

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

EPIC POETRY

Course Description

This course covers epic poetry from ancient to contemporary times, with a special emphasis on canonical texts from world literature. Students will analyze primary texts covering the different periods of western and non-western literature, and will discuss them from different critical stances. They will demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the works by responding to questions focusing on the works, authors, themes, and motifs. Students will demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the works by responding to questions focusing on the works, movements, authors, themes, and motifs. In addition, they will discuss the historical, social, cultural, or biographical contexts of the works' production. This course is intended for students who already possess a bachelor's and, ideally, a master's degree, and who would like to develop interdisciplinary perspectives that integrate with their prior knowledge and experience.

About the Professor

Frederic Will, Ph.D. is a widely published professor of comparative literature who has been a Fulbright Scholar in Greece, Tunisia, and Ivory Coast. He is the founding editor of *Micromegas*, a journal of poetry in translation, and has served as administrator and faculty member of Dartmouth, University of Massachusetts, and University of Iowa.

Suggested Readings

Suggested Readings on the epic, to consult as needed for research purposes and paper writing; the list is not intended to be comprehensive-- it deals only in English language work, and that very sketchily—but simply to suggest directions you can follow.

- Bates, Catherine, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic* (Cambridge, 2010).
 Bowra, M., *From Virgil to Milton* (London, 1962).
 Chadwick, Nora, *Oral Epics of Central Asia* (Cambridge, 1969).
 Finnegan, Ruth, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Open Book Publishers, 2012).
 Foley, John, *Traditional Oral Epic* (Berkeley, 1990).
 Hatto, A.T., ed., *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry, Vol. I, The Traditions* (London, 1980).
 Heide, van der, N., *Spirited Performance* (Amsterdam, 2008).
 Honko, Lauri; Handoo Jawaharlal; Foley, John Miles: *The Epic, Oral and Written* (Mysore 1998).
 Honko, Lauri, *Religion, Myth, and Folklore in the World's Epics; The Kalevala and its Predecessors* (Berlin, 1990).
 Hymes, Dell, "The Ethnography of Speaking", pp. 13–53 in Gladwin, T. & Sturtevant, W.C. (eds), *Anthropology and Human Behavior* (Washington, 1962).
 Johns-Putro, Adeline, *The History of the Epic* (London, 2006.)
 Lord, A.B., *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass. 2000).
 Miller, Dean, *The Epic Hero* (Baltimore, 2000.)
 Mori, Masaki, *Epic Grandeur* (Albany, 1997).
 Newman, John Kevin, *The Classical Epic Tradition* (Madison, 1986).
 Nimis, Stephen, *Narrative Semiotics in the Epic Tradition* (Bloomington, 1987).
 Oinas, Felix, ed. *Heroic Epic and Saga* (Bloomington, 1978).
 Reichl, Karl, *Singing the Past: Turkic and Medieval Heroic Poetry* (Ithaca, 2001).
 Turkic Oral Epic Poetry: Traditions, Forms, Poetic Structure (New York, 1992).
 Thompson, Stith, *Motif-Index of Folk-literature* (Bloomington, 1955-58).
 Van Deusen, Kira, *Singing Story Healing Drum: Shamans and Storytellers of Turkic Siberia* (Montreal, 2004).
 Yu, Anthony, *Parnassus Revisited: Modern Critical Essays on the Epic Tradition* (Chicago, 1973).

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ASSIGNMENTS

Reading Assignments

Secondary Sources. The student will read all of the this study guide and two background texts, which should be useful for orienting the student in the larger context of the work he/she is studying: these texts are Felix Oinas, ed., *Heroic Epic and Saga, HES*, (Bloomington, 1978) and Catherine Bates, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic, CCE* (Cambridge, 2010) . (*It is suggested the student purchase these books, which will be useful guides to the course as a whole.*) These two books will provide background discussion for many of the texts that will make up the course. The text edited by Oinas will be useful for many of the folk and heroic epics we consider. The work edited by Bates will be valuable where it is a question of European 'high culture' epic. For visuals of epic performers and performances YouTube is priceless.

Primary Sources. The students will read minimum of five primary texts from one from each unit II-VI. We will provide reference to the translated epic text to be read that week, and a bibliographic pointer to a useful secondary source to add to the week's reading.(As for the text to go with each reading, the student is free to make his/her own choices. It is important to note that *Project Gutenberg* provides free downloadable texts, though often dated, for most of the epics we include; these Gutenberg options will be marked, when available, as alternatives to the suggested text for the reading at hand.)

A special word on the size of the primary text reading assignments. An epic is a vast work, and it is important, for the student, to get a firm taste of each work we encounter. The average page volume of the assignments, for individual texts, is between two and three hundred pages, sometimes less. The instructor is obviously free to reshape these page numbers as he/she thinks fit.

Writing Assignments.

The total writing expectation for the course will be 10,000 words. The student will be left to do some imaginative detective work, to find the appropriate research material for paper writing. There is, to be sure, a brief bibliography below; the internet will give pointers and texts; and a major library, or interlibrary loan at a smaller library, should easily serve the research purpose. But, to repeat, the student will need to explore the research resources at his/her disposal.

Unit Essays. The student will be expected to write a minimum of six 1000 word unit essays, one paper each from Units I –VI. (Topics can be chosen from the suggested list at the end of each reading entry, from the suggested unit assignments provided at the beginning of each unit, or, in agreement with instructor, on other topics relating to the reading unit.)

Final Essay. This paper will be 5,000 words in length, and will be drawn from the list of topics at the end of the syllabus.

Unit essays

Unit I Introduction

What is the meaning of a literary genre? Are there many kinds or simply a few, which can be subdivided into smaller units? Does a 'genus' in literature have a relation to a 'genus' in nature? What connection do you see there?

What connection do you see between the epic and the novel? Is the epic just an extensive novel, usually in poetry? Or is there a more fundamental difference between the two types of literature?

Does it seem plausible to include film and music in the definition of the epic? Does that inclusion overstretch the usefulness of the term 'epic'?

Unit II Ancient Epic poetry

Homer and Virgil both make use of their cultural pasts, in order to create a new poetic world in the present. How do they transform their pasts? Which one does so in a way that most speaks to our own time?

How is character treated in the epics of Homer and Virgil? Aeneas, the 'pious,' is often criticized as without personal warmth or even traits. How do you feel about that criticism?

Both Homer and Virgil devote much creative attention to the description of battle scenes. How do their methods of depiction differ? Which author is the more successful, in engaging you in the scenes of battle?

Unit III Medieval Epic poetry

It marks the epics of this unit, that they are anonymous, except for Dante. Do they all seem equally anonymous? Do any seem 'historical,' as though they are dealing with actual 'historical events and characters'? Are they so dealing?

Do you see a sharp distinction between folk and heroic work in the epics of this unit? Would certain of these epics seem to you distinctly either folk or heroic? Please explain your response by examples.

Do you see any differences among the epics of this unit, in regard to ethnic or geographical or linguistic differences? For instance, is there any characteristic similarity to the Romance, or Slavic, or Germanic/Scandinavian creations of this unit?

What kind of treatment of the past do you find characteristic of the epics of this unit? Nostalgic? Memorial? Nationalistically proud? Discuss the relation of these attitudes to the past, in the epics of this unit.

Unit IV Early Modern Epic Poetry

Can you tell, from the texts you are reading in this unit, that you have moved into a more 'modern era'? Is there a cultural distance between Dante's and Ariosto's work, which would support this sense of 'cultural development'?

Do the epics of this unit draw on the past, in the way that the epics of Unit III did, or is 'imagination' more nearly the source of these 'more modern' epics? Argue this issue, with details.

Both Milton and Dante deal in their epic writing with the fundamental themes of Christian theology—grace, the fall, paradise. How does Milton's treatment of these issues differ from that of Dante? Is Milton clearly the product of a more 'modern' culture than Dante?

Unit V Modern epic Poetry

Both Eliot and Pound generate their epic poetry around a severe and learned interrogation of the nature of history. Have we encountered before such a motivation for the creation of epic?

Eliot's Wasteland is only a little over 4000 words long. Can it still qualify as an epic? Has size anything to do with the definition of the epic?

Ezra Pound has been widely criticized for the fascist turn in his ideology, both in his epic Cantos and in his public statements? Does a vicious ideology necessarily undermine creative work?

Unit VI Non-Western Epic poetry

Have you read epics, in this Unit, that clearly concentrate on the folk hero? What would be examples? In which of those epics does the folk hero seem to be nearly of universal human interest?

Do you see something in common to the epics of Manas and King Gesar? Do they resemble any of the folk hero epics you read in Unit III?

We look into two vast Indian epics in this unit. Do you see something in common to them both? What? How does the widely branching unfolding narrative, of these two epics, compare to the equally outfolding narrative pattern of Gesar or Manas?

The Popol Vuh is an epic without characters—loosely speaking. Does it still qualify as epic poetry? Is cosmogony a legitimate form of the epic, as you understand the form? Explain.

The Shahname and The Tale of the Heike both plumb the history of their cultures. Is this kind of epic plumbing akin to history in the academic sense? Could one learn about Persian history or the history of Japanese family conflicts from these two works?

Final Essay

Is there an underlying unity among all the examples of epic we have looked at? Should some of those examples be excluded, as not belonging to the group?

What correlation do you make between kind of epic—literary or folk heroic—and the time of its creation? Which historical periods seem to correspond to which kind of epic? Why?

How would you divide the epics we have looked at in terms of overall theme? Which epics seem to you martial, religious, philosophical, or 'purely imaginative?' Does the epic form exclude certain kinds of themes?

Do most epics reflect the immediate historical setting in which they are 'compiled' or composed? Or do most of them reflect an older historical setting, which has been mediated to them through a tradition? Argue this out.

What do you foresee for the future of the epic in world culture? Are cinema and music appropriate vehicles for the continuation of this tradition? Would you like to extend the vehicle-list to the blockbuster novel, say? Or do you think the traditional *literary* epic is the norm the genre depends on, and must return to?

Epic Poetry : Scope

Concept of epic. The primary aim of this course is to give a sense of the breadth and grandeur of the global epic tradition. The epic, whether taken loosely in the sense of any grand narrative creation, representing major themes, and incorporating a sense of the high importance of the human adventure, or whether taken in a more specifically literary-poetic sense, to refer to such grand work as it occurs in oral or written poetry—the epic is in every case one of humanity’s most ancient and lasting vehicles for celebrating greatness. By the broader category, above, one would include as epic prose masterpieces like *War and Peace*, *The Tale of Genji*, or arguably even Gibbons’ *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* or the *Journals of Lewis and Clark*. The practice of the present course, however, will be to highlight the epic tradition as it restricts itself to work carried out in oral or written poetry, though reference will be made, where appropriate, to the epic in the broadest sense.

