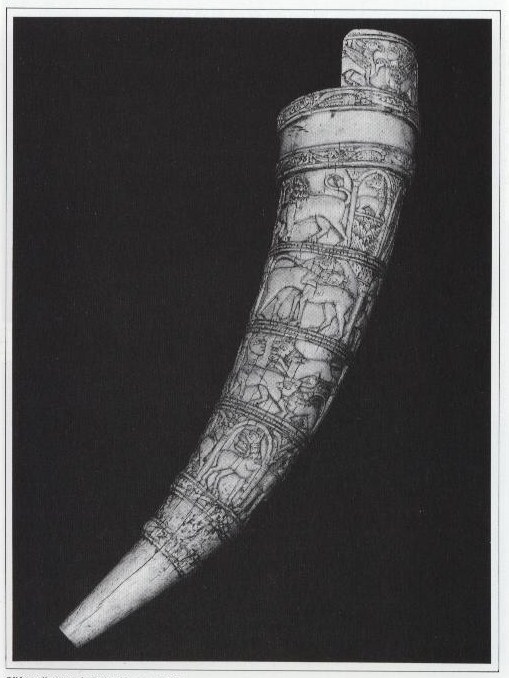
Likewise, the dragon, for all his destructive abilities and justifiable anger at being robbed, does not destroy the Geats; rather, the Franks, Frisians, and Swedes will obliterate the Geats, as the messenger prophesizes at the end of the poem, which has come to pass, for we still have Franks, Frisians, and Swedes, but no Geats.

So, what does this have to do with Dr. Shay’s work?

First, consider that this text is “English,” not “Norse,” and that it was transcribed by a Christian monk. This text marks a transitional period from an honor-based Norse society to a Christian Anglo-Saxon society, and it is the latter’s values that the text champions. **This text, at its heart, is about what it means to be a good king**, which juxtaposes Agamemnon and Beowulf as leaders. It is important to note that the difference between Scyld Scefing and Grendel is not one of violence; they are both wreckers of mead halls. **The difference is one of generosity**. Like Scyld, Beowulf is the ring giver, but he is also generous willing to forfeit his life. This text is about the emergence of a king who serves his people, rather than a king who expects the people to serve him. Beowulf achieves this by performing in a feminine way.

# Song of Roland

## Background



Roland's Oliphant

The *Song of Roland* is the oldest surviving French medieval romance and epic poem.It was written down between 1140 and 1170 AD but told of actual events that occurred on August 15, 778 AD.

The poem is based on a historical incident, the Battle of Roncesvaux Pass, in which the rearguard of Charlemagne's withdrawing Franks, the French forces, escorting a rich collection of plunder gathered during a campaign in Spain, was attacked by pagans (non-Christians/Muslims). In this battle, recorded by the contemporary historian and biographer **Einhard** in his *Life of Charlemagne* (written around 830), every one of the trapped soldiers was slaughtered, including Roland.

Before his honorable death in battle, however, Roland represents the stages of the Hero’s Journey and many heroic archetypes. He demonstrates what it means to be a chivalrous knight – loyal to his king and country to the very end, overcoming his character flaw, and sacrificing himself for the greater good in the end. His story is the embodiment of medieval romance.

Nevertheless, the composer of the poem got nearly all the historical facts surrounding Roland’s defeat and death incorrect:

* The bandits who slaughtered the rearguard of the French were Basques, not Saracens.
* The invasion of the Spanish moors was brief, not a seven-year-long war.
* Revenge for the ambush was never carried out.
* There was never a rivalry between Roland and Ganelon; Ganelon and Roland likely were not even alive at the same time.
* And… Charlemagne was not the emperor (at the time of poem composition).

Roland’s historically accurate battle occurred on August 15, 778 while the *Song of Roland* was written between 1098 and 1100 AD, so there was a substantial time gap between the two events.

Charlemagne invaded Spain in 778, intending to seize the city of Saragossa (Zaragoza) in northern Spain. On his way there, he had traveled through Basque lands, plundering, looting, and pillaging as he passed. On Charlemagne's return to France, on the afternoon of August 15, 778, the Basques attacked his rearguard and slaughtered the force to a man at Roncesvalles (Roncesvalles, Roncesvaux), which is somewhere in the Pyrenees Mountains between France and Spain—the exact location remains in dispute. Einhard only describes the incident briefly in his notes on the Spanish expedition (it will be quoted in the analysis). According to Einhard, a few nobles were killed, including "Hrudoland [Roland], lord of the Marches of Brittany."

It is unclear what impact the disaster had on Charlemagne's plans. As it merited few words from Einhard, one is tempted to conclude that it was minor and did not really hinder Charlemagne's military campaigns. However, it did delay his establishment of a Spanish March by almost a decade and allow Saragossa to remain an independent emirate while the Basques remained an independent force (because of succeeding battles).

## Summary

The *Song of Roland* is one of the most popular medieval epics of French literature. The poem takes the historical Battle of Roncesvalles (Roncevaux) in 778 as its subject. The epic itself became widely popular and was later romanticized as a conflict between Christians and Muslims during the Crusades. *Song of Roland* is also considered the oldest epic in French Literature and to some the embodiment of the greatest medieval romances.

Charlemagne's army is fighting the Muslims in Spain. The last city standing is Saragossa, held by the Muslim king Marsilla. Terrified of the might of Charlemagne's army of Franks, Marsilla sends out messengers to Charlemagne, promising treasure and Marsilla's conversion to Christianity if the Franks will go back to France. Charlemagne and his men are tired of fighting and decide to accept this peace offer. They now need to select a messenger to go back to Marsilla's court. The bold warrior Roland nominates Ganelon. Angry because Roland proposes him for the dangerous task, Ganelon plots with the Saracens to achieve Roland’s destruction through betrayal. On his return, Ganelon ensures that Roland will command the rearguard of the army when it withdraws from Spain.

As the Frankish army crosses the Pyrenees, the rearguard is surrounded at the pass of Roncesvalles by an overwhelming Saracen force. The wise and moderate Olivier and the fierce archbishop Turpin are among the men Roland picks to join him. Seeing that they are badly outnumbered, Olivier asks Roland to blow on his **oliphant** to call the main body of the Frankish army to reinforce them. Roland proudly refuses to do so, claiming that they need no help and that the rearguard can defeat the “pagan hordes.” While the Franks fight magnificently, there is no way they can continue to hold off against the Saracens. Almost all Roland’s men are dead, and he knows that it is too late for Charlemagne and his troops to save them, but he blows his oliphant anyway to warn the emperor about what happened to his men. Roland blows so hard that his temples burst. He dies a glorious martyr's death, and saints take his soul straight to Paradise.

When Charlemagne and his men reach the battlefield, Roland and his army are dead, the Saracens have fled, and the Franks pursue them in search of vengeance. The Frankish army chases them into the river Ebro, where they all drown. Meanwhile, the powerful emir of Babylon, Baligant, has arrived in Spain to help Marsilla. Baligant and his immense Muslim army ride after Charlemagne and his Christian army, meeting them on the battlefield at Roncesvalles, where the Christians are burying and mourning their dead. Both sides fight valiantly.

Charlemagne kills Baligant, however, and the remaining Saracen army flees. This means that Saragossa has no defenders left; the Franks take the city. With Marsilla's wife Bramimonde, Charlemagne and his men ride back to Aix, their capital in sweet France. The Franks, who have already discovered Ganelon's betrayal, keep him in chains until it is time for his trial. Ganelon makes the argument that his actions were a legitimate form of revenge, openly proclaimed, not treason. While the council of barons, which Charlemagne gathered to decide the traitor's fate, is initially swayed by this claim, one man, Thierry, argues that, because Roland was serving Charlemagne, Ganelon's actions constitute a betrayal of the emperor. The Franks are convinced by the result of the trial by combat that Ganelon is truly a villain and sentences him to a most painful death. The story does not end, however, without the conversion of Marsilla’s wife, Bramimonde, to Christianity and Charlamagne being visited by Gabriel to drive home the righteousness of the Frankish crusade.

[The Christian Themes of The Song of Roland](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-h17M0hDSk) (A Lovely Jaunt)

[Song of Roland Source:

<https://www.fadedpage.com/books/20130224/html.php>

1 – 69, 79 – 94, 104 – 135, 147 – 177, 272 – 291]

**Analysis**

****

The Battle of Roncevaux

As we position ourselves to analyze the *Song of Roland*, it is important to keep a certain sympathetic perspective: the Spain that Roland and Charlamagne are invading is the same Spain of our lovable Don Quixote. In fact, the very “pagan” Muslims Roland refers to are likely from the same Moorish community that produced the *Arabic* transcript from which Cervantes translated to produce the first edition of *Don Quixote*.

This historical context is important to us because the *Song of Roland* is a military text. More specifically, it is one of the earliest **propaganda** military texts ever recorded for an empire.

How can we know it is propaganda?

Here is one definition of propaganda that I like:

Propaganda appears in a variety of forms. It is strategic and intentional as it aims to influence attitudes, opinions, and behaviors. Propaganda can be beneficial or harmful. It may use truth, half-truths, or lies. To be successful, propaganda taps into our deepest values, fears, hopes, and dreams.

Steven Luckert and Susan Bachrach, authors of *The State of Deception*, 2009

So, what happened?

It is important to note that many consider the *Song of Roland* a beautiful epic, rich in culture and history. It is not that simple, however, and what began as an oral epic celebrating a great knight has been transformed, due to the application of politics, into something nefarious. As we know, the *Song of Roland* tells the story of the ambush of Charles the Great's rearguard in the Pyrenees **in the year 778**; or, as Charles’ biographer Einhard relates:

While the war against the Saxons is being fought energetically almost continuously, Charlamagne, having stationed troops at strategic places along the borders, attacks Spain with all the forces he can muster. He crosses the Pyrenees, accepts the surrender of all the towns and fortified places that he encounters along the way, and returns without his army having sustained any losses. Except that during the withdrawal, while traversing the Pyrenees, he happened to experience Gascon treachery. While His army was marching along column because of the narrow pass, and some Gascons lying in ambush at the top of the mountain, swoop down on the last elements of the baggage train and the rearguard protecting the main body of the army. They drive them back into the Valley, join battle, and massacre every one of them.

This historical incident is the basis for the old French epic poem. However, three hundred years of singing and recounting this incident in the halls where the Frankish Warriors spent their nights, or on their marches where they spent their days, or even on the battlefield at Hastings, have transformed the story into a profound reflection on the culture it represents. The semi-oral nature of the epic places the *Song of Roland* in a similar context as the *Iliad* concerning the Greeks and Troy: it was changed over centuries by epic poets into the remarkable story of the wrath of Achilles and therefore holds much of the same historical and emotional renown.

Our reading of the *Song of Roland* will not be that simple, of course. In recounting a scene from the text, Dr. Richard Smith notes one of the underlying themes of this text is that the “pagans” they have routed must burn and suffer; the Muslims (misrepresented purposely as “pagan,” despite being Abrahamic for propaganda purposes) would have been converted or killed, and this can be seen through the juxtaposition of Charles and his sycophants play gayly in a garden while the inhabitants suffer and die. He claims that:

“God rewards the Christian Franks and spares those Saracens who accept true religion. This is the message of the garden. On the other hand, *God will not spare those Saracens who persist in false religion*. This is a message of Cardona’s smoking rubble.”

