

Sacrificial and Un-sacrificial Epics: An Examination of El Cid

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The beginning of the Epic of Gilgamesh suggestively inverts the theme of Cain and Abel by opposing Gilgamesh, builder of a city to Enkidu, who knows “nothing of cultivated land” (61) and lives, as Abel, among the beasts. Gilgamesh has an excess of existence: “his arrogance has no bounds by day or night,” “does not leave a son to his father” (60), “does not leave a girl to her mother, the daughter of the warrior, the bride of the young man,” and this excess generates a general resentment which threatens his city: “the men of Uruk become anxious.” In order to contain this excess the gods create Enkidu, “his equal... his own reflection, his second self, stormy heart by stormy heart.”

Enkidu, longing “for a comrade, for one who would understand his heart” (63), goes to Uruk, meets Gilgamesh and fights him. Somehow unreasonably, but in a sequence that can be observed again and again in epic texts, after Gilgamesh defeats Enkidu they become friends: they “embraced and their friendship was sealed” (67). The Epic conflates aggression and socialization: by defining an order of priority, aggression establishes distinctions that contain mimetic desire. Yet, violence needs to go somewhere, and will be channeled later in the same epic, in the campaign of both heroes against Umbaba, monstrous distortion of Gilgamesh.

A similar treatment of violence can be observed in other epic poems, and with more intensity in those with a clear foundational theme. Epics construct the legitimacy of a ruling class that is or represents itself as a class of warriors. The topic of epic poetry coincides with the, as it were, professional focus of the members of this class: warfare. Yet, most epic literature shows at the same time an awareness of the destructive potential of the activities of this military class towards the societies in which this class exists. As an example, the Illiad describes the heroic deeds of the legendary Achaeans, which validate the sovereignty of their Dorian inheritors, but it also serves as a cautionary tale against the danger of rivalry, as the central storyline develops the catastrophic effects of Achilles’ jealousy towards Agamemnon over Briseis.

Epic poetry tends to reproduce and support the economy of mimetic violence. Aggression is described, as in the case of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, as a non-problematic device for social classification. It promotes differentiation, contains rivalry and prevents conflict. Medieval Romance epic poetry follows the same thematic patterns and presents aggression in identical fashion. Roland, in the Chanson presents the same ethical defects of Achilles. His rivalry against count Genes, together with his excessive pride, causes the hero’s destruction and produces a social unbalance. This unbalance will be resolved by the epiphany – to use Northrop Frye’s expression – of an emerging judiciary system, staged in the gruesome death of Genes. Drawn and quartered, Genes’ body both mirrors and heals the effects of the offender’s crime on the political body.

I want to focus my attention here in another text, the Lay of el Cid, the only fully preserved Castilian epic poem. Mimetic analysis of this work reveals fracture lines in the epic narrative patterns which problematize aggression and de-stabilize validity of the processes of sacrificial substitution. This deviation from epic convention suggests the emergence of new discourses in this text, which become more evident in the third and final chant of the poem.

For good or evil, Hollywood has popularized the main elements of the narrative of the Poem. El Cid, Rodrigo Díaz, a member of the lower nobility, is expelled from Castile by his king, Alfonse. While never clearly explained, the king's reasons for Rodrigo's expulsion are probably related to an encroachment of Rodrigo in the king's operative sphere: he may have embezzled taxes his king sent him to collect, might have failed to show up with his men in a military royal campaign, or, according to other traditions, might have challenged his king with the accusation of having had part in the killing of his brother and former king, Sancho. A second reason for the expulsion, explicitly declared in the text, is the action of Rodrigo's "bad enemies," that is, of other members of the royal court who perceive Rodrigo as an upstart who threatens their status.

These two oppositions define two triangles of desire: in the first, Rodrigo mediates Alfonse's desire for his sovereignty; in the second the desire of the other members of the nobility for priority of status. Rodrigo's expulsion from Castile would reverse these two triangles: king and enemies would place themselves as mediators of Rodrigo's desire for social integration, for being part of a body which has, violently, expelled him.