Genre theory. The conceptual breadth of the epic has customarily been checked by one or another form of genre theory. Aristotle opens the *Poetics* by distinguishing the features of the main Greek ‘genres’—epic, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry--and from that time on, in the Western classical tradition, the epic has been viewed as a distinctive, and often premier form of literary art. In Greek antiquity Homer’s work acquired virtual Biblical status. In the Italian Renaissance, from which we will read, the epic form was viewed as the ultimate in poetic achievement, and John Milton viewed the epic as the supreme challenge. In *The Theory of the Novel* (1914-15), the Marxist critic Gyorgy Lukacs describes the epic as a extensive and naïve investment in a long past and sealed in worldview, while the novel, to which he contrasts the epic, is the ‘art form of virile maturity.’ In our own time the notion of the epic, as we will see in this course, is often deeply reinterpreted, to reflect a new kind of poetic view of history, though there continue to be traditional long-narrative poetic epics, which stand in full continuity with the classical traditions of epic. Furthermore the notion of the epic has moved, as we well know, into cinema, which (in America) assumed a soi-disant epic character in the early twentieth century with the developments of the work of D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille. The age of the blockbuster (like *Star Wars*) is arguably a continuation (1990) of the epic tradition.

The epic today. The student of the following course will no doubt form opinions about the development of the epic in our time. To be sure there is a steady epic movement within literature—and Kazantzakis’ huge Greek epic, *The Odyssey* (1925-38), serves as example, as does Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* (1990), a Caribbean version of the *Odyssey*—but, depending on one’s definition of epic, there may be future developments of the genre still unsuspected. Traditions within classical music—the *Gesamtkunstwerk* notion as Wagner employed it, to describe musical theater, poetry, and opera which convey a total aesthetic impression; the Bauhaus movement concept, fathered by Walter Gropius, according to which a community is imagined in which architecture, interior décor, even clothing have some inherent connection—these are tracings of the epic dimensions potential in the art traditions of our last century and a half. While this last instance may seem to push the envelope, it is included for that reason. The limits of the epic, understood thus broadly, are in these instances still being dictated by the epic spirit.

Reading

The History of the Epic, Adeline Johns-Putra (New York, 2006), pp. 1-259. An excellent brief survey of the history of the epic in the west.

TOTAL READING 259 PAGES

Suggested Paper Topics

What do you think about the notion of the epic tradition, which is originally 'literary,' usually 'poetic,' when it is continued into non-literary genres? Does the distance between literature and film or music seem too great, to transport the literary epic notion to it?

What do you think of Lukacs' idea that the epic is more or less supplanted by the advent of the novel form in the 18th and 19th centuries? Did history prove him right?

Epic Poetry : Types

Types of epic. Epic poetry can be simplistically divided into folk or heroic poetry, and literary epic poetry. This point needs making from the start, because popular conceptions of the epic incline either to the idea of the literary or to the folk/heroic side of the genre. When discussing epic, then, it is incumbent on us to be clear which kind we are talking about. In addition, we need to know whether a single concept of epic covers the two kinds. We will start with clarifying the difference between the two kinds, then turning to the unifying concept of epic.

Literary and folk heroic epic. In the twenty seven epics we will follow, in this course, there is a rather sharp division between the literary and the folk heroic epics. (Please remember that the Bates book, included in your readings, stresses only the western tradition of literary epic, with the exception of *Gilgamesh* and Homer; while the book edited by Oinas includes for the most part folk/heroic epics—with the discussable exceptions of Ferdowsi's *Shahname* and the *Sundiata* epic from West Africa.) If you look, in our table of contents above, at the items in Units 2 through 5—our set of Western epics—you see that they lean slightly to the folk/heroic side, arguably *ten* works falling in that category, some *eight* on the literary side; while in the works from Unit 6, the non-western works, we have some *seven* clear cases of folk/heroic epic and some *two* of literary epic. (The distinction between folk and literary, in two of the non-western epics—*Sundiata* and the *Shahname*—is a thin line. The material is ancient and traditional but the creation is far later, late mediaeval: do we privilege the ancient material or the 'modern' use of it? This fine point will be of interest throughout our course, wherever the creative factor in epic making balances off evenly against the vast traditional material with which the creation takes place.)

Western Epic: 8 literary; 10 folk/heroic

Non-western Epic: 2 literary; 7 folk/heroic

Three issues. There are three important comments to make on this group of examples. First, as we have just said, the distinction between literary and folk epic is not always clear. Second, within the folk heroic epic tradition there are many different kinds of construction history. Third, the reading choices in this class are pretty random, chosen from among thousands.

Distinction of types. First the distinction issue. I cite a few examples: the student who goes through the course will find many more. *The Tale of Heike* was compiled by a blind monk. What does *compiled* mean? What was his role in dealing with the material he dealt with? Did he create as an artist, a literary creator, or simply as a transmitter of folk materials? (The same question arises with the authorship of other texts: those of Homer, say, or *The Song of Roland*, or the *Kalevala*.) In all of those cases we are either ignorant of the kind of authorship involved, or unable to interpret just what 'compilation' means.

Construction history in folk heroic epic. Now the construction history within the folk epic tradition. Most of our folk or heroic epics were constructed, built up, in stages, using earlier and older material to build into an outbranching tree system of new tales (cf. *Manas* or King *Gesar*, from Central Asia and Thibet, or South Slavic epic songs). It is in the nature of the folk heroic epic material to be accretive, and to take on new forms in new places, but the variations on this growth process are wide, as you will note in the course.

The random. Now the randomness of the reading choices in this course. You will want to remember that a very narrow canonical swathe of epics has been considered here.

Reading

Rhys Carpenter, *Folk-tale, fiction, and saga in the Homeric epic* (Berkeley, 1974), 198 pp. An exemplary effort to pry apart the constituent elements of a folk-epic which is infiltrated with literary genius. An instructive test case for understanding various issues in this course.

TOTAL READING 198 PAGES

Suggested paper topics

Is the literary epic, as well as the folk tale heroic epic based on prior material? What is the difference between the raw material of the literary epic and that of the folk epic?

Is the folk heroic epic usually based on an initial oral creation, or is the story more complicated? You may want to consult the work of A.B.Lord—cf. bibliography—for a start on this issue. Oral and written cultures co-exist more frequently than we used to think.

Epic Poetry ; Themes

The range of our study. We will covered renowned epics, though we will barely scratch the surface of a genre whose offspring have long histories at every point on the globe. We will look at literary epics written two millennia ago (Virgil's *Aeneid*) and within the past century (Pound's *Cantos*), at folk heroic epics put together four and a half millennia ago (*Mahabharata* or *Gilgamesh*), and as recent—but the point is tricky—as the middle of the 19th century—Dr. Lonrott's compilation+a little creation, to put together the in some cases very primitive tales of the Kalevala region of Finland. We have looked, in our introductory entry, at the notion that the epic itself is a wide-bore concept with a future that spreads into film, art, and music.

What is in common? What will we come to find in common to the many epics we consider? Certain traits will stand out, though none will be universal. We will inevitably emphasize three: *the presence of a powerful male hero figure; great and heroic deeds performed; heightened language, suiting heroic presence and deeds.*

Male hero. The male hero role is prominent in many of the epics we will read: in Homer, Virgil, Camoens, Milton (in a way), in *Sundiata*, *El Cid*, *Roland*, etc.; the list could go on, but not indefinitely. Dante, Ariosto, Spenser, Pound, Eliot, arguably *Gilgamesh*, the *Popol Vuh*, etc.; *this* list of non-heroic epics too could go on. In other words the potent male hero is not an absolute requirement of the epic, though he often plays a role there. When he is not playing an active role there are many alternative narrative strategies for the epic: from the *désabusé* private voice of Pound and Eliot to the *fantaisiste* high imagination of Spenser and Ariosto, to the diffuse story telling verve of *The Tain* or the *Njalasaga*.

Great deeds. The performance of great and 'heroic' deeds is widespread, though we might dispute its presence in the works of Eliot, Spenser, or perhaps Dante. (The great deed theme seems consistently present in the remaining samples.) Heroic deeds, of course, is a wide notion, and needs pinning down. There will in the following texts be superheroes, like Manas and Gesar, Achilles and Roland, *Sundiata* or *el Cid*; there will also be heroes like Rama or Orlando who fight powerfully but embedded in a tangle of narrative circumstance, that deflects attention from their heroic natures.

Language. Heightened language. In the short compass of our entries, on individual epics, we will barely be able to address the issue of epic style. (It is to be repeated that YouTube is a magic casement into the tone and practice of many of the epics we are about to consider.) Poetry is the medium of most epic, though you will note (try YouTube again) that some grand accretive epics, like *Manas* or *Gesar* are created in a mixture of 'poetic' recital and prosaic interludes, in which the reciter 'talks to' the listeners. You will also notice, in the two contemporary western epics we select, those of Pound and Eliot, that the presentation is often a prosaic poetry, talky and elevated at the same time. Within the folk heroic traditions it is common for the epic to be presented by some kind of bard or professional singer, though within literary epic the creator typically presents either in a version of 'his own voice,' or in a 'simulated 'voice of the Muse.'

Reading

Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York, 1956), Prologue and Part I, pp. 1-244.

TOTAL READING 244 PAGES

Suggested paper topics

You may need to speculate here, but if so, go for it! What do you take to be at the root of epic poetry? What brought it into being as a type of human production? Does it, the epic, spring from what you suppose a basic need of the human animal? At what stage in human development do you think the epic entered culture?

Does 'heightened language' seem a necessary component of epic creation? What about music? What do you think music would add to the argument of the epic?

Epic Poetry Essay Topics

What is the meaning of a literary genre? Are there many kinds or simply a few, which can be subdivided into smaller units? Does a 'genus' in literature have a relation to a 'genus' in nature? What connection do you see there?

What connection do you see between the epic and the novel? Is the epic just an extensive novel, usually in poetry? Or is there a more fundamental difference between the two types of literature?

Does it seem plausible to include film and music in the definition of the epic? Does that inclusion overstretch the usefulness of the term 'epic'?

Unit II Ancient Period

Overview

As a general point we need to stress from the outset that we are devoting ourselves to a very small segment of world epic, even if we define epic in a strictly literary way. The two epics attributed to Homer, for instance, were only survivors from among a great number of ancient Greek epics, contemporary to Homer, which constituted the 'epic cycle.' Latin literature, similarly, was full of epic material, and of distinguished epic creators—Ennius, Lucan, Statius among the noteworthy—who generated a large body of epics based both on Greek mythical themes and, like Virgil, on ancient Italic themes. That said, however, the importance of Homer himself remains dominant in ancient Western epic, and remains the strongest Hellenic contribution to world culture. Virgil picks up the energy from Homer, challenges him directly, so to speak, and carries forward to the Middle Ages and Renaissance a rich harvest of Greco-Roman sensibility and world view.