(My emphasis)

If we understand the poem the same way as Dr. Smith, then Turoldus, the poet, provides a positive symbol and symbolic structure for understanding Roland’s role in the poem. Like Dante in *The Inferno*, Roland acts as a type of **figure fulfillment**, wherein he is representative of Isaac, or even Christ, to Charles's hoary personage, which resembles both Abraham and God. Roland plays the sacrificial son in this interpretation. Ganelon’s betrayal of Roland for a healthy annual subsidy from Marseilles is another figure fulfillment, but for Judas. Roland’s death on a Hill beneath the pine tree, flanked by two other trees, in a temple-like enclosure only underscores this correspondence.

Thus, in this view, Roland is there to become a sacrifice on behalf of the Frankish army, permitted by Charlemagne, just as Christ was a sacrifice for all humankind permitted by God. Moreover, Roland is a willing sacrifice who submits himself dutifully to Charles’ command. Thus, from the Christian and Frankish viewpoint, we can see how the biblical symbolism associated with the text and the realities of feudal society and warfare complement each other while restoring Roland’s heroic stature.

However, if we recall that the rest of the poem is about Charles’ revenge and that Roland’s sacrifice acts as a method for **justifying the annihilation of the Saracens**, it is easy to see how this “positive” reading is problematic. Consider that the oldest existing manuscript of the *Song of Roland*, which scholars call the Oxford manuscript, is in the Bodleian Library and dated to around the year 1100, why, then, might the author of the *Song of Roland* have written about a battle that took place in 778, between the Franks and the native Spanish Basque peoples (certainly not Islamic, but possibly “pagan”), as if it were in a different time, place, and in conflict with an altogether different enemy?

By the later part of the eleventh century, *when the text that we possess today was finally composed*, the historical essence of the story had pretty much disappeared. It was no longer a tale of Basque treachery and Roland's death; it had become a saga of Muslim-Christian enmity and French loyalty to the cause of France and the Catholic Church.

Dr. Shay specifically speaks to the *Song of Roland*. He states:

The Judeo-Christian (and Islamic) world view has triumphed so completely over the Homeric world view that dishonoring the enemy now seems natural, virtuous, patriotic, pious. Yet, in the *Iliad*, only Achilles disrespects the enemy. In Homer’s world, this is not a natural but inhuman state into which Achilles has tragically fallen. Homer’s warriors are never weakened by respecting the enemy… [and] **the veteran’s self-respect never fully recovers so long as he is unable to see the enemy as worthy**.

Demonizing the enemy leads directly to the “Betrayal of What’s Right” mentioned earlier within the text, a precursor for PTSD. Naturally, this prejudice goes both ways. Dr. Paul M. Cobb, Professor of Islamic History at the University of Pennsylvania, author of *Race for Paradise: An Islamic History of the Crusades*, notes in a History Channel interview that:

Most famously, there was an Arabic author named Ibrahim Ibn Ya’qub, who traveled around Europe in the 10th century, and his work was quoted by others. He left first-hand accounts of France, Italy, and Germany, among other places. We learn, for example, of the lushness of the land in Bordeaux, feasting practices in Germany, even whaling practices near Ireland. For all these, he was pleased by the land but appalled by the people he met. “They do not bathe except once or twice a year, with cold water,” he wrote. “They never wash their clothes, which they put on once for good until they fall into tatters.” What you have is a classic strategy by which one society “others” another society—much as Europeans did to Muslims.

He also draws the comparison between the Crusades and the Jihad:

There is a family resemblance because they share roots in monotheism, where God is a jealous God. And both Crusades and Jihad offered martyrdom to those who die. But while they look alike, they have some important differences. Crusades were directed at the liberation of the sacred land considered rightfully Christians, whereas Jihad was about rescuing souls.

With all of this information in mind, I hope that a picture has begun to form: as the Franks gear up for a second Crusade, the Frankish government co-opts a cherished historical tale into a propagandistic text meant to demonize the Islamic communities that live where the Franks want to invade and occupy (and this is something Americans will also do a bit later in history). Moreover, there is clear and obvious misinformation throughout the text: Muslims are not Pagan (in fact, the very idea that they would worship an idol is ludicrous), Roland was killed by Christian Basques, and the invasion had little to do with faith.

In the end, it seems as if politics affected not only the epic’s historical context but also the Christian message of honor and sacrifice that Roland originally represented.

# Hamlet

## Background



Hamlet

Shakespeare (1564-1616) wrote plays during the late part of the sixteenth century and in the early part of the seventeenth century. Hamlet, written around 1601, was Shakespeare’s longest play. It is arguably one of his most famous tragedies. The lines from Hamlet's monologue in act three that begin "To be, or not to be..." have been studied and are widely known even amongst those that are otherwise unfamiliar with Shakespeare's work.

Like our previous epic, *Beowulf*, this English text has some Danish influences. In fact, Saxo Grammaticus and his histories, specifically *Historia Danica*, make another appearance. Saxo told a similar tale, only 400 years prior. It is also understood that a popular collection of French tales written by Francois de Belleforest adopted the primary story elements of Hamlet in the *Histoires and Tragiques.* Hamlet was most likely performed in 1600, almost exactly at the midpoint of Shakespeare’s writing career, and most of the written editions of Shakespeare’s plays were written down (not composed) by his performers, not Shakespeare himself.

At the time when Hamlet first appeared on stage, questions about loyalty and national security were at the forefront of Elizabethan England politics. It is therefore worth taking a closer look at the significance of these acts since this concept of revenge relates to very basic concerns about justice and the legality of violent action, much like the “wergild” covered in *Beowulf*. The difference herein, of course, is that this is now a fully Christian society; under the Tudors, the move towards a more centralized understanding of power under a monarchy was developed. In this conception, the monarch was positioned as divinely appointed and so too her earthly governing bodies.

Private revenge acts were understood at the time to be actions taken by an individual in response to a wrong committed on themselves or their family group. Often these “blood feuds” would be settled by a duel or other violent retributive actions. Francis Bacon describes revenge actions as a sort of “wild justice,” connoting these as out of control or transgressing regulated human society. Even as late as 1773, Dr. Johnson talks about revenge as “an act of passion; vengeance is justice.” This seems to separate an individual’s private revenge actions (as an emotional response) from divine or state “vengeance” as more clearly linked to ideas of legality (therefore “justice”).

In this context, private revenge actions as linked to concepts of blood feud would be deeply disruptive. In addition to the threats to public order presented by an individual seeking justice for themselves, such actions presented both a theoretical and a literal challenge to Elizabeth I’s legislative bodies.

On the other hand, what happens when the judicial systems break down, or are shown to be unworkable? What happens if you believe that those who make the laws are misguided or corrupt? In the play, Hamlet grapples with his position in a corrupt court, where surveillance intrudes on individual’s lives, and there is an apparent lack of justice: “Denmark is a prison” (2.2.239). Violent revenge appears to be the only way to achieve resolution for his anger and frustration.

Indeed, even though there were efforts to ensure it was the judicial system that handled crimes and punishment, the idea of self-government was in fact so deeply embedded in the English psyche that blood feud and dueling continued in England until the latter part of the century, and in Scotland until well after 1600.

## Summary

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, is home from school to mourn the death of his father, King Hamlet, who died two months earlier. While he was gone, his mother, Queen Gertrude, has married his uncle, Claudius. Hamlet is disgusted by the marriage of his newly widowed mother and Claudius, who is now on the throne.

Shortly after Hamlet’s return, a ghost appears to Horatio, Hamlet’s best friend, who thinks the spirit has a likeness to the former King Hamlet. When asked to speak by Horatio, the ghost is silent. Horatio asks Hamlet to wait for the ghost and see if it will speak to him. The ghost of his father beckons Hamlet to follow him and reveals that his brother Claudius poisoned him in the ear. Hamlet vows to avenge his father’s murder.

While Hamlet has returned due to his father’s murder, Laertes, son to the King’s advisor Polonius, is set to return to France. Before he leaves, he tells his sister Ophelia that she should be wary of Hamlet’s affections towards her, especially given his “madness.” Polonius, on the other hand, orders Ophelia to stay away from Hamlet.

Hamlet’s sanity begins to be questioned by all. Claudius and Gertrude both show “concern” for Hamlet’s welfare, and Polonius suggests it is due to Ophelia’s rejection of his advances. Claudius and Polonius decide to spy on Hamlet and Ophelia. Claudius also employs Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two childhood friends of Hamlet, to spy on him. Hamlet, who is only pretending madness, uses his keen observation to pierce the veil of their intentions.

As luck would have it, a troupe of actors happens to be in town, and Hamlet utilizes them to determine the validity of his father’s murder. He has them perform the exact act of murder that Claudius used on his father, killing a king through poison in the ear. Hamlet asks Horatio to watch Claudius’ reaction throughout the play. While the court is watching, Claudius is enraged and leaves the play, which convinces Hamlet that he is the murderer.

Hamlet is relieved of all doubt about Claudius’ guilt, and as he comes upon Claudius in the chapel kneeling to pray, he readies himself to strike Claudius down. However, since Claudius is in the act of prayer and will therefore go to heaven if he dies, Hamlet decides to wait until Claudius goes to hell like Hamlet’s father before him. Shortly after leaving Claudius, Hamlet meets Gertrude in her room, and an argument ensues. When he hears Polonius, who is hiding behind the curtain, shouts for help, he stabs him thinking it is Claudius.

Claudius demands that Hamlet, Rosencrantz, and Guildenstern head for England while having sent a letter with them ordering Hamlet’s execution during the trip. While at sea, however, Hamlet discovers his planned murder and switches the orders, causing Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to be executed. Hamlet returns to Denmark.

Meanwhile, back at Elsinore, Ophelia has gone mad with grief. Laertes returns from France and learns it was Hamlet who has killed his father, Polonius. Ophelia dies soon afterward, after one final display of “madness.” Claudius suggests to Laertes that he duel with Hamlet and poison the tip of his foil for a fatal blow and revenge. Claudius also puts poison into a drink for Hamlet just in case Laertes fails. Gertrude enters and announces that Ophelia has drowned.

In the graveyard, Hamlet reminisces on a friend of his whose skull he has found. When the processional arrives with Ophelia’s corpse, Laertes and Hamlet quarrel, and the duel is scheduled. Then, during the fight, Gertrude accidentally drinks from the poisoned chalice and dies. Hamlet is wounded with the poisoned sword, but it is a small wound; in the scuffle, the foils are swapped, and Laertes is also wounded with the poisoned foil. In dying, Laertes confesses Claudius’ plot to kill Hamlet. Hamlet stabs Claudius, forces him to drink the rest of the poisoned chalice that killed his mother, and dies asking Horatio to tell his story. The Norwegian forces arrive at Elsinore, and Prince Fortinbras seizes control of Denmark.

[What is Tragedy?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9XOUo85TfM) (OpenLearn)

[Summary of Hamlet](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bb69mI3of_U) (Schooling Online), or

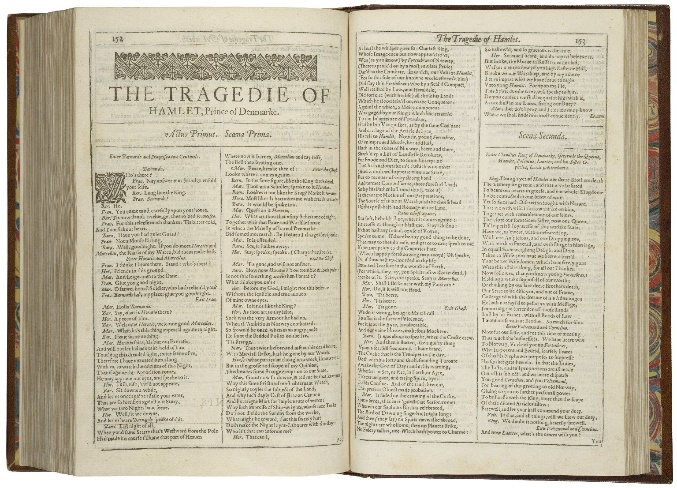
[Hamlet](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A98tf9krihg) (Thug Notes)

[Hamlet Source:

<https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/hamlet/>

All acts]

## Analysis



The First Folio

*Hamlet* may not seem like an obvious choice for this chapter on warriors. He is notorious for his inaction, right? By some, maybe, but let us dig a bit deeper into the action of the play, and whether Hamlet is truly as fickle as he has been accused. It is the position of this analysis that he is acting rationally; he is also the first model of the modern existential dilemma that we, and **our soldiers**, face.