Some textual indexes suggest the presence of an additional problem. The day Rodrigo is expelled from Castile he makes his camp in the meadow next to the city of Burgos. By the time the poem was written, about one hundred years later, that meadow was the location of a hospital for lepers. Leprosy, as noted by Foucault, is in the pre-classic period a marker of otherness; it is also a symptom of contagion, of the generalized rivalry which defines feudal society. Noblemen compete among themselves and, ultimately, dispute the king's sovereignty. By casting Rodrigo out, the Castilian polity places on Rodrigo a flaw that contaminates the whole social body seeking, by doing so, to expel in him the tensions resulting from that flaw and restore social harmony.

At this point of the story, Rodrigo position is untenable. Resisting his expulsion would make him a traitor, that is, in generative terms, would make him join the choir of his accusers and cooperate in a perfectly unanimous victimization. Yet, if he failed to resist he would be acquiescing with his expulsion. The narrative of the poem describes Rodrigo's strategies to avoid and revert his victimization. First, he abandons Castile and, leading a band of marauders, attacks and plunders a series of towns in the Muslim regions of the Iberian Peninsula. These actions could be read as sacrificial substitution, yet the fact that Muslims have a minimal connection with the kingdom Rodrigo has abandoned reduces the effect of such substitution. A few stanzas later, however, a better candidate offers himself to Rodrigo. Berenguer Raymond, Christian count of Barcelona, comes to defend one of his Muslim vassal kings and meets Rodrigo in the battlefield next to the forest of Tevar. Raymond is a perfect replacement for king Alfonse: he is a sovereign; he belongs to the same extended polity of medieval Christian Iberia; and, as Alfonse himself, albeit never explicitly declared in the poem, he carries Cain's seal: historically, the count of Barcelona was found guilty of killing his brother and co-regent Raymond Berenguer.

A battle ensues and Rodrigo defeats Berenguer and takes him prisoner. Ashamed by his defeat, Berenguer vows to starve himself, but Rodrigo promises him that if the count eats he will give him his freedom and that of two of his noblemen. Count Berenger eats and, by doing so, he breaks his own oath, dishonors himself and embraces his own victimization.

Rodrigo's victory has more than one effect. First, he satisfies his drive to revenge on his king Alfonse and displaces victimhood. Second, Rodrigo somehow absorbs the sovereignty of Count Berenguer, and this will enable him to build in the following episodes his own kingdom in the Muslim-owned coastal region of Valencia. Third, as with Enkidu and Gilgamesh, a form of friendship, or at least of benevolence, emerges between Count Berenguer and Rodrigo. When the count leaves for Barcelona, Rodrigo offers him gifts: "palafres muy bien ensellados / de buenas vestiduras de peliçones e de mantos" [three good horses and clothes, cloaks and fur coats] (1064-65).

Up to this point, the poem follows epic conventions strictly, almost exemplary, and transparently reproduces the economy of mimetic desire, rivalry and sacrificial substitution. At the same time, it shows the possibility of maneuver under that economy. Rodrigo's success, the ultimate source of his political legitimacy, is his ability to reverse the position which others have tried to assign to him within a mimetic structure. Yet, I want to postulate that this apparently strict observance of epic narrative convention serves to deliver a very different discourse, one that unveils the artificial quality of sacrificial substitution and criticizes its limitations. As I mentioned earlier, there are two conflicts in the poem, the rivalry between Rodrigo and his king and that between Rodrigo and his political rivals. If the victimization of the Count of Barcelona nullifies the first one, the second mimetic loop remains open, and its resolution is going to show the limits of sacrificial substitution.