Homer: *the earliest epic poet of Greece, influential for the future development of Greek literature, philosophy, law, and art; best known for the Iliad (concerning the Trojan War) and the Odyssey (concerning the return home from that war of one of its heroes.)*

Virgil: *A Roman epic writer of the first century B.C., who composed lyrics and pastoral poems as well as a magisterial epic, The Aeneid, in which he celebrated the founding of his nation and the new ruler of it, his friend Augustus Caesar.*

SUGGESTIONS FOR UNIT II WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT

Homer and Virgil both make use of their cultural pasts, in order to create a new poetic world in the present. How do they transform their pasts? Which one does so in a way that most speaks to our own time?

How is character treated in the epics of Homer and Virgil? Aeneas, the 'pious,' is often criticized as without personal warmth or even traits. How do you feel about that criticism?

Both Homer and Virgil devote much creative attention to the description of battle scenes. How do their methods of depiction differ? Which author is the more successful, in engaging you in the scenes of battle?

#4 Greek: Homer

The author of the epics. The author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is rightly viewed as the father of subsequent Greek literature, and even culture, for the epic poetry of Homer, written in long poetic lines we call dactylic hexameters, and composed orally, served the Greeks as a textbook of warfare, tribal history, legal precedent, and heroic mores. The sweep of this influence was vast. Homer himself, if indeed a distinct individual and not a stitcher together of oral tales accumulated since well into the second millennium B.C., seems to have stood behind the earliest recorded history of ancient Greece. With the case of Homer we confront, in its sharpest form, the dilemma of literary versus folk heroic epic. Was Homer a shaping genius somewhere in the early Greek tradition? Or was Homer a *stitcher together*, which is just what some have taken his name to mean?

Themes of the epics. In his two great epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Homer works first with the theme of the Fall of the city of Troy, a storied event probably traceable to the 13th century B.C., and reflecting turf battles for control of the Dardanelles. The remains of the citadel of Troy itself were first dug up by the German archeologist Heinrich Schliemann, in 1873, and from that time we have confronted the miracle of Homeric art in its process of transforming 'actual reality.'

Characters. Homer's path to transforming this reality is to incorporate unforgettable individual characters into a seething battleground, across which a wide range of Greek invaders entangle with the besieged Trojans, who are fighting with their backs to the walls of the city they are trying to defend. From the melee emerge figures like Agamemnon, the Greek leader, Hector, the leader of the Trojans, and especially Achilles, the most powerful, volatile, passionate, and emotionally profound of the Greeks.

The Odyssey. Homer's second epic, the *Odyssey*, is doubtless like the *Iliad* in gathering together traditional tales—in this case tales of the return home of the victorious Greek fighters. The central figure in this dramatic return, across waters both rough and inhabited by threatening creatures and hostile gods, is Odysseus, one (but not the chief) of the daring Greek fighters who have taken Troy after twenty years. It is essential that from the start Odysseus is impelled by a quest, to return to his home island Ithaca, and to his wife, Penelope. It is also essential that Odysseus spends ten years on his return, visiting odd species of humans, testing his ability to withstand siren calls, sporting with island folk here and there, and spending several years with a goddess, Calypso, before taking the last leg of his journey.

Homer the master poet. Homer is a master poet because, even though writing an 'heroic epic,' replete with the grandeur of armies, weaponry, and bloody self-sacrifice, he goes at the same time for the personal depth of the characters at the heart of his story. Odysseus is not only a fighter—though he is a tricky fighter, a plotter and a fox—but a forest fire of curiosity, sticking his nose into the odd anthropological events that cross his return path, filling his body and mind with the pleasures afforded by a goddess and a number of fine festival tables, while at the same time he is unwaveringly powerful in driving from his home the suitors of his wife, and taking possession of his lands.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read one of the two following epics

Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Lombardo (Indianapolis, 1997), pp. 1-197, Books I-X.

Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Fitzgerald (New York, 1963), pp. 1-184. Books I-X.

OR

The same books and pages in the *Iliad* or *Odyssey* in

Project Gutenberg

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2199> (Iliad)

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1727> (Odyssey)

Secondary Source Reading

Bates, *CCE*, pp. 13-30.

TOTAL READING APPROX. 225 PAGES

Further Reading

Bassett, Samuel, *The Poetry of Homer* (Lanham, 2003).

Paper topics

Many of the epics we will read will be seemingly authorless, created by folk literary traditions, and ultimately welded together by some clan or editor. There is an ancient uncertainty about the existence and authorship of Homer. As you make your way through his two epics, do you 'feel' that you are in the presence of a single author's creation? Is there the mark of one unified imagination? If not, where do you see the points at which the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* suggest two or more authors?

There is much presentation of conflict in the two epics of Homer: outright war, single combat, tricky manipulation, strategic mastery (as with Odysseus in his encounter with the suitors), battles of wits—as between Odysseus and Athena. Which kind(s) of conflict preponderate in each of the two epics? Does your answer provide any clue to the basic difference between the two epics?

EXCERPT 1

Iliad. The fateful quarrel of Agamemnon and Achilles, Book I

With these words he sat down, and Agamemnon rose in anger. His heart was black with rage, and his eyes flashed fire as he scowled on Calchas and said, "Seer of evil, you never yet prophesied smooth things concerning me, but have ever loved to foretell that which was evil. You have brought me neither comfort nor performance; and now you come seeing among Danaans, and saying that Apollo has plagued us because I would not take a ransom for this girl, the daughter of Chryses. I have set my heart on keeping her in my own house, for I love her better even than my own wife Clytemnestra, whose peer she is alike in form and feature, in understanding and accomplishments. Still I will give her up if I must, for I would have the people live, not die; but you must find me a prize instead, or I alone among the Argives shall be without one. This is not well; for you behold, all of you, that my prize is to go elsewhere."

And Achilles answered, "Most noble son of Atreus, covetous beyond all mankind, how shall the Achaeans find you another prize? We have no common store from which to take one. Those we took from the cities have been awarded; we cannot disallow the awards that have been made already. Give this girl, therefore, to the god, and if ever Jove grants us to sack the city of Troy we will requite you three and fourfold." Then Agamemnon said, "Achilles, valiant though you be, you shall not thus outwit me. You shall not overreach and you shall not persuade me. Are you to keep your own prize, while I sit tamely under my loss and give up the girl at your bidding? Let the Achaeans find me a prize in fair exchange to my liking, or I will come and take your own, or that of Ajax or of Ulysses; and he to whomsoever I may come shall rue my coming. But of this we will take thought hereafter; for the present, let us draw a ship into the sea, and find a crew for her expressly; let us put a hecatomb on board, and let us send Chryseis also; further, let some chief man among us be in command, either Ajax, or Idomeneus, or yourself, son of Peleus, mighty warrior that you are, that we may offer sacrifice and appease the anger of the god."

Achilles scowled at him and answered, "You are steeped in insolence and lust of gain. With what heart can any of the Achaeans do your bidding, either on foray or in open fighting? I came not warring here for any ill the Trojans had done me. I have no quarrel with them. They have not raided my cattle nor my horses, nor cut down my harvests on the rich plains of Phthia; for between me and them there is a great space, both mountain and sounding sea. We have followed you, Sir Insolence! for your pleasure, not ours—to gain satisfaction from the Trojans for your shameless self and for Menelaus. You forget this, and threaten to rob me of the prize for which I have toiled, and which the sons of the Achaeans have given me. Never when the Achaeans sack any rich city of the Trojans do I receive so good a prize as you do, though it is my hands that do the better part of the fighting. When the sharing comes, your share is far the largest, and I, forsooth, must go back to my ships, take what I can get and be thankful, when my labour of fighting is done. Now, therefore, I shall go back to Phthia; it will be much better for me to return home with my ships, for I will not stay here dishonoured to gather gold and substance for you."

5 Roman: Virgil

The Aeneid. Virgil's *Aeneid* was composed in the twenties of the first century B.C., in a Rome which was on the cusp of transitioning from an ancient republic into an Imperial state. We are far from the still pre-urban clan world of which Homer writes (and probably *in which* he writes), and yet we are in a world deeply concerned with its own past, which means both the early Republican traditions of Rome itself and the historical/mythical traditions of the Greek world, of which the Romans were always conscious, and to which they usually looked up. Virgil is decidedly a *literary* author, in the terms of our discussion in section #2, but he draws on myth/historical sources as fully as does a folk-epic creator. To all of which must be added, of course, that Virgil was also the author of splendid pastoral poems, *The Bucolics* and the *Georgics*, which showed him in tender unity with the simple forces of nature.

Virgil and Augustus. Writing at the end of the Republican period—which had already lasted nearly five centuries—Virgil desired to celebrate the advent to imperial rule of his patron and friend, Caesar Augustus; desired by the Romans for the sake of national glory and by Virgil for his own splendor as well as that of his nation. Virgil's challenge was to write an epic poem of the magnitude of Homer's two epics, which would incorporate both the ancient Roman and the Greek literary traditions, and at whose center would be a figure significant enough to serve as the image of the original establisher of the city of Rome. (Both Achilles and Odysseus were there, in Homer's two epics, to provide the model of the founding hero.) The figure of Aeneas, a minor figure in Homer's *Iliad*, who escaped from the destroyed city of Troy, was 'chosen' to represent the post-war wanderer—like Odysseus—who would make his way across the seas, through multiple dangers and seductions, and found the very city of which Augustus would one day become supreme ruler. While Aeneas lacked the bravado of Homer's Odysseus, he shared the Greek hero's sense of direction and ultimate fidelity to his plan.

Virgil and Homer. From this summary it is apparent that Virgil strove to carry Homer's themes directly into the *Aeneid*, but it is equally relevant, to Virgil's achievement, that he characterized the deeply Old Italic world that Aeneas found on arrival in Italy, and that the whole mythological apparatus of the *Aeneid* is Roman rather than Greek. It was Virgil's ambition to show the intertwining of Greek and Roman cultures in the single culture of the new Italy. For that he devotes much of the second half of his epic to the struggles of Aeneas to conquer and settle in the new land that he has conquered. We might say that this second half of the *Aeneid* is *to some degree* a departure from the argument of the Homeric epics, which devote their last books to getting Odysseus back into control of his island of Ithaca.

Virgil's greatness. The greatness of Virgil's achievement goes far beyond the interweaving of themes with the Homeric tradition. On the one hand there is the pure poetry of his work, which brings the epic dactyl to some of its highest perfection, but on the other hand there is the fact that Virgil, like Dante and like Milton later, was one of those individual giants of poetry, who single mindedly—though of course out of a rich tradition to which they are heir—welded together a huge private vision which at the same time spoke to world history and the human condition in its largest sense.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read from this text:

Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. Lombardo (Indianapolis, 2005), pp. 1-161, Books I-VI.