In most of our texts, we are dealing with honor-based societies. This is true for *Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, *Beowulf*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, but distinctly not the *Song of Roland* or *Hamlet,* which fall under the Guilt Culture Area. In *Beowulf* and the *Song* *of* *Roland*, we see the bookending of the transitional period between the honor-based warrior culture and the modern guilt-based Christian society of our modern world. The latter being the beginning, and the former being the conclusion of this process, both of which mark the conversion of the Germanic societal norms. *Hamlet*, on the other hand, shows us the inherent internal conflict of the modern person: is the warrior ethos of revenge or the Christian ethos of forgiveness of higher-order concern?

Naturally, to explore this internal conflict, we will need to define some terms of the mind, ala **psychoanalysis**:

Id—instinctual drives present at birth

* + Does not distinguish between reality and fantasy.
  + Operates according to the pleasure principle—drive toward immediate gratification, the most fundamental human motive.
    - Sources of energy:
      * Eros—life instinct perpetuates life.
      * Libido—sexual energy or motivation
      * Thanatos—death instinct, aggression, self-destructive actions

Ego—develops out of the id in infancy

* + Understands reality and logic.
  + A mediator between id and superego
  + The part of the personality that mediates the demands of the id without going against the restraints of the superego.
    - Rational, organized, logical, **mediator** to demands of reality.
    - Reality principle—ability to postpone gratification in accordance with demands of reality.
    - Can repress desires that cannot be met in an acceptable manner.

Superego:

* + Internalization of societal & parental moral standards
  + One’s conscience; focuses on what the person “should” do.
  + Develops around ages 5-6.
  + Partially unconscious
  + Can be harshly punitive using feelings of guilt.
  + The last component of personality to develop
    - According to Freud, the superego begins to emerge at around age five.
    - The superego holds the **internalized moral standards and ideals that we acquire** from our parents and society (our sense of right and wrong).﻿
    - The superego provides guidelines for making judgments.
  + The superego has two parts:
    - The conscience includes **information about things that are viewed as bad by parents and society**. These behaviors are often forbidden and lead to bad consequences, punishments, or feelings of guilt and remorse.
    - The **ego ideal** includes the rules and standards for behaviors that the ego aspires to.

The superego is the primary culprit that we are concerned about within this analysis. In introductory courses, the id, ego, and superego are often presented in simplistic terms: with the id as the “devil on one shoulder” and the superego as “the angel on the other shoulder.” This is only true, however, **if our intuition is always wrong, and society is always right**. Certainly, we can agree this is not the case.

Our discontent in civilization arises not because of a heightening of our sense of guilt but rather through the heightening of the unconscious need for punishment that defends against the sense of guilt. It is beneficial to reflect on the *Song* *of* *Roland* and Dr. Shay’s assessment of REMFs, to understand how social structures can stand in the way of a soldier’s ability to feel guilt (or rather, **even to admit they should feel guilt**).

What would happen if our “conscience” (our internal morality) and “ego ideal” (what people we respect say is moral) are in conflict?

Since most of us do not possess the strength of character for conscious suppression and self-mastery without lying to ourselves, most people, including our soldiers, will be forced to fall back on **repression**, with the disguised return of the repressed that repression itself inevitably entails. Those are some ten-dollar words, but think of it like this:

[Example Soldier Story](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IfG7WV-bN6Y)

The disguised return of the repressed guilt is often manifested in the form of the **sadistic** superego redirecting the id’s aggression away from the object world (e.g. the REMFs who contradicted the moral code) and against the ego (ourselves). This results in various forms of self-punishment; Freud described the “moral masochism” in terms of “the criminal from a sense of guilt,” “those wrecked by success,” and other self-sabotaging and self-tormenting character-types.

Do we see this illustrated in Shakespeare’s work when we apply Dr. Shay’s viewpoint? Without recognizing the feeling of guilt, a subject’s unconscious superego frequently judges him or her to be guilty. Frequently, instead of allowing oneself to feel guilty (whether such guilt is justified or not is another matter), the subject (the soldier, or in this case, Hamlet) often unconsciously seeks external punishment unrelated to the actual offense committed (e.g., alcoholism or even suicide).

The feeling of guilt that might accompany the state of being guilty, or being capable of judging oneself to be guilty, is absent because this feeling of guilt is unbearable or unacceptable, and in many ways, we have not seen a character who struggles with such a modern dilemma. It was not morally “wrong” for Achilles to slay Hector; it was tragic. Nor was it “illegal” for Beowulf to face the dragon, but the lack of belief and support led to his demise. For Hamlet, the death of his father demands vengeance, but *it is also immoral for him to kill as a modern Christian man*.

So, first, let us tackle the subject of Hamlet’s “failure to act.” Herein, we need to look at three key scenes: Hamlet slaying Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet slaying Polonius, and ultimately the “ineffectual” scene where Hamlet fails to kill his uncle Claudius while Claudius is praying. I know it may seem strange to go in reverse chronological order, but it helps to understand Hamlet’s mindset. First, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s death are the clearest example of Hamlet’s overarching sense of vengeance and capability for cruelty. When he finds the letter demanding his own death upon arrival in England, he does not hesitate to have his former friends take his place in death. Likewise, when Hamlet confronts his mother in her chambers, and he believes that it is his uncle behind the tapestry, Hamlet does not hesitate for a moment; he stabs Polonius without even checking to see who is truly hiding there. These two scenes do not paint a picture of a man who is afraid of violence, cruelty, or action.

So, why does he fail to kill Claudius when he has the chance? Hamlet himself tells us:

He took my father grossly, full of bread,  
With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;  
And how his audit stands who knows save heaven.  
But in our circumstance and course of thought  
’Tis heavy with him. And am I then revenged  
To take him in the purging of his soul,  
When he is fit and seasoned for his passage?  
No. (92)

Hamlet is concerned with justice, especially with respect to his **guilt-driven culture**. The punishment must be *fair*, or at least *feel* fair. This does not reflect an inability to act; it reflects a complex rumination on the justness of Claudius’ death.

So, what does all of this have to do with guilt, soldiers or others who have PTSD, and the repressed desire for punishment? I know this has gotten complex, but we will use Hamlet to bring it all together. It is stated that:

Unfortunately, evading guilt-feeling in this way precludes the rational evaluation of such guilt that would enable us to decide whether to accept and make reparation for our actions or to reject it as irrational and unfounded. One may not be guilty at all, but the repression of guilt stops that judgment from ever taking place.

This modern moral dilemma is played out in the most famous **soliloquy**:

To be or not to be—that is the question:  
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles  
And, by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep—

…

To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there’s the rub,  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause. There’s the respect  
That makes calamity of so long life.  
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
Th’ oppressor’s wrong, the proud man’s contumely,  
The pangs of despised love, the law’s delay,  
The insolence of office, and the spurns  
That patient merit of th’ unworthy takes,  
When he himself might his quietus make  
With a bare bodkin?…

…

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pitch and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry  
And lose the name of action. —

The central question here is one we are all familiar with: While it feels *right* and *fair* to do something, it is wrong or against the law; therefore, *we do not act*. Does our inaction make us all ineffectual or incapable of acting? No. However, it does highlight the need for repression and how such a conflict results in someone, like a soldier who has PTSD, punishing themselves even when they are not guilty. Like Hamlet, to kill a good, god-fearing man who is free of sin (this is how Hamlet would have seen Claudius after prayer), even in service of one’s country, would feel wrong, as would killing a town full of civilians, as noted in previous chapters.

Unlike Hamlet, the soldiers exampled above did act. As noted in the “Betrayal of What’s Right,” the schism between doing something they knew was morally wrong and being rewarded for that action led to the downward spiral that PTSD represents. Such repressed guilt cannot be recognized, so it unleases in other ways. For Hamlet, it is the sabotaging of his relationship with Ophelia. For soldiers, it is often manifested in alcoholism, nightmares, and suicide.

I cannot transition into the next module on women without speaking up for the women in Shakespeare’s most famous tragedy. First, Ophelia, the tragic heroine, is often seen as having no agency. While it is true that she has very little and that she is treated rather poorly, there is more to her scenes than may meet the eye. Specifically, in Act Four, Scene Five, when Ophelia states:

There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance.

Pray you, love, remember. And there is pansies,

that’s for thoughts.

…

There’s fennel for you, and columbines.

There’s rue for you, and here’s some for me; we

may call it herb of grace o’ Sundays. You must wear

your rue with a difference. There’s a daisy. I would

give you some violets, but they withered all when

my father died. They say he made a good end.

Sings. For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy.

This, perhaps, sounds like madness to us; but, consider poor Ophelia and how much she can or cannot say in her position without punishment, especially by a King or Queen, who is willing to kill their own son. For a little context, in English history, especially around the Elizabethan era, flowers had a great deal of symbolism:

* **Rosemary and Pansies**: Ophelia gives these flowers to Laertes; she even cites them as being for remembrance and thoughts.
* **Fennel and Columbine**: To King Claudius, Ophelia delivers a bold message: Fennel is the symbol for flattery, and columbine is considered the flower for “deceived lovers,” a symbol of male adultery and faithlessness.
* **Rue**: Rue is the symbol for bitterness, thought to be the cause of most abortions in that day, and often connected with adultery. Ophelia gives this flower to Queen Gertrude, as well as keeping some for herself.
* **Daisy**: Ophelia picks up and sets down the daisy without giving it to anyone. This is interesting because the daisy is the symbol of innocence and gentleness. Evidently, Ophelia thought there was no place for innocence in the Danish court anymore.
* **Violets**: Finally, Ophelia says that she would have brought violets but that they all withered when her father died. This is a fascinating note for Ophelia to close on because violets are the symbol of faithfulness and fidelity.

In her own way, Ophelia was calling out everyone in the room for what they were. Curiously, however, Claudius does not seem to get the worst of it. Gertrude is being accused of adultery, bitterness, and abortion. It is as if Ophelia is telling Gertrude that she knows Gertrude tried to kill her own son. Furthermore, consider Ophelia’s lines just before the latter passage:

You must sing “A-down a-down”—and you

“Call him a-down-a.”—O, how the wheel becomes

it! It is the false steward that stole his master’s

daughter.

Down, down, it is the false steward that stole his master’s daughter. It begs the question, who is the falsest person in the play? It is the traditional viewpoint that Claudius is the mastermind and antagonist of this play, but I challenge that this may be due to the focus on Hamlet as someone who suffers from Oedipus complex. That is, Hamlet’s reluctance to kill Claudius is thought to be rooted in the Oedipus complex, a Freudian concept of a child’s rivalry or opposition towards his father due to his unconscious psychosexual affection towards his mother. If, however, Hamlet’s failure to act is instead due to the conflict within his superego, then this is not true. Furthermore, if we examine Claudius’ prayer scene a little more closely, it is strange that he feels such remorse *if it were his plan to kill his brother*. Shakespeare does not shy away from a strong woman antagonist, see lady Macbeth, and it is worth considering that right after Ophelia makes this pronouncement, she “dies” by “possible suicide” when climbing on a branch, and the Queen watches as she slowly sinks and her dress slowly splays out in the stream. Gertrude does not mention attempting to save Ophelia even once.