One of the signs by which king Alfonse expresses the return of Rodrigo to his favor is the arrangement of the marriage of Rodrigo's two daughters to two scions of one of the clanic groups which, up to this point, have opposed Rodrigo. Reluctant at the beginning, Rodrigo ultimately accepts the union, and the two brothers, the "infantes de Carrión" move with him to Valencia. A series of events, however – a lion escapes from his cage and the two brothers hide away in terror – embarrass the new sons-in-law on the eyes of the court. Even if Rodrigo seems to try to subdue the mockery against the both brothers, there is in this action the suggestion of a new movement of sacrificial substitution: the two brothers stand metonymically for the group to which they belong, the enemies of el Cid, and they have placed themselves in a position where they can act as scapegoats for Rodrigo's hostility towards those enemies.

Here the smooth mechanics of substitution break down: the two infantes decline to embrace the role they have been given and, instead, attempt a second substitution. A few days later, they take their wives into the forest of Corpes, beat and abandon them to be devoured by the beasts.

Note here the symmetry: both this event and the victory over Count Berenguer happen in a forest; also, the infantes take away from their wives what Rodrigo had given to the count: "Levaron les los mantos e las pieles armañas" [they took their cloaks and their fur coats]. This symmetry does not only serve to point to the ethical difference between Rodrigo and his in-laws; it also challenges the ability of sacrificial substitution to contain violence. In fact, from this point on, Rodrigo follows an uncharacteristic line of conduct that suggests he has become aware that he cannot solve his problem by taking arms against those who offended him. Instead, he sues them in front of the royal court. He will eventually obtain legal satisfaction, and his enemies will be properly punished, but there is a clear feeling that this is not a real revenge. In order to obtain redress

Rodrigo has given up that which defines medieval nobility: the right to obtain direct satisfaction from the offenses received through private war.

I suspect that the separation of the poem from epic convention and common social practice is connected to a wider project emerging in Southern Europe in the late Tenth Century, to movements such as God's Truce, God's Peace and the Pataria, which aim to contain unruly aristocratic behavior. The first chant of the Poem would strictly follow genre and social expectations precisely to intensify the contrast of the final with those expectations.

This understanding of the poem may help also to interpret a considerably troubling episodes. At the beginning of the first chant, after making his camp in the meadow of Burgos, Rodrigo swindles two merchants, probably Jews, Rachel and Vidas. Presenting them with two large coffers full of sand, one of Rodrigo's men explains that these boxes contain the taxes Rodrigo had embezzled from his king, and obtains a substantial loan of money against the boxes, which the two Jews are not to open unless Rodrigo fails to repay his loan in a year. This episode has been read as a comic interlude to lighten up the beginning of the poem, but I think that there is more to it. This episode contains a miniature of the whole poem and functions as its hermeneutic key. Rodrigo, here and later, passes on aggression in order to avoid its effects. In this episode he does so on those who, socially and racially different, were sacrificial victims par excellence. Yet, violence eventually comes back. Later in the poem, when the two Jews have already learned of Rodrigo's deception, they go to one of his men asking for their money, and claim that unless they are paid they will themselves to Valencia and collect it. They never do so, but it is precisely at this point of the poem that another dual character, the future sons-in-law of Rodrigo appear in the story. The duality here is both an index of narrative continuity and, by suggesting the theme of rival brothers, symptom of sacrificial crisis. The listeners of the poem might have smiled on the trickery of Rodrigo against the Jews. By doing so, they would have added themselves to sacrificial unanimity. Yet, both that smile, and the sacrificial consensus freeze when the two infants, narrative avatar of the two merchants, go to Valencia and victimize in turn Rodrigo's daughters. The unveiling of sacrifice turns consensus into complicity. The cycle of aggression is, in the poem, the vehicle of catharsis, forces its public to reconsider the generative power of violence, both in literary genre and in social practice.

An additional textual index confirms this hypothesis. After closing their initial deal, one of the two merchants asks Rodrigo for a gift: "una piel vermeja" [a red fur coat] (178). This gift, never received, projects this scene into the two symmetrical events of victimization, the events in the forests of Tevar and Corpes, the victory over Count Berenguer and the beating of Rodrigo's daughters. And here the red garment, as the Scarlet L or Jesus' cloak in the Pretorium, stands for victimization.

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