OR

The same books and pages at

<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/VirgilAeneidI.htm>

Secondary Source Reading

Bates, *CCE*, pp. 31-54.

TOTAL READING 184 PAGES

Further Reading

Braund, S.M., *Latin Literature* (London, 2001.)

Paper topics

How does Aeneas as hero compare with Homeric heroes like Odysseus or Achilles? Does the Roman hero conceive of his life and mission differently from the Greek hero? What kind of obstacles face Aeneas? Are they at all similar to those confronting the major heroes of Homeric epic? Which culture seems to embrace a view of the world closer to ours today?

To what do you attribute the powerful influence exercised by the *Aeneid* over later European culture and literature? It is often claimed that Homer was a greater genius than Virgil, but that Virgil meant more than Homer to later civilizations. Can you imagine why this would be? Could it be because, as was later said, 'Virgil stood on Homer's shoulders, and had the advantage of that perspective in his own work'?

EXCERPT (From A.S.Kline, translation, 2002: free source on internet).
Invocation to the epic; anger of Juno against the Trojans.

Bk I:1-11 Invocation to the Muse

*I sing of arms and the man, he who, exiled by fate,
 first came from the coast of Troy to Italy, and to
 Lavinian shores – hurled about endlessly by land and sea,
 by the will of the gods, by cruel Juno's remorseless anger,
 long suffering also in war, until he founded a city
 and brought his gods to Latium: from that the Latin people
 came, the lords of Alba Longa, the walls of noble Rome.
 Muse, tell me the cause: how was she offended in her divinity,
 how was she grieved, the Queen of Heaven, to drive a man,
 noted for virtue, to endure such dangers, to face so many
 trials? Can there be such anger in the minds of the gods?*

BkI:12-49 The Anger of Juno

*There was an ancient city, Carthage (held by colonists from Tyre),
 opposite Italy, and the far-off mouths of the Tiber,
 rich in wealth, and very savage in pursuit of war.
 They say Juno loved this one land above all others,
 even neglecting Samos: here were her weapons
 and her chariot, even then the goddess worked at,
 and cherished, the idea that it should have supremacy
 over the nations, if only the fates allowed.
 Yet she'd heard of offspring, derived from Trojan blood,
 that would one day overthrow the Tyrian stronghold:
 that from them a people would come, wide-ruling,
 and proud in war, to Libya's ruin: so the Fates ordained.
 Fearing this, and remembering the ancient war
 she had fought before, at Troy, for her dear Argos,
 (and the cause of her anger and bitter sorrows
 had not yet passed from her mind: the distant judgement
 of Paris stayed deep in her heart, the injury to her scorned beauty,
 her hatred of the race, and abducted Ganymede's honours)
 the daughter of Saturn, incited further by this,
 hurled the Trojans, the Greeks and pitiless Achilles had left,
 round the whole ocean, keeping them far from Latium:
 they wandered for many years, driven by fate over all the seas.
 Such an effort it was to found the Roman people.*

Unit III Mediaeval Period

Overview

In this unit you will encounter a wide variety of types of epic, from different times and different places. We speak of this group of poems as mediaeval because the writing down of the work took place during what we normally call the medieval period, between the end of the first millennium and the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries A.D. (To be sure, at least one of these epics, the Kalevala, was not written down until the nineteenth century, but in this case the material collected, and written down, was ancient, virtually 'primeval.') One of the following epics, Dante's Divine Comedy, sticks out from the present collection because it was a purely literary epic—like Virgil's Aeneid—rather than an incorporation of folk or heroic materials. Of the folk/heroic examples, though, there is a considerable variety; the South Slavic and Russian materials, for example, dealing directly with sung heroic folk tales, while *The Cid* comes closer to epic history, recounting the deeds performed by a national hero not long before the composition of the epic.

Kalevala: The national epic of Finland. Written down in the 19th century, compiled from folk tales which reach back two millennia into the Finnish past.

Dante, Divine Comedy: A poetic epic written by Dante in the thirteenth century, concerning the journey of the soul to Paradise, through the three stages of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise.

Virgil, Aeneid: A Roman epic writer of the first century B.C., who composed lyrics and pastoral poems as well as a magisterial epic, *The Aeneid*, in which he celebrated the founding of his nation and the new ruler of it, his friend Augustus Caesar.

South Slavic: Refers to the body of oral folk and heroic tales created in the Balkans for two millennia, and collected by various folklorists from the nineteenth century on.

The Cid: The national epic of Spain, composed in the twelfth century, concerning an actual heroic Spanish nobleman of the preceding century.

Further Reading

It marks the epics of this unit, that they are anonymous, except for Dante. Do they all seem equally anonymous? Do any seem 'historical,' as though they are dealing with actual 'historical events and characters'? Are they so dealing?

Do you see a sharp distinction between folk and heroic work in the epics of this unit? Would certain of these epics seem to you distinctly either folk or heroic? Please explain your response by examples.

Do you see any differences among the epics of this unit, in regard to ethnic or geographical or linguistic differences? For instance, is there any characteristic similarity to the Romance, or Slavic, or Germanic/Scandinavian creations of this unit?

What kind of treatment of the past do you find characteristic of the epics of this unit? Nostalgic? Memorial? Nationalistically proud? Discuss the relation of these attitudes to the past, in the epics of this unit.

#6 Irish The Tain

Irish Epic Cycle. The *Tain Bo Cuailnge* is the name of the most famous epic poem in the cycle of Irish heroic poetry. The title means 'the cattle raid of Cooley,' and refers to the challenge facing the hero of the cycle, who killed the hound of Cuchulainn, king of the Prince of Ulster, and was consequently forced to act as a replacement for the dog until its young matured, and were able to assume their own roles as guard hounds. (From the outset, such tales interlock into other tales and together form a vast intertwined story world, in the manner of an epic like *Manas* (#27), rather than in the far more linear fashion of a Homer or Dante. It is no surprise to find, in prying into the historical roots of Irish tales, that they represent not only literary traditions going back to pre-Christian times, but that a great deal of Irish legal and social history is embedded in these texts, which like so many epics were not 'pure poetry.')

The central tale in the heroic cycle involving the hound of Cuchulainn is 'The Cattle Raid of Cooley'—*the Tain bo Cuailinge*—and the grand battle it involves.

The Tain battle. The origin of that battle is a conflict which arises between the King and Queen of Connaught, who are joined in happy marriage. It turns out that the two of them have precisely the same possessions—in kind and quality—and over this fact the pair regularly, and good humoredly, quarrel, as though making a game of who has this and who has that. In the course of time, however, the royal pair begin to compare their possessions in a more competitive spirit, until it is found that in fact the King, Ailill, has one significant possession for which the Queen has no equivalent. That possession is the bull, Finnbenach, the White Horned. Naturally the Queen wants her equivalent, but it is found that there is only one other bull of such quality in Ireland, *Donn Cuailinge*, the Brown Bull of Cooley. That bull, however, is far away in the Province of Ulster, and an embassy is appointed to go and acquire the bull. There the trouble begins; in a sense it reminds us of the conflict that forced the Greeks to fight against the Trojans, in the present case over a bull and not a woman.

The bull of Ulster. The men of Ulster, to whom the bull belongs, are at this point, just when they need to hold on to the bull, struck by a collective illness which, it turns out, has been inflicted on them through their offence to the goddess Macha, an offence which only Cuchulainn has been innocent of. A tremendous struggle ensues, in which Cuchulainn finally vanquishes the men of Connaught. The final stages of battle involve the brutal struggle between the two bulls themselves, Finnenbach and the Brown Bull of Cooley. The conclusion of the epic tale is especially powerful.

When morning came, the men of Ireland saw the Donn Cualinge coming westward past Cruachan with the mangled remains of Finnenbach hanging from his horns.

The battle was over.

Pagan and pre-Christian materials. The material of this epic is thought to be pre-Christian, and, like much Irish epic material, to have been written down in the early Christian centuries, the sixth and seventh. Various suggestions have been made, for the intricate interconnections between this tale and other collateral heroic Irish tales which involve the same heroic characters and adversaries. Such a labyrinth of interrelations reinforces the sense that this material is part poetry—though in fact it was initially mainly in prose—and part an elaboration of regional histories and their personal characteristics.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read all of the following text:

The Tain: A new translation of the Tain Bo Cuailinge, trans. C. Carson (New York, 2007.) pp. 1-256.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/14391>

Secondary Source Reading

Oinas, *HES*, pp. 172-192.

TOTAL READING 276 PAGES

Further Reading

Cambridge History of Irish Literature, ed. Kelleher, O'Leary (Dublin, 1970)

Suggested paper topics

Racially speaking, the Celts (Irish, Scots) differ from the Indo Europeans, from whom many of our epics in this course derive. Do you note any characteristics of the *Tain* which might be markers of another culture than Indo European? With what other epic texts we have read does the *Tainn* seem to have affiliations? (Reader, this is a question to keep in mind for the future, when you will have completed the course.) Does the importance of cattle assume prominence in any other epic?

We have made a large division between literature and folk heroic epic in this course. Does the present epic seem to you to blend motifs from both folkore and heroic epic? The epic element, in the struggle between two regional powers, is evident, as it is in the heroism of Cuchulainn. But what about, say, the possessions-quarrel between husband and wife? Can you track that theme to any folk lore pattern? Please try using Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-literature* (See bibliography).

EXCERPT

The men of Connaught gather for their armed attack on the forces of the south, where Cuchulain lives; from the introduction to the epic.

A great hosting was brought together by the Connaughtmen, that is, by Ailill and Medb; and they sent to the three other provinces. And messengers were sent by Ailill to the seven sons of Magach: Ailill, Anluan, Mocrorb, Cet, En, Bascall, and Doche; a cantred with each of them. And to Cormac Condlongas Mac Conchobair with his three hundred, who was billeted in Connaught. Then they all come to Cruachan Ai.

Now Cormac had three troops which came to Cruachan. The first troop had many-coloured cloaks folded round them; hair like a mantle (?); the tunic falling(?) to the knee, and long(?) shields; and a broad grey spearhead on a slender shaft in the hand of each man.

The second troop wore dark grey cloaks, and tunics with red ornamentation down to their calves, and long hair hanging behind from their heads, and white shields (?), and five-pronged spears were in their hands.

'This is not Cormac yet,' said Medb.

Then comes the third troop; and they wore purple cloaks and hooded tunics with red ornamentation down to their feet, hair smooth to their shoulders, and round shields with engraved edges, and the pillars [Note: i.e. spears as large as pillars, etc.] of a palace in the hand of each man.