Perhaps she wanted a man she could control.

# Chapter Three: The Woman

We cannot end this course without speaking some truth to power. There is a question that has likely been pulling on the back of our minds if it has not already burst upon the scene:

What about the women?

We have experienced firsthand the problematic portrayal of “dangerous” women who act in a masculine way, as exampled by Pandora, Ishtar, Grendel’s Mother, the forced conversion of Bramimonde, and possibly even Gertrude (shoutout to the mastermind!); This aspect will be explored further through Medea, Lysistrata, the women in *One Thousand and One Nights*, and the Wife of Bath as we read this final chapter.

When women are not being treated as monstrous, they are often subservient, or even objectified, as exampled by the way Gilgamesh treats the women of his kingdom, the way Briseis and Chriseis are treated as a prize, the way Wealhtheow is treated as a peace treaty, and the way Ophelia is treated as having no agency. Gilgamesh’s actions will also be directly reflected in Shahryar and Shah Zaman’s treatment of their own wives in *One Thousand and One Nights*. We could even extend this idea to Eve.

However, we will end this chapter with the first text written by a woman, for women, in the Western literary tradition: *The Book of the City of Ladies*.In many ways, de Pizan’s work is the beginning and essence of Feminism; it is a book by a woman, who is speaking about women in a positive way with feminine terms. The femininity is being celebrated for its unique strengths, rather than being considered the antithesis of it because they are not men, e.g. “he throws like a girl.”

To do this, we will borrow concepts from the Bulgarian-born French literary critic and philosopher Julia Kristeva. She is an influential authority in many fields of study, from literary criticism to psychoanalysis to anthropology and psychology, and thus, we will view the women in this chapter through Kristeva’s feminine lens. To understand Kristeva, however, we need a primer on her influences: Saussure and Bakhtin:

For Ferdinand de Saussure, the relational nature of the world emerges from a vision of language as a generalized **abstract** system, which includes the spoken word and that which is spoken about.

* Saussure perceives a linguistic unit to be a “double entity” composed of two elements:
  1. A sound-image.
  2. A concept or meaning.
* However, from Saussure’s point of view, the concepts consists of two primary parts:
  + - signifier (the sound or image you use, *saying the words “the dog*”)
    - and signified (the concept or object, *the physical dog*),
* The signifier and the signified are not two different entities; they are two different ways to look at and describe language. On the one hand, language is a system of **signs**. That is **a semiotic system**. On the other hand, language is also a social phenomenon: **a product of the language community**. The signifier and the signified are inseparably one. With this theory, Saussure rejects the Western tradition that treats language like an entity or an instrument. For him, language is a creative process, not a thing.

For Mikhail Bakhtin, the relationship between the author, the work, and the reader originates from the existence of the world within specific social registers and specific moments of speaking and listening.

* He advocates that there is a mutual relationship between meaning and context.
  + This involves the author, the work, and the reader, **each constantly affecting and influencing the others** and the society that is influenced by existing political and social forces.
* This leads to a shift away from languages as systems and towards social uses of language. In its social use, it operates as an irreducible plurality of belief systems.
  + Much of language use is also **intertextual**, *referring to others’ statements and views*. Bakhtin sees language as an ongoing, unending chain of meaning, *which is constantly renewed and reborn through each link in the chain*.
  + Languages and cultures are always unfinished. Similarly, nothing is ever dead since it is connected to everything else by the chain of meanings. **Hopefully, you can see Bakhtin’s influence on the structure of this course!**

Kristeva was influenced by both Saussure and Bakhtin’s theories, and it is through the combination of these theories that Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality emerged. While Kristeva was inspired by these men, neither Saussure nor Bakhtin employed the term **intertextuality**, so credit for the term intertextuality is hers alone.

Kristeva established a new model of semiotics, which she calls semi-analysis. She emphasizes in this approach the idea that **texts are always in a state of production, rather than being products to be quickly consumed**. In her view, ideas are not presented as finished consumable products but are presented in such a way as to encourage readers to come up with their own interpretation. Kristeva’s new semiotics of production thus blurs the distinction between science, or the logical, and language and imagination, and it demonstrates how texts are alive.

In her work *Desire in Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, published in 1980, Kristeva revised and redirected Bakhtin’s work in one of the most important essays, “The Bounded Text” and “World, Dialogue, and Novel.” In this work, she discusses establishing the way a text is constructed of already existing discourse. She argues that authors do not create the text from their own mind but rather compile them from preexisting texts. To create a clear image of what she means, Don Quixote is perhaps the best example of this writ large; Cervantes even parodies the very concepts through his complex meta narrative that blurs the line between history and fiction, which Kristeva will go on to deconstruct. This is also reflected by the *Song of Roland*, wherein the evil “pagan” knight Bernardo del Carpio slays Roland, but he is a celebrated knight that inspires Don Quixote! Thus, according to Kristeva, the text becomes a permutation of text and intertextuality in the space of a given text, in which “several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another.”

Kristeva argues that the text is not an individual isolated object but **a compilation of cultural textuality**. Kristeva believes that the individual text and the cultural text are made from the same textual material and cannot be separated from each other. This is basically a adaptation of Bakhtin’s notion of the dialogue, which establishes the relation between author, work, reader, society, and history. The distinction is that Kristeva’s theory paid close attention to the text, textuality, and their relation to ideological structures. Bakhtin’s work centers on human subjects using language in specific social situations, while Kristeva’s work deals with more abstract notions, such as text and textuality; however, both **Bakhtin and Kristeva believe that the text cannot be separated from the larger cultural or social textuality out of which they are constructed**. Therefore, all texts contain ideological structures expressed through discourse.

Texts do not present clear and stable meanings. They embody society's conflict over the meaning of words. Thus, intertextuality deals with a text’s existence within society and history. Texts have no unity, or unified meaning, of their own; they are thoroughly connected to ongoing cultural and social processes. A text's meaning is understood, in Kristeva’s view, as a temporary rearrangement of elements with socially preexistent meaning. Meaning then is simultaneously both ‘inside’ the readers view and ‘outside’ (through society's influence on the text).

Kristeva stated, “any text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations and any text is the absorption and transformation of another.” Thus, the communication between author and reader is always paired with an intertextual relation between words and their prior existence in past texts.

Thus, we will be utilizing intertextuality to guide our “feminist reading” of the following texts, which means, “To share certain assumptions and concepts that underlie the diverse ways that individual critics explore the factor of sexual difference and privilege in the production, the form and content, the reception, and the critical analysis and evaluation of works of literature” (Abrams and Harpham 110), and examine how cultures that once celebrated strong women sought to turn them into a subservient subject.

For a deeper understanding of how these concepts apply to our lives now, today, take the time to reflect on the following podcast episode:

<https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/men/>

https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/men-45-women-0/

# Medea

## Background



Medea and her Children

Euripides lived during the Golden Age of Athens from 484 B.C.E.—406 B.C.E. Euripides was a sophist and a philosopher who taught rhetoric to instruct people on how to live their lives. Sophists were particularly interested in the relationships among language, truth, and perception in determining what a convention was and the true nature of something. Euripides's plays had particularly controversial, radical ideas.

*Medea* won third prize at the Dionysia festival in 431 B.C.E., the same year the Peloponnesian War began. The Peloponnesian War was a struggle between Greece and the Peloponnesian Legion led by Sparta. Sparta tried to weaken the Greek Empire, which had begun to amass significant power in the region. The war caused social and political upheavals and challenged institutions of democracy that shaped Greek society. Medea, like other plays written during this time, for example, *Lysistrata*, speaks to some of these tensions.

Jason, the Prince of the Olgas, was given the task of capturing the Golden Fleece, or Rams gold skin, with a group of men known as the Argonauts. Once organized, Jason sailed the coldest seas in the Argo and enlisted Medea, the King's daughter, who has magical powers. Medea fell passionately in love with Jason. She helped him betraying and murdering her family and married him, which forced the couple into exile in Corinth. They had two son together. In *Medea*, Jason has left Medea for his new bride, King Creon of Corinth's daughter; Medea rages at being dishonored and abandoned.

## Summary

In the play *Medea*, Euripides presents one of the most shocking female characters in literature. Though Lady Macbeth swears that she would have killed her child, Medea gives life to those very words and murders her two sons. *Medea* is set in the ancient Greek city-state of Corinth. Jason, the Prince of the Olgas, has left his wife Medea and married the Princess of Corinth. In the play's introduction, the nurse summarizes events before the play began while Medea sobs.

Her desire for revenge is the primary force that drives the play's action, and her hatred towards Jason is entirely understandable. She forsook her family, friends, and country for Jason, who repays her sacrifice by marrying another woman. Medea believes that killing her two sons is necessary because she wants to annihilate Jason's happiness. If the children were to survive, then Jason would still have some remaining comfort. Indeed, Jason wronged Medea, but nothing justifies her decision to kill her two sons. The internal dialogue that Medea has before murdering her children is chilling. The maternal part of her is unwilling to do the deed, but she overpowers these last dregs of her motherhood and convinces herself that she must fulfill her plan. Her hatred for Jason is more potent than her love for her children.

Euripides argues that tragedy occurs when hate becomes greater than love. The following are a few quotes:

"All men love themselves more than their neighbors."

"There is no justice in the eyes of mortal men. Everyone avoids a friend once he is a popper."

"I'd sooner have great fame that house is filled with gold or the power to sing sweet melodies sweeter than all the songs of Orpheus."

"I pray that moderation, the gods' most beautiful gift, will always guide me.

"As for human life, it is nothing but shadows among human beings. No one is happy. Wealth may flow into produce a man luckier than another, but no man is ever happy. No one."

The chorus, a group of Corinthian women who are Medea's friends and serve as the voice of Greek society, try to soothe Medea, but she will not be consoled in the play’s rising action. King Creon arrives to order Medea and the children into exile because he fears Medea will harm his daughter. Medea begs to remain for one day, and the King grants her wish. Medea begins plotting the murder of Jason's new wife. Jason appears and tells Medea that she deserves her exile for slandering the Royal house. When Medea reminds him of all the crimes she committed to help him and their children, Jason belittles her help, claiming he did more for her than she did for him. Medea refuses his offer of "help," seeing gifts from a worthless man are without value.

Medea feels she has no other choice; with no father, no home, no refuge. The plan succeeds soon after that. A Messenger from Creon's house comes to say the Princess and King are both dead. In holding his dead daughter, the King became entangled in the poisoned robe and died. Medea enters the house to slay the children, and the audience hears their cries for help in the falling action. Jason arrives at the news that the King and the Princess have been slain. In the play's resolution, Medea flies off in a winged chariot with the bodies of the children inside while she taunts her former husband, Jason.

[The Myth of Jason, Medea, and The Golden Fleece](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M7cIc7IAN6U) (Ted-Ed)

[Medea](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7WH30_8vos) (Overly Sarcastic Productions)

[Medea Source Text:

Entire Play, starting with title “Medea”, ending with Chorus line “So hath it fallen here”]

## Analysis



Manuscript of Medea

When discussing *Medea*, it is essential to remember that the titular revenge seeker of the play, Medea, is royalty from Colchis, the land of the magical Golden Fleece. First, this establishes the depth of betrayal by Jason, but it also situates Medea as Jason's equal. Not only is her father the King, but her Grandfather is Helios, the Sun God. She met and fell in love with Jason when he arrived in Caucus on his quest for the Golden Fleece. It is also important to remember that Medea possesses magical powers and uses them to help Jason in this quest. Medea's otherworldly power establishes her, like other "problematic and masculine women," like Grendel's mother, as "monstrous."

Thus, after betraying her family and assisting in her own brother's death, the newlywed couple arrived in Corinth, where they began raising their children. However, Jason then left Medea to marry the Princess of Corinth, and now it has become clear there is only one person Jason cares about: himself. Through betrayal and Jason and other dominant men's ability to strip Medea of all agency, Euripides highlights the inequalities of gender in their society.

The play opens with Medea raging at Jason's betrayal, much like Achilles in the *Iliad*. She plots to execute vengeance on her former husband, killing his new wife, King Creon, the King of Corinth, and even rejects her parental feelings when she kills her children at the end of the play to make sure all members of Jason's house dies entirely. Her plan is sinister and violent. Nevertheless, as we shall see, she is often a sympathetic figure, having been betrayed by a callous husband who broke his marriage's sacred oath.

While the betrayal, rage, and vengeance that Medea enacts may remind us of Achilles and the cycle of PTSD described by Dr. Shay. It is Julia Kristeva’s concept of the abjection of women that cuts closest to the bone that Euripides is gnawing on here. According to Kristeva, the feminist struggle must be seen historically and politically as a three-tiered one, which can be schematically summarized as follows:

* Women demand equal access to the symbolic order.
* Women reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference.
* Women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine metaphysically.

More specifically: Kristeva observes that men and women are not innately different but are viewed differently due to their social positions, and thus claiming that there is no opposition between feminine and masculine in pre-Oedipality. We see this in action in *Medea*: Jason is supported by Medea's magic, and only completes the series of complex tasks set by her father, the King of Colchis, **because of her military prowess, not his.** Medea has loved and helped him throughout his exploits, yet **it is precisely because of her strength** **that Jason and the King of Colchis fear her**! He claims to want to help his family by leaving Medea, but she does not see that as a valid excuse. Jason is unbelievably cruel to Medea throughout the play, and the chorus clarifies that while they do not want Medea to murder their children, Jason deserves severe punishment.

Euripides' Medea is a dangerous person, much like Medusa, Grendel's mother in *Beowulf*, Pandora in *Works and Days*, many of the women in *One Thousand and One Nights*, including the Kings’ wives, The Wife of Bath in the *Canterbury Tales*, to name a few. To be clear, Medea is not monstrous because of what she did to her children—especially since is not original to the myth it is not Medea who slays the children—but because she defended women's rights and deplored their treatment by men, and **that she acted in a “masculine” way**. This was **anathema** in fifth-century Athens. In the play, she is supported by the Corinthian women's conspiratorial silence, although their King is at risk. Euripides' female characters were not the ideal females of the Periclean funeral oration: they were radicals with perilous ideas.

In Aristophanes' comedy *The Frogs*, produced in 405, the god Dionysus journeys to the underworld to bring back Euripides, who died the previous year. Once there, Dionysus learns that Aeschylus challenges his desire to recover Euripides because he would serve the gods' purpose for Athens better and give the people better advice. In the end, Dionysus chooses Aeschylus. Why does Dionysus want to bring back a poet to teach the people wisdom? Comic poets were more blatant in their political commentary and advice, but they had greater freedom with their storylines. Tragic poets had political opinions, which they expressed by the timing of their productions (e.g., Euripides wrote *The* *Trojan Women* right after the Athenian destruction of Melos in 416), by manipulating the details of the myths, and by the resultant symbolism.

Euripides was current, topical, and deconstructive. In *Medea*, he forces the Athenian society to confront the image of a woman acting like what a man would in a similar scenario. She was meant to be queen, and she notes multiple times that she will not be looked down upon, laughed at, or ridiculed. In essence, she must protect her honor: this position of power, which she supports with an authentic military prowess that surpasses Jason’s, situates Medea alongside heroes like Achilles, Odysseus, and Ajax. Every single one of these men killed hundreds, if not thousands, of children in their bid for revenge. Nevertheless, they are heroes. Medea is a monster not because she killed innocents, nor because among them were her children; she is perceived as a monster because she is a woman, and people expect women to act differently than they do men.

Boys will be boys, right? Euripides is on the side of Kristeva; he clearly outlines the abjection of women through *Medea* and the double standard of the Patriarchal system, which led to Medea’s betrayal in the first place.

# One Thousand and One Nights

## Background



Sheikh Ibrahim and His Visitors

To give background for *One Thousand and One Nights*, we have to begin, not in ancient Persia where the stories originated, but in the 17th and 18th century of France. It is important to note here that the central character in this story is **Antoine Galland**, who died in 1715. Galland was a French scholar employed by the King of France to obtain antiquities and manuscripts from the Near East for the Royal collections. He was also a linguist, traveler, diplomat, and what used to be called an **Orientalist** and passed himself off as an expert on near eastern affairs. These days in the English-speaking world, one usually still comes across *One Thousand and One Nights* through Lane or Burton’s translations, but Galland introduced Western audiences to *The Nights*.

Medieval Arab authors, of course, knew about *One Thousand and One Nights*, but they did not particularly celebrate the work as a literary masterpiece. A 10th-century historian and literary man, for example, denigrated the text as a “currency of silly stories about the Kings of Old” and mentioned that they came from tales initially written in ancient Persian, Sanskrit, and Greek. He explicitly named a Persian collection called *Hazār Afsāna*, which he said was translated into Arabic for “**the** **ordinary people.”** The title's translation is ***One Thousand Nights*** because it had not yet become *One Thousand and One Nights*. *Hazār Afsāna* frames the nights with the tale of Scheherazade and her sister, just like in our version.

Antoine Galland was a scholar and a diplomat. He spent a good bit of time in the Middle East in the 1670s and 80s, where he gained his knowledge of Arabic, Persian, and Turkish. Around 1698, Galland translated the stories of *Sinbad of the Sea*, which are known today as the *Seven Voyages of Sinbad the Sailor*. Having learned that these were part of a much more extensive collection of stories, Galland assumed that the collection must be the *One Thousand and One Nights* that he had heard about from various medieval and early modern authors. As it happens, **no manuscript of *The Nights* contains the story of Sinbad**, and the stories Galland translated as originating from *The Nights* are known to belong to a larger cycle of Sinbad stories. Despite this fact, Galland included them in his translation of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Likewise, anytime the story of Sinbad appears in *One Thousand and One Nights*, it is due to Galland’s French translation being retranslated back into Arabic manuscripts. Those Arabic texts were influenced by Galland’s French translation, **thus perverting the most translated editions at the time with Orientalist revision**. Therefore, any later editions that include the Sinbad cycle are a retranslation of *One Thousand and One Nights* back into Arabic from Galland’s French edition.

Galland dutifully sought to obtain a manuscript of *One Thousand and One Nights* through his network so that he might translate the work in full. He obtained a Syrian manuscript of *The Nights*, which now survives in three volumes; the manuscript dates from the late 15th century and is the oldest substantial manuscript of *The Nights* in existence. It is not nearly a complete edition, however. The current manuscript includes only 35 tales, spread over 271 nights.

Galland therefore faced a dilemma: On the one hand, everyone would expect one thousand and one night’s worth of tales, just like the title promised; on the other hand, ever since the publication of Charles Perrault’s *Tales of Mother Goose* in the 1690s, which included such staples as “Sleeping Beauty,” “Cinderella,” and “Blue Beard,” European fairy stories and tales of fantasy were all the rage in the Voguish aristocratic set, particularly among the ladies. Galland, in short, decided to take advantage of this, and like all other orientalist endeavors, he did so by subverting, stealing, and wantonly transforming *The Nights* into his version of *One Thousand and One Nights* as he saw fit. He would exploit with his collection of exotic fantasy tales from the East by any means possible. This translation of *One Thousand and One Nights* was finally published, in pieces, from 1704 to 1717.

Galland’s solution was add to the 271 **authentic,** original tales from his Syrian manuscript of *The Nights* the Sinbad's stories he had taken from their cycle, which is not related to *The Nights*. Other manuscripts of *The One Thousand and One Nights* were introduced to Egypt’s literary scene since Galland had begun translating his own (it seems all Orientalists thought alike), so he added many stories from **these contemporary manuscripts** to his version as well. Drawing from an entirely different sources in his library, Galland also expand the collection with accounts about India from an Arabic diplomat. Finally, and most controversially, he obtained stories from a Syrian informant he had met in France, *not a Muslim author, but a* ***Maronite Christian*** *interpreter and secretary from Aleppo*: Hanna Diab. He then generally rewrote the stories Hanna Diab told him **according to his tastes**, or rather the tastes of the Parisian, commenting on French manners and customs disguised as comments on the Caliphs and taking motifs and plot points from genuine tales to make his renditions more authentic.

Galland’s “translation” gets worse; for example, neither *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* nor *The* *Tale of Aladdin* appears in any Arabic source before Galland! **This fact raises the very likely possibility that these tales, which, thanks to Disney, are perhaps the most emblematic of all stories in *One Thousand and One Nights* for western audiences, were invented by the Frenchman out of whole cloth**. To make matters worse, Galland’s publisher was even more eager to cash in than he was. When Galland was distracted working up a new volume of the translations, his publisher inserted new tales into new volumes from the entirely different collection of stories, which was translated from Turkish by a different French translator without telling Galland about it. The final book was about as far from the original 15th century Syrian manuscript of *The Nights* as humanly possible.

This translation is a Frankensteinian monster comprised of stories from medieval Syrian and Egyptian sources, the Sinbad cycle, the Christian Syrian informant’s debatable memory, and Galland’s feverish imagination. What an influential monster it was. *One Thousand and One Nights* by Galland was a sensation almost immediately upon publication. The French translation was translated into English by London pamphleteers and subsequently into most major European languages. Even today, many versions of *The Nights* claim to be independent translations made directly from Arabic. However, most are, in fact, translations of Galland’s work, or at best, reworkings from Galland’s with an eye on the original Arabic and some additional materials from other sources.

## Summary

*One Thousand and One Nights* consists of 468 tales, depending on how we count them. However, it is essential to note that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the number of tales and the number of nights within the plot. This sprawling collection begins with the framing story, into which all the other nights are subsumed.

As our tale opens, we are introduced to a fiction King named Shahryar who discovers that his wife, whom he thought was faithful, was having regular orgies with her slaves. He becomes convinced in his grief and madness that all women are evil and untrustworthy. However, he is not ready to give up the company of young women. Being the King, he decrees that he will marry a different maiden every morning, have a wedding night with her, and have her head cut off the following day (the disruption of the marriage night is a bit of a theme in ancient literature). He went night after night, day after day, through Princes’ and merchants’ daughters. His country is almost up in arms against him. Now, he has a loyal vizier whose job it is to procure these girls, to greet them at the door after their wedding nights, and to oversee their decapitation the following mornings. Furthermore, this vizier has two daughters: the older named Scheherazade and the younger named Dunyazad.

One morning Scheherazade comes to her father and demands that she be the next woman to marry King Shahryar. At first, her father refuses, but she finally convinces him when she threatens to go to the King herself. So, the next day, the vizier brings his beloved daughter to marry the King. She makes just one request to the King: She said, “I have a younger sister whom I would like to be able to say goodbye to and who is used to hearing a story every night. May she come late in the evening just before dawn so that I can tell her a story?” The King agrees. So that night, after the lovemaking, Scheherazade begins a story.