'This is Cormac now,' said Medb.

Then the four provinces of Ireland were assembled, till they were in Cruachan Ai. And their poets and their druids did not let them go thence till the end of a fortnight, for waiting for a good omen. Medb said then to her charioteer the day that they set out:

'Every one who parts here to-day from his love or his friend will curse me,' said she, 'for it is I who have gathered this hosting.'

'Wait then,' said the charioteer, 'till I turn the chariot with the sun, and till there come the power of a good omen that we may come back again.'
Then the charioteer turned the chariot, and they set forth. Then they saw a full-grown maiden before them. She had yellow hair, and a cloak of many colours, and a golden pin in it; and a hooded tunic with red embroidery. She wore two shoes with buckles of gold. Her face was narrow below and broad above. Very black were her two eyebrows; her black delicate eyelashes cast a shadow into the middle of her two cheeks. You would think it was with partaing [Note: Exact meaning unknown. It is always used in this connection.] her lips were adorned. You would think it was a shower of pearls that was in her mouth, that is, her teeth. She had three tresses: two tresses round her head above, and a tress behind, so that it struck her two thighs behind her. A shuttle [Note: Literally, a beam used for making fringe.] of white metal, with an inlaying of gold, was in her hand. Each of her two eyes had three pupils. The maiden was armed, and there were two black horses to her chariot. 'What is your name?' said Medb to the maiden.

#7 Old English: Beowulf

The epic Beowulf. Beowulf is a rather brief epic (3182 lines) in Old English, dealing with heroic events both imagined and real in pagan Scandinavia. It is created in long lines of highly alliterative verse, and was performed to harp or lyre accompaniment, presumably at kingly festivals. It was repeated endlessly by professional bards.

The manuscript. The true story of the manuscript of this epic is almost as dramatic as the epic itself. We believe that the text itself, in written form, was probably composed sometime between the 8th and the 11th centuries, although the original creation of the story is presumed to be much earlier. The tale itself seems to have hung on a single manuscript before it surfaced in the possession of an English gentleman in the seventeenth century—which means of course that the very existence of the *Beowulf* story was hanging by a perilously thin thread. But that was not the full story of the peril. The single manuscript, the Nowell codex, found its way into the private library of Sir Robert Cotton where it was nearly consumed by fire in 1731, much of it escaping in charred and barely legible form. The text, which ever since has been in virtual process of reconstruction—most recently by fibre optic backgrounding techniques—was not studied until the 18th century, and was first published in 1815. It is a rare masterpiece of English literature, which did not enter the canon until English literature had already been fixed.

The setting. The tale itself is mysterious and profound. The setting is in a Scandinavia steeped in pagan anxieties and misty scenes, studded with battles and war mindedness. But that darkness is lightened by the development of the hero, Beowulf.

Beowulf the hero. Beowulf is a hero of the Geats—a tribe in Sweden—who comes to the aid of Hrothgar, king of the Danes, whose mead-hall has come under attack from a fearsome monster named Grendel. After Beowulf finally slays the monster, in a bloodthirsty hand to hand battle, the monster's mother attacks the hall, where she is finally killed, but in a struggle in the mists which is terrifying, a sample which seems to pit the human against the forces of the underworld.

The Old Beowulf. Beowulf then returns to Geatland, where he later—after the passage of considerable time; one might say the midlife passage of life—becomes King of the Geats. Fifty years after the initial struggle to slay Grendel and his mother, Beowulf is called out to defend his kingdom against a ravishing dragon. Beowulf is killed in this combat, and buried in a tumulus. The story ends on this simple note.

The topic of the epic. What has this epic poem been about? The moving profile of Beowulf's life is of foremost importance. As a young king, called on a mission of support by Hrothgar, he sails out to Denmark, endures the tense anxiety of Grendel's attacks, then in hand to hand combat, which calls out all his force, Beowulf destroys this monster. The same savage battle soon ensues with Grendel's dam. Once these feats of heroism have cleansed Hrothgar's kingdom, Beowulf returns home to rule, and age. But matters are not allowed to lie still, and soon a dragon is besieging his land, as Grendel had done in Denmark, and Beowulf, now older and wiser, is called on to protect and destroy. It is too much for him. He too dies, like us all. (You may later think of *Gilgamesh* (#21) in this context.) But it is not simply a story of aging. *Beowulf* is a misty and mysterious epic, going far into the mind and spirit of a hero

who is ultimately forced to recognize his mortality, and who reflects on it sadly and profoundly.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Beowulf, trans. Heaney (New York, 2000), pp. 1-256.

OR

The same text in Project Gutenberg

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16328/16328-h/16328-h.htm>

Secondary Source Reading

Oinas, *HES*, pp. 99-119.

TOTAL READING 276 PAGES

Further Reading

Fulk, Robert, *History of Old English Literature* (London, 2002.)

Suggested paper topics

Does Beowulf develop significantly from the first to the second half of the epic? How is that development indicated? Is Beowulf, the person in the poem, a fully heroic individual, or in some ways an ordinary man, struggling to meet the challenges laid on him?

What is the nature of the pagan element in Beowulf's world? Are monsters to be taken at face value, literally? Is a figure like Grendel a force of imagination or of real evil? What is the attitude of Beowulf's fellow lords toward the unredeemed and dangerous natural world around them?

EXCERPT

Section 12, the crucial Battle between Beowulf and the monster Grendel.

*'Neath the cloudy cliffs came from the moor then
 Grendel going, God's anger bare he.
 The monster intended some one of earthmen
 In the hall-building grand to entrap and make way with:
 He goes towards the joyous building.
 He went under welkin where well he knew of
 The wine-joyous building, brilliant with plating,
 Gold-hall of earthmen. Not the earliest occasion
 This was not his first visit there.
 He the home and manor of Hrothgar had sought:
 Ne'er found he in life-days later nor earlier
 Hardier hero, hall-thanes¹ more sturdy!
 Then came to the building the warrior marching,
 His horrid fingers tear the door open.
 Bereft of his joyance. The door quickly opened
 On fire-hinges fastened, when his fingers had touched it;
 The fell one had flung then—his fury so bitter—
 Open the entrance. Early thereafter
 The foeman trod the shining hall-pavement,
 He strides furiously into the hall.
 Strode he angrily; from the eyes of him glimmered
 A lustre unlovely likest to fire.
 He beheld in the hall the heroes in numbers,
 A circle of kinsmen sleeping together,
 He exults over his supposed prey.
 A throng of thanemen: then his thoughts were exultant,
 He minded to sunder from each of the thanemen
 The life from his body, horrible demon,
 Ere morning came, since fate had allowed him
 The prospect of plenty. Providence willed not
 To permit him any more of men under heaven
 To eat in the night-time. Higelac's kinsman
 Great sorrow endured how the dire-mooded creature
 In unlooked-for assaults were likely to bear him.
 No thought had the monster of deferring the matter,
 But on earliest occasion he quickly laid hold of
 A soldier asleep, suddenly tore him,
 Bit his bone-prison, the blood drank in currents,
 Swallowed in mouthfuls: he soon had the dead man's
 Feet and hands, too, eaten entirely.
 Nearer he strode then, the stout-hearted warrior
 Beowulf and Grendel grapple.
 Snatched as he slumbered, seizing with hand-grip,
 Forward the foeman foined with his hand;
 Caught he quickly the cunning deviser,
 On his elbow he rested. This early discovered
 The master of malice, that in middle-earth's regions,
 'Neath the whole of the heavens, no hand-grapple greater
 The monster is amazed at Beowulf's strength.
 In any man else had he ever encountered...*

#8 French: La Chanson de Roland

The French Epic. *The Chanson de Roland* was one of many heroic songs, some of epic dimension, which circulated throughout France in the Middle Ages, and which were very popular from the 12th to the 14th centuries. (We need to note that France was during this period not yet quite France, but was a loosely bundled together collection of duchies and kingdoms, in which royal courts hosted entertainment both for the nobility and for the man and woman serving as serfs on the manor.) These songs were recited (to music) by a group of *jongleurs*, who were no doubt familiar with the basic outlines of the songs they performed, but at the same time improvised as their genius permitted. The writing down of this traditional heroic material is hard to date, but we are in any case certain that composers came along, in the course of time, who brought tales to a certain fullness, and that then clerics were primarily responsible for the written texts. In the case of the epic before us, the *Chanson de Roland*, the decisive composer, Tuoldus by name, was the one who wrote out the text of the epic, containing some 4,004 lines, in the form we now call the Oxford manuscript. The date of Tuoldus' brilliant composition was between 1140-1170.

The hero of the epic. The hero of the *Chanson de Roland* is a noble knight fighting in the army of Charlemagne. (Note: the fighting involved, and described in the poem, dates from three hundred years prior to the composition by Tuoldus.) The plot of the tale is complex as is the significance of it, and we have to marvel at the internal brilliance of the oral popular tradition. It goes like this. The army of Charlemagne is engaged in combat with the Saracens in Spain; the armed conflict between Christians and Muslims is raging. Charlemagne decides to propose a truce to the Saracens, and thereupon the French army, under the command of Roland, decides to send a deputation to Spain to negotiate a settlement. Roland chooses his uncle, Ganelon, to carry out this sensitive mission. Ganelon accepts the assignment, but with deep resentment, because he knows the fatal dangers of the mission, and suspects Roland of wanting to get rid of him. So deep is Ganelon's resentment that instead of negotiating a peace settlement he plots with the Saracens to ambush Roland and his men as they withdraw from Spain. The treacherous ambush takes place, Roland finds himself and his men cut off, and then Roland makes a gesture which characterizes him and brings the moral energy of the epic to the fore. In his pride and honor he refuses to call on Charlemagne's help, which he could have done by blowing Roland's famed hunting horn—which acquires almost a magical power here. Only when it is too late does Roland, expiring, blast out his lungs into the trumpet, but the gasped fury is so strong that the hero dies in the effort, and is in that moment taken up into heaven. In the aftermath, still within the epic, Charlemagne fights the battle of Roncesvalles, finally making the Saracens his servants.

The Christian Tenor. The contemporary reader must work to assess the Christian tenor of this epic. Roland is called *proulx*, brave, but one must read into this trait his entire knightly dignity. (We are reading about the world of Charlemagne, which was itself already touched by early mediaeval Christianity. At the same time we are reading a poem composed *at the time of the Crusades*, when the image of the faithful knight hero was predominant.) Roland's ascension into heaven is a credible event horizon, given a pervasive world view that includes the everpresent possibility either of salvation or damnation.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read all of this text:

The Song of Roland, trans. Crossland (Cambridge, Ontario, 1999), pp. 1-78.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/391>

Secondary Source Reading

Oinas, *HES*, pp. 193-211

TOTAL READING 101 PAGES

Further Reading

History of Old French Literature; Holmes, Urban (Nook Books, 2012).