One thousand and one nights later, the King is so in love that he has forgotten all about his former woes and retains Scheherazade as his Queen, and so they live, to borrow a phrase from another book, happily ever. Scheherazade’s stories are the heart of the *One Thousand and One Nights*. The single most distinctive quality of the collection is its famously nested stories: tales within tales, like Russian nesting dolls, in which characters in the tales stop to tell tales themselves. Scheherazade develops this technique in an attempt to save her life; she tells the tale of the Hunchback, and that includes the story of the Tailor, and the Tailor tells the tale of the Barber. It is a story within a story, within a story. The technique the French described as “**mise en abyme**,” or being thrust into the abyss.

Kings and Queens, Sultans, Caliphs, Princes, Princesses, viziers and barbers, Hunchbacks, merchants, peasants, tinkers, tailors, and sailors populate *One Thousand and One Nights*. There are heroes, villains, genies, demons, giants, bandits, and fish who can talk even as they are fried them up. There are many rhetorical styles within *The Nights*: comedies, tragedies, stories about death, stories about romance, fables, parables, and tons of poetry. There is also a lot of sex. It is also an emotionally charged text; many characters are wasting away from unrequited love, burning from forbidden lust, boiling over with passion, seething with envy, or simply collapsing. They are also tales that instruct and model virtuous deeds and acts of faith. **There are tales of social justice and divine intervention**. They are reflections of the pettiness of human existence as well as the fates of fallen civilizations and their tales of warning against tricksters, thieves, con artists, and adulterers. However, there are also celebrations of rulers, wise merchants, cunning women, and eloquent peasants. Through these tales, **Scheherazade transforms Shahryar into the wise and just King he always should have been**. Likewise, through the power of narration, Scheherazade instructs all readers on what it means to be virtuous, wise, and just.

[One Thousand and One Nights: The Tale of Scheherazade](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLj3EBX72QU&t=199s) (Mythology Unleashed)

[Orientalism Today](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=heyuHiGqmu0) (The Graduate Institute of Geneva), or

[Editorial: Orientalism](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5NMZkO7_wS4) (The Modern Middle East)

[One Thousand and One Nights Source Text:

<https://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/burt1k1/index.htm>

THE STORY OF KING SHAHRYAR AND HIS BROTHER

THE TALE OF THE BULL AND THE ASS

THE FISHERMAN AND THE JINNI

THE PORTER AND THE THREE LADIES OF BAGHDAD

THE FIRST KALANDAR'S TALE

THE SECOND KALANDAR'S TALE

THE THIRD KALANDAR'S TALE

THE ELDEST LADY'S TALE

CONCLUSION]

### Analysis



Arabic Manuscript

One of the themes running throughout the entire *One Thousand and One Nights* is the oppressor and the oppressed. This is Scheherazade’s chosen strategy and specific act of agency by employing a feminine virtue. Many stories explore this theme explicitly, and it is all meant to tacitly persuade Shahryar to reason. We see this tension of the oppressor and the oppressed throughout various tales: “the powerful Djinn locked in bottles, kings and their servants, parents, and children” (). There are many examples of women battling for survival in unjust patriarchy, and the tales that mirror Scheherazade’s situation are most poignant.

We also get to see many examples of women triumphing. Previously made powerless women find ways to regain some sovereignty while those who rule through hypocrisy and force are humbled. This contradiction, of course, relates directly to King Shahryar; it is precisely Shahryar’s irrationality towards his wife, for love, we will say, that he reacts so strongly. His love turns quickly to hate; it is a purely emotional response from an otherwise good King. The fact that his wife rules his emotions so profoundly points to **the power** she has over Shahryar. However, the love between Shahryar and his first, unfaithful wife is itself a lesson in misogyny. There is blatant hypocrisy in a man with multiple concubines becoming jealous of a spouse who is also unfaithful. The notion that Shahryar does not simply punish his wife but an entire kingdom’s worth of daughters further highlights how widespread misogyny was at the time. Shahryar and his brother, who are both representatives of an entire kingdom, punish all women for the actions of two women, and the system unjustly bases this conviction on a standard to which neither King would hold themselves.

Scheherazade weaves these stories for Shahryar with the intent to humanize women and educate him. The stories also follow the logical progression of deradicalizing Shahryar. The stories begin with brutal and dark content, mirroring Shahryar’s perspective, highlighting that adultery usually happens for a reason and that jealousy and violence always lead to misery. There is a story of a wicked woman and another of a man acting idiotically to balance the system. In time, she introduces a historical figure, Haroun al-Rashid, to act as a foil for the King. Haroun al-Rashid is known to have loved art, poetry, and music, but, most notably: he believed all people should be treated equally.

In light of Scheherazade’s core purpose for recounting her tales, the treatment of *One Thousand and One Nights* by the European Imperialist colonizers is deeply ironic. Even after all the apparent plagiarism by Galland in his “translation” noted earlier, a few manuscripts discovered in the 1800s, which contained, for example, the orphan tales of *Aladdin and Alibaba,* helped solve the mystery of where these extra tales originated. We now know these were just elaborate fakes, amounting to retranslations into Arabic of Galland’s French version. It is as if Galland’s orientalist endeavor could not be escaped.

Entered the two best-known English translations of *The Nights*: Edward Lane’s published from 1838 to 1841, and Richard Francis Burton’s published from 1885 to 1887. In the interest of time, we will skip over Lane’s contribution. He is an interesting fellow but not as relevant here. Lane and Burton were the exact opposites; Lane was concise while Burton was verbose if we are kind. Whereas Lane labored hard to make his work family-friendly and palatable to the broadest possible audience, Burton accentuated the erotic elements of *The Nights.* At the time, Burton’s work was available only to a small society of discrete, many of whom one would imagine creepy, gentleman subscribers. Burton is one of the most colorful and appalling characters in the history of the Middle East studies. He was a soldier with a gift for languages who thought of himself as a scholar and archaeologist. Some considered him one of the Victorian Age’s great explorers. He traveled throughout the Middle East, South Asia, and East Africa. He is best known for two achievements: being one of the co-discoverers of the source of the Nile and disguising himself as a Muslim to go on a pilgrimage to Meccah. After each of his travels, he never failed to write thrilling and **self-aggrandizing** memoirs. However, he was also a racist, misogynist, and imperialist when racists and imperialists were striving to outdo one another.

Moreover, he was one of the loudest voices in the English-speaking world **to spread the vicious idea that the Middle East was part of the exotic, erotic, and easily exploitable East** in almost everything he translated. The Sanskrit Kama Sutra, for example, was intended as a vehicle to expose his Victorian audiences to the kinky sexual practices of other cultures and, above all, the flash about his erudition. Thus, it is nearly impossible to talk about *One Thousand and One Nights* without discussing the blatant and destructive Orientalist project that plagues it.

Edward Said was one of the most important cultural figures of the late 20th century. In his 1978 book *Orientalism*, Said made the influential argument that scholarly writing from America and Europe presented inaccurate, misleading, and stereotypical cultural representations of the East. He argued that the Orient was the stage on which the whole East was confined. Therefore, people who read these texts and scholarly works also believed these biased perceptions, which in turns hindered a proper understanding of Middle Eastern and Asian cultures.

In the Orientalist tradition, Americans and western Europeans often portrayed the East as exotic and enigmatic while simultaneously judging and romanticizing it without ever understanding it. Deep down, the “translators” like Galland felt their values were justified. After all, Galland was an elitist. His distaste for the lifestyle of the “others” affirmed his perspective. Thus, scholars like him published reports, collections, and translations portraying the East as raucous, uncultured, and unintelligent because these “other” cultures deviated from *their values*. Said went further; he thought Western scholarship held strong ties to the domineering, imperialist societies that produced it, concluding that much Western scholarship about Middle Eastern and Asian cultures was inherently political and intellectually dubious. Said argued that stereotyping became justification for Western colonization of Middle Eastern and Asian countries. The West painted a picture of an Eastern world that needed civilizing. The invasion was framed as salvation, rescuing the inhabitants who were too lazy and too pleasure-focused to be fit to govern themselves. So, we can deduce that either the West was blind to its failings and did not recognize its portrayal of the East as stereotyping, or it believed that its own culture was superior. Edward Said’s book became the foundational text for postcolonial studies and transformed Middle Eastern and Asian Studies. His theory remains critically relevant today, so much so that it has become part of our language. The term Orientalism describes a patronizing Western attitude towards other cultures from the Middle East and Asia. So, Scheherazade has her work cut out for her; not only must she deconstruct the misogyny inherent in patriarchy but also the Orientalist project that robs her of her agency yet again.

# The Wife of Bath

## Background



Chaucer's Pilgrims

Geoffrey Chaucer, who wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, is often cited as the father of English poetry. Chaucer lived in the second half of the 14th century, toward the end of what we now call the Middle Ages. It was a time of tremendous change in Europe generally and in Britain specifically, and the Renaissance was just around the corner. Chaucer’s most famous work, *The Canterbury Tales*, is both a look back on nearly 350 years of British society and a glimpse of what was to come.

The Norman Conquest of 1066 marks the end of the Anglo-Saxon dominance in the British Isles; this is the culture that produced Beowulf. However, the Normans and the Anglo Saxons were tribal cousins; both were Germanic tribes who came to Britain from Scandinavia. William of Normandy, soon to be known as William the Conqueror, led the Norman invasion of Britannia in 1066. He was related to the Anglo-Saxon Kings that he conquered, and like Hamlet, it was his lineage and belief of his entitlement to the crown that spurs him to action. His aim, therefore, was to conquer the Anglo Saxons and not to eliminate them. In December of 1066, he named himself William the first, the King of England. Within five years, he took control of nearly all of Britannia, which he ruled without difficulty until his death in 1087. With William’s ascendancy to the throne, French culture and the French language dominated the island of Britannia for the next 300 years. The Normans never left the island and merged with the Anglo Saxons to become the English we think of today.

Let us look at the aristocracy. One of William’s most important initiatives was commissioning an inventory of British property and possessions known as *The Domesday Book* (Doomsday). William’s people scoured the cities and the countryside, counting every landowner, every peasant, every building, every chicken, every cow, and every bushel of wheat. This inventory allowed William to collect taxes. The more someone owned, the more money William could demand of him. The entire *Domesday Book* is now online, and it is a fascinating read. One striking thing is that anyone who owned anything of consequence had a Norman name and thus was a Norman aristocracy member. Virtually no one who owned anything of consequence had an Anglo-Saxon name. In a mere 20 years, the entire Anglo-Saxon ruling class was eliminated and replaced by an entirely new ruling class from Normandy. It should be no surprise, then, to learn that with the Norman Conquest, French became the aristocracy’s language. It was a rough country dialect of French, not the fancy stuff they spoke in Paris. However, it was French, and, more importantly, it was the official language of the British Royal Court and the official language of the British state. Simultaneously, in farmhouses and fields across the island, English Saxon was still spoken by the rural people and the peasantry.

Feudalism, of course, was a comprehensive hierarchical system of social, political, and economic relationships. It claimed God as its ultimate authority, which is a clever and practical tactic if one happens to be the King. Furthermore, it was a top-down power system, with virtually no mobility among its various levels, especially the lower levels. In contrast, the knight was the symbol of the feudal system, and the idea of loyalty was central to an entire series of social behaviors and codes. To break any of these codes was to risk the welfare of oneself and that of the entire system. We can detect the not-so-subtle whiff of **comitatus** here. The dramatic concept of **comitatus** was the blueprint for the feudal system of the Middle Ages. Like so many other things in England during the Middle Ages, feudalism was an import from France introduced by William the Conqueror immediately after the Norman Conquest. However, it slowly began to erode over time as ordinary people gained greater control over their lives.