Suggested paper topics

What kind of hero is Roland? Does he use good judgment in sending Ganelon to negotiate in Spain? Is his refusal to call for assistance, after the ambush of his forces, heroic or foolish? What do you make of his instantaneous ascension into heaven? Does that event indicate God's total approval of Roland's behavior?

The *Chanson de Roland* was apparently composed, as a full scale epic, some three centuries after the events that form its material. From what perspective does the epic seem to be written, that of the participants in the 'original events,' or that of the world of the composer, Tuoldus? Do many of the epics we have been reading—or will read; this is a prospective question-- reflect a significant time gap between the composer's perspective and that of the participants in the original events of the epic?

EXCERPT

The attack on Roland by the pagans; pagans defeated**CLVII**

*The pagans say: "That Emperour's at hand,
 We hear their sound, the trumpets of the Franks;
 If Charles come, great loss we then shall stand,
 And wars renewed, unless we slay Rollant;
 All Spain we'll lose, our own dear father-land."
 Four hundred men of them in helmets stand;
 The best of them that might be in their ranks
 Make on Rollanz a grim and fierce attack;
 Gainst these the count had well enough in hand. AOI.*

CLVIII

*The count Rollanz, when their approach he sees
 Is grown so bold and manifest and fierce
 So long as he's alive he will not yield.
 He sits his horse, which men call Veillantif,
 Pricking him well with golden spurs beneath,
 Through the great press he goes, their line to meet,
 And by his side is the Archbishop Turpin.
 "Now, friend, begone!" say pagans, each to each;
 "These Frankish men, their horns we plainly hear
 Charle is at hand, that King in Majesty."*

CLIX

*The count Rollanz has never loved cowards,
 Nor arrogant, nor men of evil heart,
 Nor chevalier that was not good vassal.
 That Archbishop, Turpins, he calls apart:
 "Sir, you're afoot, and I my charger have;
 For love of you, here will I take my stand,
 Together we'll endure things good and bad;
 I'll leave you not, for no incarnate man:
 We'll give again these pagans their attack;
 The better blows are those from Durendal."
 Says the Archbishop: "Shame on him that holds back!
 Charle is at hand, full vengeance he'll exact."*

CLX

*The pagans say: "Unlucky were we born!
 An evil day for us did this day dawn!
 For we have lost our peers and all our lords.
 Charles his great host once more upon us draws,
 Of Frankish men we plainly hear the horns,
 "Monjoie" they cry, and great is their uproar.
 The count Rollant is of such pride and force
 He'll never yield to man of woman born;
 Let's aim at him, then leave him on the spot!"
 And aim they did: with arrows long and short,
 Lances and spears and feathered javelots;
 Count Rollant's shield they've broken through and bored,
 The woven mail have from his hauberk torn,
 But not himself, they've never touched his corse;
 Veillantif is in thirty places gored, Beneath the count he's fallen dead, that horse.*

#9 German: *Nibelungenlied*

Archaic German epic. The *Nibelungenlied* is an archaic Germanic poem, some 9000 lines in length, composed in four line stanzas, and reaching deeply into the pre-Christian German past. (The historical figures behind the work are now thought to have lived in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D.) We imagine that there was a single individual poet of this work, probably a knight or ecclesiastic, but because the work itself is difficult to understand, we cannot confidently guess at the creator of it. We do, however, believe that the poem was *written down* around the year 1200. What was written then comes down to us in three 13th century manuscripts, which were lost not long after being created, and rediscovered again in the 18th century.

Layered story. The story of the *Nibelungenlied* is many layered—like those, say, of *Manas* (#27) or *The Tain* (#5). The outline of the plot concerns Siegfried the dragon slayer at the court of the Burgundians, how he was murdered, and the revenge for that murder taken by his wife, Kriemhild. Innumerable enriching subthemes fill out that bare outline.

Kriemhild and Siegfried. The first part of the poem concerns the wooing of Kriemhild by Siegfried, and their marriage after the overcoming of many obstacles. The second part of the story involves a second wooing of Kriemhild, this time by the widowed king of Hungary, and Kriemhild's eventual revenge for the killing of Siegfried. In other words, despite all the myriad complexities that intervene, the epic tale maintains a large scale unity.

Scholarly analysis. Scholarly analysis of the epic has increasingly turned on trying to separate out the historical layers which compose the poem. The distinctive problem, in this case, is that the multiple layers exist simultaneously, intricately involved with one another. There is a purely archaic stratum of explanation, that sees the epic as related to archaic nature myths, and the tale played out among them as a sub tale, an explanation in terms of sun, moon, planetary cycles. Then there is an explanatory level that concentrates on the actual historical events—so far as we can grasp them—that transpire in the 5th and 6th centuries among the early Germanic tribes, when new cultural formations were under way, in conflictual dialogue with the disintegrating Roman Empire. The third explanatory level, in analysis of the *Nibelungenlied*, concerns the Feudal period itself, in which Siegfried and Kriemhild and many associated characters carry out their lives in the present of the epic. (That present would have been around 1200 A.D.) On that level the courtly Siegfried, and the formal wooings of Kriemhild, with all the trappings of Feudal protocol and costume, would have come center stage. The analysis, scholars have maintained with many different degrees of emphasis, would have directed itself to a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which periods and beliefs, far separated from one another, would have been brought together.

***Nibelungenlied* as folk epic.** The *Nibelungenlied*, while a literary epic—though we know little about its author—would at the same time be an historically rich epic. Would this be a folk heroic epic, like *Manas* or the *Tain*? Perhaps not; for the *Nibelungenlied* is structurally crafted, in a single minded way the other two epics are not. We begin to see the fine tuned differences among epics, in the ways they construct history behind them, and incorporate original imagination with inherited folk material. We begin to value freshly the rich stockpile of literary treasures left behind them by ages when the mediaeval, even archaic, past was a distinct memory, but a shaping literary consciousness was coming into control of these memories.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read the following text:

The Niebelungenlied, trans. Hatto (London, 1969), pp. 17-165; sections 1-20.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1151>

Secondary Source Reading

Oinas, *HES*, pp. 120-143.

TOTAL READING 171 PAGES

Further Reading

A New History of German Literature (Cambridge, Mass., 2005),

Suggested paper topics

Do you *hear* the voice of a single author in the *Niebelungenlied*, or does the epic seem rather to be a compilation of distant tales, which a composer/narrator has fastened together? Can you separate out the three historical layers which mark the epic? How?

What kind of epic hero is Siegfried the Dragon Slayer? Has he personal characteristics? Is he an allegorical or mythical figure? Do you associate with him, or with Kriemhild? For that matter, which epic heroes, throughout our course, do you—prospective question again-- feel empathy with? Is empathy even the word, to describe our feelings toward the epic experience?

EXCERPT

The birth and development of the handsome Siegfried.

In the Netherlands there grew the child of a noble king (his father had for name Siegmund, (1) his mother Siegelind), (2) in a mighty castle, known far and wide, in the lowlands of the Rhine: Xanten, (3) men called it. Of this hero I sing, how fair he grew. Free he was of every blemish. Strong and famous he later became, this valiant man. Ho! What great worship he won in this world! Siegfried hight this good and doughty knight. Full many kingdoms did he put to the test through his warlike mood. Through his strength of body he rode into many lands. Ho! What bold warriors he after found in the Burgundian land! Mickle wonders might one tell of Siegfried in his prime, in youthful days; what honors he received and how fair of body he. The most stately women held him in their love; with the zeal which was his due men trained him. But of himself what virtues he attained! Truly his father's lands were honored, that he was found in all things of such right lordly mind. Now was he become of the age that he might ride to court. Gladly the people saw him, many a maid wished that his desire might ever bear him hither. Enow gazed on him with favor; of this the prince was well aware. Full seldom was the youth allowed to ride without a guard of knights. Siegmund and Siegelind bade deck him out in brave attire. The older knights who were acquaint with courtly custom, had him in their care. Well therefore might he win both folk and land.

Now he was of the strength that he bare weapons well. Whatever he needed thereto, of this he had enow. With purpose he began to woo fair ladies; these bold Siegfried courted well in proper wise. Then bade Siegmund have cried to all his men, that he would hold a feasting with his loving kindred. The tidings thereof men brought into the lands of other kings. To the strangers and the home-folk he gave steeds and armor. Wheresoever any was found who, because of his birth, should become a knight, these noble youths were summoned to the land for the feasting. Here with the youthful prince they gained the knightly sword. Wonders might one tell of this great feast; Siegmund and Siegelind wist well how to gain great worship with their gifts, of which their hands dealt out great store. Wherefore one beheld many strangers riding to their realm. Four hundred sword-thanes (4) were to put on knightly garb with Siegfried. Many a fair maid was aught but idle with the work, for he was beloved of them all. Many precious stones the ladies inlaid on the gold, which together with the edging they would work upon the dress of the proud young warriors, for this must needs be done.

The host bade make benches for the many valiant men, for the midsummer festival, (5) at which Siegfried should gain the name of knight. Then full many a noble knight and many a high-born squire did hie them to the minster. Right were the elders in that they served the young, as had been done to them afore. Pastimes they had and hope of much good cheer. To the honor of God a mass was sung; then there rose from the people full great a press, as the youths were made knights in courtly wise, with such great honors as might not ever lightly be again. Then they ran to where they found saddled many a steed. In Siegmund's court the hurtling (6) waxed so fierce that both palace (7) and hall were heard to ring; the high-mettled warriors clashed with mighty sound. From young and old one heard many a shock, so that the splintering of the shafts reechoed to the clouds. Truncheons (8) were seen flying out before the palace from the hand of many a knight. This was done with zeal. At length the host bade cease the tourney and the steeds were led away. Upon the turf one saw all to-shivered (9) many a mighty buckler and great store of precious stones from the bright spangles (10) of the shields. Through the hurtling this did hap.

#10 Spanish: El Cid

Spanish National Epic. *El Cid*, the Spanish national epic, was copied to written form in a Castilian monastery. This anonymous poem of 4000 lines was composed around 1140 A.D., roughly a half century after the death of the renowned historical figure we now call El Cid (*the Lord, Master*). El Cid (1043-1099) was in fact a Catalan nobleman born near Burgos, and brought up in the court of Ferdinand the Great. He became the royal standard bearer, a position of power at the court, and went on to lead the army of the Kingdom of Castile against the Muslims—throughout his life he was fighting either with or against Muslims, sometimes both at the same time. In 1081 he was exiled from Castile, although he was later pardoned, and spent much of his life in the internal battles of the Castilian plain.

Historical elements. From these details we can surmise that the *Cantar del mio Cid*, the *Song of the Cid*, unlike most of the epic material we have been discussing, centers around then recent historical events—neither around ancient historical events, like the *Iliad*, nor around mythically distant heroic events, like those of *The Nibelungenlied* or the *Tain*. There was indeed an earlier epic creation tradition in Spain, created by *jongleurs (juglares)* as had been the case in France, but we have little trace of it; one scholarly theory is that the Visigoths brought proto epic adventure tales with them as they swept over Europe in the 7th century, that these tales then spread throughout Teutonic migratory cultures, and from there found their ways into Spain and France.

Sections of the poem. The tale of *El Cid* itself is both epic poetry and a kind of historical document, as we have seen. The material of the poem is customarily divided into three sections: *The Song of Exile*, concerning the momentous exile of this hero, who has been falsely accused by his enemies, and whom the King has thus come to consider an enemy; as well as the fortunes of the Cid himself, who with a band of three hundred men leaves his family and goes off to fight the Muslims and establish new provinces for himself: the *Song of the Weddings of the Daughters of El Cid*, in which the Cid eventually gives his daughters in marriage to two unworthy suitors, conquers the city of Valencia, wins pardon from King Ferdinand, and carries out repeated battles both with and against the Moors—a true reflection of the complex relations joining those two cultural components of the Spain of the time: *The Song of the Dishonor of the Daughters of El Cid*, whose unworthy husbands mistreat them, while El Cid punishes those miscreants, humiliates them, remarries his daughters into the kingly line, and passes the remainder of his life in distinction and wealth.

Comparison with Chanson de Roland. *El Cid* makes a fascinating contrast, as epic, with its in some ways comparable Romance cousin, the *Chanson de Roland*. *El Cid*, as we have remarked, is close to the historical material it recounts, and in fact bends to meet the demands of that material, providing a fairly clear picture of the internal warfare and culture of the Castile of the time. *La Chanson de Roland*, on the other hand, while also dealing with intense military affairs on the Iberian peninsula, sets its intrigues, struggles, and heroisms in a far more 'romantic' and 'trans historical' atmosphere than does *El Cid*, which unlike *Roland* deals with recent historical events.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read all of the following text:

Poem of the Cid, trans. Blackburn (Norman, 1998), pp. 1-192.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/8491>

Secondary Source Reading

Oinas, *HES*, pp. 216-235.

TOTAL READING 211 PAGES

Further Reading

Cambridge History of Spanish Literature, ed. Gies (Cambridge, 2005).

Suggested paper topics

El Cid is often called the national epic of Spain. Can you see why? (You may need to do some research on the huge influence of *El Cid* on more recent, even on contemporary, Spanish culture.) Do other epics we have read—you may want to take this on later--seem to you to be national epics? Which ones?

Muslim culture and power plays a large role in both *La Chanson de Roland* and *El Cid*. How is Muslim culture viewed in those epics? Is there in these epics any sense of a large scale conflict of cultures? Of potential co-existence of cultures?

EXCERPT

El Cid banished from Spain; end of Book III.

XXIV. *A great feast did they make that day in the Monastery for the good Campeador, and the bells of St. Pedro's rung merrily. Meantime the tidings had gone through Castille how my Cid was banished from the land, and great was the sorrow of the people. Some left their houses to follow him, others forsook their honourable offices which they held. And that day a hundred and fifteen knights assembled at the bridge of Arlanzon, all in quest of my Cid; and there Martin Antolinez joined them, and they rode on together to St. Pedro's. And when he of Bivar knew what a goodly company were coming to join him, he rejoiced in his own strength, and rode out to meet them and greeted them full courteously; and they kissed his hand, and he said to them, I pray to God that I may one day requite ye well, because ye have forsaken your houses and your heritages for my sake, and I trust that I shall pay ye two fold. Six days of the term allotted were now gone, and three only remained: if after that time he should be found, within the King's dominions, neither for gold nor for silver could he then escape. That day they feasted together, and when it was evening the Cid distributed among them, all that he had, giving to each man according to what he was; and he told them that they must meet at mass after matins, and depart at that early hour. Before the cock crew they were ready, and the Abbot said the mass of the Holy Trinity, and when it was done they left the church and went to horse. And my Cid embraced Doña Ximena and his daughters, and blest them; and the parting between them was like separating the nail from the quick flesh: and he wept and continued to look round after them. Then Alvar Fañez came up to him and said, Where is your courage, my Cid? In a good hour were you born of woman. Think of our road now; these sorrows will yet be turned into joy. And the Cid spake again to the Abbot, commending his family to his care;—well did the Abbot know that he should one day receive good guerdon. And as he took leave of the Cid, Alvar Fañez said to him, Abbot, if you see any who come to follow us, tell them what route we take, and bid them make speed, for they may reach us either in the waste or in the peopled country. And then they loosed the reins and pricked forward.*

XXV. *That night my Cid lay at Spinar de Can, and people flocked to him from all parts, and early on the morrow he set out; Santestevan lay on his left hand, which is a good city, and Ahilon on the right, which belongs to the Moors, and he passed by Alcobíella, which is the boundary of Castille. And he went by the Calzada de Quinea, and crost the Douro upon rafts. That night, being the eighth, they rested at Figeruela, and more adventurers came to join him. And when my Cid was fast asleep, the Angel Gabriel appeared to him in a vision, and said, Go on boldly and fear nothing; for everything shall go well with thee as long as thou livest, and all the things which thou beginnest, thou shalt bring to good end, and thou shalt be rich and honourable. And the Cid awoke and blest himself; and he crost his forehead and rose from his bed, and knelt down and gave thanks to God for the mercy which he had vouchsafed him, being right joyful because of the vision. Early on the morrow they set forth; now this was the last day of the nine. And they went on towards the Sierra de Miedes. Before sunset the Cid halted and took account of his company; there were three hundred lances, all with streamers, besides foot-soldiers. And he said unto them, Now take and eat, for we must pass this great and wild Sierra, that we may quit the land of King Alfonso this night. To-morrow he who seeks us may find us. So they passed the Sierra that night.*

#11 Icelandic: Njal's Saga

Icelandic sagas. The *Njalasaga* is the major among numerous Icelandic sagas. These mediaeval sagas, though deeply part of Scandinavian tradition and language background, have, thanks to the island's isolated geography, always maintained a unique and separate literary history. The *Njala* is a symposium composition, though various 17th century composers, including the renowned Snorri Sturlisson, have been suggested. It is taken for granted that the background material was created orally, on the folk epic level, and that the major players in the epic, Njal (a lawyer) and Gunnar (a forceful military man), were real characters, as were many of the places and situations in which they are embedded in the epic. In fact the *Njalasaga* seems to be part of a sequence of family epics, thirty in number, which dealt with issues of social magnitude occurring over a limited period of time, perhaps 930-1050 A.D. The writers of these family story epics themselves wrote during the 13th century A.D., either, as said, fictionalizing tales passed down to them, or simply recording. The 13th century writers worked exclusively in prose.

Feuds in the saga. The *Njala saga* itself deals with a fifty year period in which blood feuds dominated the social cluster of Njal, his friends, and his kin; it is essentially a study in the ways people can destroy one another through jealousy, infidelity, and dismissive behavior. And it is a study of that dynamic in an environment so intense and introverted that major players—especially men, the heavy burden carriers of the culture—are driven to conditions of extreme sensitivity, forever on the look out for evidence of disrespect, especially for innuendos concerning one another's lack of manhood or sense of decency.

Plot and character. As in epic literature generally, the interactions among the principal characters are here typically implicit and suggested either by direct action, which speaks for itself, or by indirect implication. The typical plot of the Icelandic family saga plays into this kind of understated verbal interrelation. There is in fact a classic character development pattern which plays out in the family sagas, and is central, for example, to the interplay between Njal and Gunnar in the *Njala* saga. That pattern juxtaposes an upright family and society man against a ne'er do well or loser type, with a fairly quick tongue and an inclination to undermine others. A major confrontation will develop over little—say a dispute over a request for a load of hay.

Dialogue. One man approaches another, on his farm, with a request to buy a load of hay. The other replies, tersely: "Your money is no better to me than my own." (That is, I don't want your money, here characteristically expressed slantwise, in a fashion befitting the whole indirect but rough scene.) From that point on the first man, who is the ne'er do well, grows increasingly demanding, sentence by terse sentence ratcheting up his request, with the accompanying readiness to pay. It is no surprise when, at the end of the short episode carried out almost entirely in dialogue, the first man seizes the hay he needs and takes it away, leaving the second man, an upright and well respected citizen who simply wanted to be left alone with his hay, in a grumbling and vengeful mood. The end result, of a sequence of small scale abrasions of this sort, is to render the likeable man susceptible to wrath and to the loss of his original equilibrium. The looming sense of fate plays over these conflicts, in Icelandic family sagas, and leaves the reader troubled with a broad feeling of doom in human life.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read the following text:

Njal's Saga, trans Cook (London, 2001), pp. 1-150.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/17919>

Secondary Source Reading

Oinas, *HES*, pp. 144-171.

TOTAL READING 177 PAGES

Further Reading

History of Icelandic Literature, ed. Neijmann (Lincoln, 2007.)

Suggested paper topics

Judging from the *Njalasaga*, what seems to you the character of tragedy in Iceladic literature? Does Njal seem to you to be a tragic figure, in the modern sense of the word? What kind of fate does he encounter? Do we conclude the epic with the sense that there is no justice in the universe?

Is the *Njalasaga* an heroic epic? (It would seem not, on the face of it.) If not, is it still an epic? Can an epic be an account of the actions of 'simple people'? Have we—will we?—read other epics in this course which do not involve great or heroic deeds, carried out in settings of power and majesty?

EXCERPT

Chapter One, the wooing of Unna; the fraught dialogue is typical for the entire epic

It happened once that those brothers, Hauskuld and Hrut, rode to the Althing, and there was much people at it. Then Hauskuld said to Hrut, "One thing I wish, brother, and that is, that thou wouldst better thy lot and woo thyself a wife."

Hrut answered, "That has been long on my mind, though there always seemed to be two sides to the matter; but now I will do as thou wishest; whither shall we turn our eyes?"

Hauskuld answered, "Here now are many chiefs at the Thing, and there is plenty of choice, but I have already set my eyes on a spot where a match lies made to thy hand. The woman's name is Unna, and she is a daughter of Fiddle Mord one of the wisest of men. He is here at the Thing, and his daughter too, and thou mayest see her if it pleases thee."

Now the next day, when men were going to the High Court, they saw some well-dressed women standing outside the booths of the men from the Rangriversales, Then Hauskuld said to Hrut—

"Yonder now is Unna, of whom I spoke; what thinkest thou of her?"