Under the feudal system, a critical aspect of aristocratic conduct was the **Chivalric code**. Chivalric code demanded loyalty to one’s Lord and determined behavior on the battlefield. However, it also elevated women to an ideal: an image of perfection impossible to achieve (one of the problematic portrayals of women that persist today). **Courtly love** was also a central and essential aspect at the heart of the Chivalric Code, which held the knight to serve the Lady of his Devotion bravely and most honorably. In the name of the Lady, **courtly love** is the subject of hundreds of medieval stories. Perhaps most famous of these was the Arthurian Romances detailing King Arthur’s and the Knights of the Round Table’s exploits. The obvious example of courtly love gone awry is Lancelot and Guinevere, yet it is also important to note that King Arthur’s legend preexisted the Norman invasion. Lancelot and his tryst with Guinevere *is solely a French addition to the canon*.

The reality for women in the Middle Ages differed considerably from the stuff of legend and lore. Aristocrat or serf, women’s place in society was narrowly defined. Their first and primary duty *was not* to maintain their virginity forever but to fulfill the demands of reproduction once they were sexually mature enough to do so, much more accurately portrayed by Chaucer. Peasant women were child bearers first and foremost; the house and the field duties were a close second. The feudal society also expected aristocratic women to produce lots and lots of children. While they oversaw the house rather than cleaning it for themselves, they too had no real place outside of these roles. In all cases, women depended heavily on their spouses for support.

Also, looming large in the Middle Ages were the Crusades: European Christianity’s three and a half centuries-long series of Holy Wars against Muslims began shortly after the Norman Conquest. Ultimately, the quest to take over Jerusalem was unsuccessful, but the Crusades’ effect on life at home was a mess. As Europeans went East, they were exposed to Arabic cultures, establishing trade at bringing back both consumer goods and new forms of knowledge. These helped cities such as London to grow, thus offering an alternative to the feudal system. One of the primary sources of urban growth was trade. As soldiers and traders returned from Eastern lands with a wide array of consumer goods, teas, spices, fabrics, and foods, a new and vital group of people emerged: merchant class. With each passing decade, the merchant class’s economic and social power grew, and they became highly influential members of society. During the Middle Ages, large groups of craftsmen often assembled into Guilds. Furthermore, contact with the Middle East led to acquisition of new forms of knowledge, especially in the sciences, mathematics, and architecture. As a result, European cities became centers of learning in the 13th century. London saw the founding of two universities: Oxford and Cambridge, offering a challenge to the traditional European institutions of learning, the Christian monasteries.

## Summary

When *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* was written, the social structure of England was evolving. This systemic change opened an avenue for a merchant class to emerge, for which *The* *Wife of Bath* is a crucial example. The story provides insight into women's roles in the late Middle Ages when women could only occupy three stations in society: maiden, widow, or wife. The character the Wife of Bath offers a unique perspective (a satirical critique) on this context: as a childless widow, she inherits her husband's wealth (as the property would be passed down to sons even if their mothers were still alive), which allows the Wife of Bath more autonomy than other women of the time. The character in this story was one of Chaucer's most developed; the Prologue is almost twice as long as the Wife's actual tale, and *The Wife of Bath* is known as one of the best-known in the collection. The Wife of Bath calls herself "Alys" and "Alyson." However, this is also the name of a friend she references and various other characters throughout *The Canterbury Tales* (confusing students and scholars alike!).

In the Prologue, we learn some vital information about Alyson, namely that she has been married five times and therefore will be speaking about the "wo that is in marriage." She quickly recounts her first three marriages to older men, *starting twelve*. Her fourth marriage was to a philanderer, whom she repaid by making him believe she, too, had been unfaithful. Her fifth marriage is to a younger man, Jankyn, who is physically abusive. His beating left Alyson deaf in one ear in one exchange, and he is an unrepentant misogynist. They get into a heated argument, and she tears some pages from his copy of "Book of Wikked Wyves." Though, after this, he concedes his power to her in the relationship.

The Wife of Bath is then interrupted by the Friar, who complains of the "long preamble" she has provided. As a widow five times over, she would have been seen as a "loathly lady"–a woman who remarries to satisfy her sexual desires (something the Church equated with bigamy at the time). However, the Wife of Bath knows the stories of many holy men who have had multiple wives, and her adept appeal to the Scriptures puts her in direct conflict with the teachings of clerics. In her opinion, her history of multiple marriages has made her an expert on marital relations, and certainly more so than celibate, male clergy. The Wife of Bath argues, above all, that women are morally identical to men, which contradicts the prevailing double standard of her era.

The tale starts with this Knight who has raped a young woman, and for some reason, the Queen wants to give him a chance to redeem himself. King Arthur intends to behead the Knight, but he decides to leave this punishment in the Queen's hands. The Queen gives the Knight an ultimatum: he has twelve months *and one day* to bring back the answer to the question, "**what do women most desire?**" If the Knight cannot find the answer to the question, then his execution will be carried out. He sets out on a long journey to find the answer to the Queen's question. The Knight asks many people and receives a wicked assortment of answers, none of which sit well with him. The last night has come for the Knight to present his answer, yet he is still bewildered. He happens upon an "old, ugly lady" who tells him that she has what he is searching for: **all women want sovereignty or agency over their own lives**. He will pay for her wisdom, but the woman demands that the Knight pay after meeting the Queen. The old lady gives him the answer to the question, and the Knight presents it to the Queen. She is pleased with his answer and releases him, sparing his life. In payment for providing the Knight with the answer, the old lady demands the handsome Knight to marry her. Having given the woman his oath, the Knight has to marry her. However, he is miserable and begs the woman to ask anything else of him. She refuses, and on their wedding night, the older woman is upset with the Knight's reaction. She reminds him that her looks can be an asset—she will be a virtuous wife to him because no other men would desire her. She asks him which one he would prefer—a true and loyal wife or a beautiful young woman who may not be faithful. The Knight responds by saying that **the choice is hers**. Knowing that she has the ultimate power now, she promises both beauty and fidelity. The Knight turns to look at the older woman again, but now the woman is young, lovely, and beautiful. The old woman creates a situation to achieve "what women want most" and creates her sovereignty.

[The Wife of Bath’s Tale](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRtYh9TvoHM) (First Rate Tutors)

[Wife of Bath Source Text:

<https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/English/CanterburyTalesVI.php>

Prologue and Tale]

### Analysis



The Canterbury Tales

*The Wife of Bath’s Tale* is referring to an Arthurian Romance. The “tale” recaptures the historic days of Arthur, and it is the only actual example of Arthurian romance that Chaucer wrote. He was attracted to Romance and displayed his appreciation for the genre throughout his other tales, but he only wrote the one Arthurian Romance, which he then assigned to the Wife of Bath! Alyson’s tale uses a standard convention of the Romance genre, opening with a juxtaposition between the “now” of the text (late Medieval) and the past that it depicts (Arthurian). We will often see and hear nostalgic statements about bygone eras, like the tried and true “love was different back in my day.” This, of course, implies that the present time is somehow deficient; for instance, the friar seeing a woman in a position of power as an example of how the current society was corrupt. Chaucer employs a pretty standard convention of Romance; however, **he renders that cliché form specifically to support the tale and its narrator, the wife**.

So, the Wife of Bath tells us that in Arthur’s days, the whole land was full of the fanciful, supernatural, and faery world. In contrast, the presence of Friars essentially means that the culture of the friars has permanently displaced the Faery lands; where the elf used to walk, now the friar walks. She tells us that Friars are “as thick as…” These descriptions help communicate the sense that they are everywhere. These Friars get into every single space, and it accomplishes the satirical jab in a more poetic and resonant manner than saying friars are everywhere.

At the same time, this digressive moment for the Wife of Bath indicates her engagement in anti-fraternal satire. These satirical attacks on the Friars were also a prevalent mode of writing in the 14th century. Indeed, she is picking up on some mainstays of this kind of anti-fraternal satire. So, the idea of Friars being as thick as specks of dust in the sunlight is ironic given that Friars have often likened this kind of satirical writing to things like flies and bees. Chaucer’s contemporary William Langland writes about a figure called the friar, which he gave the name Sir **Penetrans-Domos**, meaning *the penetrating of the home*. So, Chaucer combines anti-fraternal satire and a conventional element of Romance, the juxtaposition of the past and the contemporary. However, he renders it sharply pointed at this moment because it is part of the Wife of Bath’s attack on the Friar, and it contributes to the roadside drama of *The Canterbury Tales*.

*The Wife of Bath’s Tale* is also, of course, an example of the **loathly lady stereotype**, and this is a stereotype that was pervasive in the Middle English tradition and literature from the Middle Ages. However, it is also indicative of the overall abjection of women in this period of world history. It is helpful to juxtapose these different versions to get a sense of what is distinctive in Chaucer’s rendition. There are two I want to focus on. One is known as *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle.* This middle English tale features Sir Gawain, Arthur’s nephew, one of the critical Knights of the Arthurian World, and his marriage to the Loathly Lady. The other is called *The Tale of Florent*, and it forms part of the collection *Confessio Amantis*, a collection of tales written by John Gower, Chaucer’s friend and contemporary. In both of these versions, Gawain’s romance and the tale of Sir Florent follow a similar pattern. Gawain and Sir Florent both have the quest to find what women most desire. They get the answer in return for marrying the Loathly Lady. On the wedding night, they are given a choice: How will they have her in the future? They can either have the loathsome woman be beautiful by day but ugly by night or ugly by day and beautiful by night. It is a choice between whether they will prioritize private desire, personal satisfaction, and fulfillment, or their public reputations. By handing the sovereignty over to the Loathly Lady and allowing her to choose, they are rewarded by her magical transformation, as it turns out that this was all an enchantment that was placed on her by her stepmother.

That is, of course, how this trope works in other works mentioned. Chaucer, however, makes several significant contributions to this type of tale. In Chaucer’s version, neither the Knight nor the Loathly Lady, where she is only ever called the old lady, is ever named. **They are not given names**. Secondly, he makes a particular action of the knight the crime of rape, and therefore **the connection between the crime and the punishment is more explicit**. *He committed rape*, and he must now go and find out what it is that women most desire. Next, he does not give any explicit details of the “loathness” of the Loathly Lady. For these other writers I have mentioned, they devote quite many lines to describe how hideous she was, and contemporary authors enjoy doing this. Chaucer says,

**Thou art so loothly, and so oold also,**  
                  Thou art so loathsome, and so old also,  
1101       **And therto comen of so lough a kynde,**  
                  And moreover descended from such low born lineage,  
1102       **That litel wonder is thogh I walwe and wynde.**  
                  That little wonder is though I toss and twist about.  
1103       **So wolde God myn herte wolde breste!"**  
                  So would God my heart would burst!"

you could not imagine or describe a fouler creature. He uses **inexpressibility tropes** here to describe just how ugly she is. Now Romance is full of these kinds of inexpressibility tropes, but **they are usually employed to describe the beauty of heroin**. Chaucer inverts the trope to describe the loathness of the older woman.

The last thing Chaucer does is to make the Knight’s reservation and hesitation on his wedding night not just about how ugly she is but also about her social status. She has come from so low a status, which is part of what makes the Knight toss and turn in bed and distress. Through the older woman as a representative of the “lower class,” Chaucer redefines what gentility meant through her speech. Gentility means **both** *nobility of one’s rank* and *the status and the nobility of one’s character* in the Middle English sense. The older woman’s speech comprises a quarter of the Tale's length and is one hundred lines long. **Thus, it is meant to be taken seriously**. The older woman, in her arguments, detaches the nobility of rank from the quality of nobility of character when it comes to her gentility. This subject has already been interrogated by romance because, after all, we have a Knight who commits the crime of rape. However, in her speech, she clarifies that they do not necessarily reside in the same person. He who is noble in status is certainly not always going to be noble in character.

The next thing that Chaucer does is to change the nature of the choice that the Knight must make. Will he choose for her to be the ugly and old but faithful and obedient wife, or will he choose for her to become the beautiful, young, and by implication, likely to be unfaithful wife. Finally, unlike in other versions of this trope of the Romantic genre, wherein a curse is a cause for the Loathly Lady’s condition, *The Wife of Bath’s Tale* has no external actor inflicting this upon the older woman, now his wife. The implication here is that she can self-transform or that she can shapeshift. Chaucer has created a robust and independent representative of the woman’s experience, and Alyson is heralded by many as one of English literature's first feminist figures. Through the satire of this text, Alyson articulates the core desire of the feminist movement; women want one thing: sovereignty and equal representation that perceives feminine characteristics on equal terms as masculine ones.

# The Book of the City of Ladies

## Background



Christine de Pizan

Christine de Pizan was born around 1364 in Italy. Her mother was the daughter of a councilor, and fer father was a professor at the University of Bologna. He was appointed to the Court of Charles the Fifth in France, so the family moved to Paris. In Paris, their surname mutated from Pisano to Pizan. Early on, even though most women were never educated, her father was adamant that Christine receive an education. When she was fifteen, Christine married Etienne du Castela, a scholar and nobleman. The couple was still newlywed when in 1380, King Charles the Fifth died. Charles the Sixth was a child when he became King, and his uncle, Phillip of Burgundy, advised him.

Phillip also preceded to drain the Royal coffers. Christine's father continued to work with the new King, but his income was vastly decreased. He died around 1385. In the end, Christine's husband became head of the family. Nevertheless, five years later, in 1390, Etienne died while away on business with the King. Christine de Pizan was 25 years old with three young children and a mother to support. She had no money and no prospects. She tried to get access to her husband's money, but the government refused her access because she was a woman. Facing destitution, Pizan began writing. She wrote poetry to the memory of her husband. French and English aristocrats received her work well. Now she could look after her family. Christine de Pizan was the first professional writer.

One day Pizan came across a treatise praising a particular poem, *The Romance of the Rose*, not realizing that her world was about to change forever. *The Romance of the Rose* is a very long poem, but the following short quotation sums up the attitude towards women:

"All women are, will be, or have been whores by action or intention."

Pizan argued against **the generalization in the poem**. The poem defamed an entire sex, without exception, which placed her in a very similar situation to Alyson and Scheherazade. She also pointed out several inconsistencies and fallacies committed by the author's rhetoric. For instance, while *The Romance of the Roses* accuses all women of immorality, most women's actual actions and conditions directly contradict this portrayal of women. Pizan's *published* response to *The Romance of the Rose* began the quarrel of the Rose and a literary debate that marked a turning point in literature and history. In the debate, Christine de Pizan exchanged heated arguments with intellectuals over the nature of the poem, gaining allies and enemies along the way. The quarrel of the Rose lasted for years and culminated in the accusation of blasphemy, not against the author of the Romance that defamed women, as we may have come to expect, but against Pizan's effort to assess it.

Pizan continued the debate in her next book, *The Book of the City of Ladies*. In it, she created a symbolic city where women were defended and appreciated, and the book became a forum to speak on issues of consequence to women.

Interestingly, as a literary construct, Pizan's utopian city anticipated Thomas More's *Utopia* by over one hundred years and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* by over two hundred. After being thrust into the medieval public eye following the quarrel of the Rose, Christine de Pizan wrote prolifically, authoring at least fifteen significant manuscripts in about six years, not including minor essays and poems. Most notably, Philip of Burgundy commissioned her to write the official biography of his deceased brother, King Charles the Fifth. In 1418, Pizan left Paris and joined her daughter at a convent, and stopped writing. The notable exception was a single poem in 1429 that celebrated the success of June of Arc. She died in obscurity around 1430.

## Summary

As the narrator of the text, Pizan describes that as she sat in her study reading *The Lamentations* *of Matheolus*, a 13th century invective against women and the sanctity of marriage. His tirade against the female sex left her feeling confused and dejected by the depiction of women, and she fell into a trance. Pizan frames *The Book of the City of Ladies* as a **dream-vision**. In this trance, three personified virtues—Reason, Rectitude, and Justice— arrive and tell her that God has chosen her to build a metaphorical City, wherein all virtuous women can find sanctitude.

They direct in all the steps for building such a utopia, each step of which is also metaphorical. This City of Ladies will house a worthy group of heroines to protect women against attacks. Each of the three virtues teaches Pizan about the achievements of great women throughout history, including reclaiming some of the “loathly women” we have studied in this collection. There are also scholars, warriors, and other great women. Pizan constructs the city’s walls from this feminine perspective. In a metanarrative move that Don Quixote would be proud of, Pizan, through the *Book of the City of Ladies*, constructs a new perspective of history and makes it physical through the book itself. This type of text belongs to the **biographical catalog** genre, which celebrates the lives of famous figures from history and mythology.

In Part I, **Reason** presents women (mainly pagan) famous for their courage, artistry, or inventiveness. In Part II, **Rectitude** presents Hebrew and Christian ladies renowned for their prophetic gifts, chastity, or love for their families or fellow citizens. Lastly, in Part III, **Justice** recounts the lives of female saints crowned with glory for their steadfastness. The text is indebted to *De Claris Mulieribus* (Concerning Famous Women) by the Tuscan author Giovanni Boccaccio, written in c. 1375.

[Lecture on Christine de Pizan's The Book of the City of Ladies](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9MhWa2b8QU&t=24s) (Ashley AF)

[Book of the City of Ladies Source Text:

<https://history.hanover.edu/courses/excerpts/165pisan.html>

All]

### Analysis



Illustrated Manuscript

If there had been a bestseller book list in France during the late 14th century, then *The Romance of the Rose* would have registered as the number one bestseller for years, with translations from the original French into English, Dutch, and Italian. The poem sets out to entertain the reader as the hero tries to woo his beloved. *The Romance of the Rose* was widely read; it became hugely popular and was highly regarded by laymen and scholars alike. In 1401, a scholar at the French court wrote a treatise supporting the poem. Soon after, he received a letter from a little-known poet; her first letter stated:

I wish to say, to divulge, and to maintain openly that (saving your good grace) you are in grave error to give such lavish and unjustified praise to Meun’s book- one which could better be called plain idleness than useful work, in my judgment. (Baird 46)

The letter went on to say that the poem justified rape, that it deliberately slandered all women, and she asked the secretary himself if he would allow his daughters to be educated by it. Christine de Pizan’s signature was on that letter. By daring to question the representation of women in literature and, by extension, women’s place in society, Christine de Pizan rocketed into public view. For most, Pizan’s letter, penned over six hundred years ago, marks the birth of feminism.

may it not be imputed to me as folly, arrogance, or presumption, that I, a woman, should dare to reproach and call into question so subtle an author, and to diminish the stature of his work, when he alone, a man, has dared to undertake to defame and blame without exception an entire sex. (Baird 63)

Women and men face double standards, and no, we do not mean just the gender pay gap. We are specifically talking about the different words we use to describe men and women with the same characteristics. While he is described as charismatic, she is often described as bubbly. We would not describe him as an airhead; he is just simple, but she is an airhead. She is bossy while he is assertive.

We have seen this throughout this text and this module. Whether it is the women of Gilgamesh’s kingdom, Briseis or Helen of the *Iliad*, Grendel’s mother, Ophelia, Medea, Alyson, or Scheherazade, these women of the ancient world were subjected to unfair, unjust, and inhumane treatments. The same actions that would have been praised in a man **damn a woman**; she is loathly and monstrous. Even in the more positive portrayal of women, such as Scheherazade and Alyson, who could reclaim some of their autonomy, the fact remains that a male agenda represents them. Combatting this misrepresentation is one of the primary purposes of Feminism: to create a feminine language, by women, for women.

For instance, the writer Ben Black found that the verbs most associated with the pronoun “she” in classic fiction are: shivered, wept, murmured, screamed, and married. The most commonly associated with “he” are: muttered, grinned, shouted, chuckled, and killed. Academics from the University of Illinois and the University of California analyzed over 100,000 works of fiction written between 1800 and 2010. They used an algorithm to determine the character’s gender, based only on the language used in descriptions and dialogue. These predictions were right 75% of the time for books written around 1800, but that falls to just about 65% of books written around 2000. The vocabulary used to describe women and men is becoming more blurred between genders; stereotypes like feisty are less common than they used to be. However, it is essential to remember that feminists like Christine de Pizan were not attempting to blur the lines between genders but establish them equally.

Feminism is a **conflict theory** that suggests that power in society is divided based on gender. Feminists suggest the patriarchal oppression of women exists in all sections of society: employment, home education, and media. They also suggest that the study of sociology has been almost entirely male-oriented. In other words, male theorists focused on the issues that are of concern to males. Indeed, early Feminism focused on studying female issues and the representations of women in society. However, Feminism evolved to deal with contemporary issues surrounding gender differences. This movement has a particular focus in contemporary society on the intersectionality of women’s experiences, examining differences based upon social class, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, age, religion, and geographical location, which gives Feminism a broad appeal when looking at our gender differences.

Christine de Pizan’s ability to predict the intellectual foundation of the Feminist movement is what makes her work so extraordinary. Pizan uses real historical examples in *The Book of the City of Ladies* to show how hypocritical men have unjustly oppressed women. The book is a chronicle of historic women who have contributed to society. Christine covers women as wives, mothers, and leaders; she speaks of women in the legal system, the social system, and marriage. She cleverly disguises her insight under three personas Lady Reason, Lady Rectitude, and Lady Justice. In doing so, she even manages to reclaim some of the loathly women that have been framed as monstrous, like Medea, who is condemned for acting in the same manner as countless men before her.

By proving her point, she denounces the credibility of some well-known men like Aristotle and Ovid for their views on women. An example of this is when Christine asked Lady Reason why Ovid attacked women so much in his books. Reason replies that Ovid was a man who led a promiscuous life with many women during his youth. Along the way, Ovid leads “others through his acts and words” to lead a life like his. His actions finally led the Romans to exile him for his promiscuity. Ovid had friends who managed to get his exile removed. However, when he stepped out, he went back to his old way of life, which led to his castration, and since he could not lead the pleasurable life he wanted to live, he began to attack women to bring everyone down to his level of misery.

Pizan’s book is a tangible demonstration of women’s accomplishments and their capability to act morally and prudently. It is a direct response to the devastating accounts about women that she has read, each of which cast doubt on women’s intellectual abilities, chastity, and faith in God. Nevertheless, without erasing the focus in Pizan’s work, we can also see a fundamental philosophical question in her approach: how do we know what the truth is, and how do we distinguish essence from—as Plato would say—opinions about it?

Christine de Pizan’s answer intriguingly anticipates another significant movement. Her methods are similar to the empirical epistemological searches of sixteenth-century Protestantism and seventeenth-century New Science: searching for truth by collecting data. Her examples of accomplished and admirable women typify what E. J. Richards calls “medieval notions of universal history” (264, n. II.22.2). Christine mixes figures from recent history, ancient history, mythology, the Bible, fictional accounts, and contemporary women. Fictional or factual, all her examples take on a mythic value, defying other authors’ claims of women’s inferiority. She sustains her pro-female position within Christianity. She claims that Christian writing includes reverence for the Virgin Mary and female saints and stands against misogyny. She also highlights the logical fallacies in misogynist reasoning. The triple woman framework invokes the Trinity, as well. Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, Christine’s three architects, also demonstrate what values and capacities are inherently human, what ties human beings to God, and what is inherently divine.