"Well," answered Hrut; "but yet I do not know whether we should get on well together."

After that they went to the High Court, where Fiddle Mord was laying down the law as was his wont, and alter he had done he went home to his booth.

Then Hauskuld and Hrut rose, and went to Mord's booth. They went in and found Mord sitting in the innermost part of the booth, and they bade him "good day". He rose to meet them, and took Hauskuld by the hand and made him sit down by his side, and Hrut sat next to Hauskuld, So after they had talked much of this and that, at last Hauskuld said, "I have a bargain to speak to thee about; Hrut wishes to become thy son-in-law, and buy thy daughter, and I, for my part, will not be sparing in the mattes".

Mord answered, "I know that thou art a great chief, but thy brother is unknown to me".

"He is a better man than I," answered Hauskuld.

"Thou wilt need to lay down a large sum with him, for she is heir to all I leave behind me," said Mord.

"There is no need," said Hauskuld, "to wait long before thou hearest what I give my word he shall have. He shall have Kamness and Hrutstede, up as far as Thrandargil, and a trading-ship beside, now on her voyage."

Then said Hrut to Mord, "Bear in mind, now, husband, that my brother has praised me much more than I deserve for love's sake; but if after what thou hast heard, thou wilt make the match, I am willing to let thee lay down the terms thyself".

Mord answered, "I have thought over the terms; she shall have sixty hundreds down, and this sum shall be increased by a third more in thine house, but if ye two have heirs, ye shall go halves in the goods".

Then said Hrut, "I agree to these terms, and now let us take witness". After that they stood up and shook hands, and Mord betrothed his daughter Unna to Hrut, and the bridal feast was to be at Mord's house, half a month after Midsummer.

Now both sides ride home from the Thing, and Hauskuld and Hrut ride westward by Hallbjorn's beacon. Then Thiostolf, the son of Biorn Gullbera of Reykiardale, rode to meet them, and told them how a ship had come out from Norway to the White River, and how aboard of her was Auzur, Hrut's father's brother, and he wished Hrut to come to him as soon as ever he could. When Hrut heard this, he asked Hauskuld to go with him to the ship, so Hauskuld went with his brother, and when they reached

the ship, Hrut gave his kinsman Auzur a kind and hearty welcome. Auzur asked them into his booth to drink, so their horses were unsaddled, and they went in and drank, and while they were drinking, Hrut said to Auzur, "Now, kinsman, thou must ride west with me, and stay with me this winter."

"That cannot be, kinsman, for I have to tell thee the death of thy brother Eyvind, and he has left thee his heir at the Gula Thing, and now thy foes will seize thy heritage, unless thou comest to claim it."

"What's to be done now, brother?" said Hrut to Hauskuld, "for this seems a hard matter, coming just as I have fixed my bridal day."

#12 South Slavic Epic

The folk song tradition. Serbo Croatian, or South Slavic, epic, tends to assume the form of overgrown folk songs, which take on epic proportions as they are recited for centuries. This material is truly 'folk,' in that much of it was recited in rural or village settings, and acquired great popularity in venues like coffee houses, which proliferated—for conversation and music and social bonding—under the Ottoman Empire (1453-1922). The thriving area for the cultural tradition we are discussing was entirely inland in that Ottoman Empire, and spread widely over the regions of what we would now call Bosnia, Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, and Montenegro. So embedded was this material in day to day culture, that a good many people devoted their lives to the learning and recital of local epic cycles, and during the nineteenth century it was a passion, among Balkan intellectuals, to go out into the countryside to collect and document the still surviving songs; a passion they shared, for example, with Finnish intellectuals like Dr. Elias Lonrott, whose exertions—see the next entry—were instrumental in establishing a text for the *Kalevala*.

Song and the epic. From incidental historical references, dating back to the early Byzantine Empire—the historian Procopius-- we know that the South Slavs—the cultural group in question here—were given to group singing. The very strong musical epic traditions established, among these people, were first brought to wider attention with the 19th century work of Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic, a Serbian ethnographer who was both close to the land and its traditions, and a wonderful practical musicologist, who recorded the beauties of Serbian folk poetry, much of it epic in ambition though—given the to the this day largely 'ethnographic' attention devoted to the work—these works are still in the process of collection and interpretation. The publication of Vuk's *Serbian Folk Songs* was complemented, later in the century, by a similar compendium of Muslim folk song literature taken from northern Jugoslavia.

History and the epic. The creators of this large body of folk materials were on the whole anonymous, and of diverse kinds, but their work has a general character: traditional oral formulaic practice, and the regular use of the heroic decasyllable, accompanied by a stringed instrument. A wide variety of literary types appears in this geographically extensive set of small principalities: religious mythological materials; stories from mediaeval Serbia; stories about the Battle of Kossovo (1389), a sad day on which the Serbs lost their independence to the Turks, a day around which a broad network of tales was elaborated; tales of Marko Kraljevic, who was a true folk hero, comical and saintly and superman-like at the same time, in whose power to save the Serbs to this day see embedded their own national grandeur; 'outlaw songs'; Krajina songs, many of which are concerned with Muslim heroism, and its conflicts with the Latin Church. The body of this literature generated folk tales of great richness and national fascination, grew from the hills and backcountry of inland South Slav Europe, and may to this day be viewed as a kind of laboratory for the production of folk epic. One point of comparison, in the material we have been studying, might be the *Manas* epic from Kyrgyzstan, which had a folk song base from which it grew to enormous dimensions.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Serbo-Croatian Heroic Poems, trans. David Bynum (New York, 1993), pp. 138-326.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/38571/38571-h/38571-h.htm>

Secondary Source Reading

Oinas, *HES*, pp. 257-285.

TOTAL READING 216 PAGES

Further Reading

A.B. Lord, *Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960).

Suggested paper topics

The case of Serbo-Croatian folk poetry, and its development into epic traditions, inevitably makes us wonder whether the popular epic producing tradition still exists. If one thinks of the 'industrialized west,' where 'pop culture' abounds, and is variously viewed as vulgar, gross, and vigorous, the recent birth of the TV series *Breaking Bad* comes to mind, as at least the stub of a new kind of epic for our time. What do you think?

A theoretical question arises: what is the epic? Is the notion of epic a coherent single concept? Is there a sharp dividing line between the literary epic, which we discussed at the beginning of the course, in connection with Virgil, and the congeries of epics in process which one sees in the South Slavic creative world?

EXCERPT

From the tales of Marko, Serbian Folk Hero; a dramatic scene to determine the heir to the Tsar.

Four tabors met together on the beautiful field of Kossovo near the white church Samodrezja: One tabor was headed by King Voukashin; the second by Despot Ouglesha; the third by Voivode Goyko, and the fourth by Tsarevitch Ourosh.

The first three of these were disputing over the inheritance of the Empire and were ready to stab one another, so]eager were they all to reign. They did not know who had been appointed the Tsar's successor and who was the rightful heir to the throne. King Voukashin announced: "The Empire was left to me!" Voivode Goyko cried out: "Not so! The Empire is mine!" and Despot Ouglesha interposed angrily, "You are both wrong, for know that the Empire is mine."

The youthful Tsarevitch remained silent, for he was not bold enough to proffer a single word in the presence of his haughty elders.

King Voukashin prepared a message and sent it by a faithful servant to the Archdeacon Nedelyko, at Prizrend, summoning him to come at once to the field of Kossovo and state without delay to whom the Empire had been left—for he must surely know, having received the last confession of the illustrious Tsar Doushan the Mighty and been in attendance upon him up to his death. Besides, it was known that the Archdeacon had the archives under his care, and could at least produce the Emperor's will. Despot Ouglesha also sent a missive to the Archdeacon by his swiftest messenger; a third was written by Voivode Goyko, who dispatched it by his special courier, and a fourth was inscribed and sent off by Ourosh.

The messages were all dispatched secretly, but the couriers reached Prizrend and met at the gates of Nedelyko's dwelling. But Nedelyko had gone, as Court Chaplain, to officiate at the morning service in the Cathedral. The men were enraged at the delay, and without even alighting from their horses, they rushed infuriated, into the sacred edifice, raised their whips and brutally struck the good Archdeacon, commanding him: "Behold, O Archdeacon Nedelyko! Hasten now,]this very hour, to the plain of Kossovo. Thou must state to whom the Empire belongs, for thou hast received the confession from the illustrious Tsar and administered the last sacrament to him, and it is thou who hast the state records in thy care. Hasten, hasten, lest we, in our fierce impatience, do sever thy head from thy body!"

Archdeacon Nedelyko wept with grief and mortification and thus replied: "Begone, ye servants of the most mighty princes! Begone from the House of God! Suffer first that we end God's service, then will I make known into whose hands the Empire is to fall!"

The couriers then went out and awaited the coming of the Archdeacon. Presently the Archdeacon came to them and spake in this wise: "O my children, messengers from the King himself, and from the Princes! I received the last confession of our glorious Tsar, and gave him the sacrament; but about the Empire and affairs of state he spoke never a word, for we were concerned only with the sins that he had committed. Ye must go to the city of Prilip, for there is the castle of the Royal Prince Marko. Marko, as ye may remember, learned from me how to read and write; later he was secretary to the Emperor and he was then entrusted with the care of the records, and he will surely know to whom the empire was entrusted. Call Marko to the field of Kossovo to say who is now the Tsar. Marko will tell the truth, for he fears none but God!"

#13 Finnish: Kalevala

Finnish national epic. The *Kalevala* is the national epic of Finland. The notion of a national epic is interesting, if slippery. Perhaps the *Aeneid* (#4) and *Manas* (#27) might also be considered 'national,' in the sense that, though very differently, they either consciously celebrate their nation's founding, or have been made cornerstones of national self-awareness. The conscious effort of Dr. Elias Lonrott, to collect fast vanishing Finnish folk epic materials, led to the construction of a folk epic which has been and continues to be a cornerstone of Finnish national self-consciousness and pride.

Dr. Lonrott. Dr. Elias Lonrott (1802-1884), the son of a tailor from the country town of Sammatti, was the Finnish Medical Doctor primarily responsible for the collection of Finnish folk epic. In this he was the main, but far from the only, Finnish collector of such material, the search for which became part of a Romantic Movement passion which swept Europe throughout the 19th century; a movement to reestablish touch with original heritages. Dr. Lonrott, in any case, had the good fortune to be stationed as district health officer in the Eastern part of the Grand Duchy of Finland. He had worked hard to qualify himself for that position, after an impoverished childhood. With his M.A. from the University of Turku, in 1827, and with a completion of his medical degree at the University of Helsinki, in 1832, he set out on the first of the eleven field trips he would make, in the following fifteen years, with the increasingly clear intention to collect the remains of Finnish folk epic. It was none too soon, for that remaining epic material, which he was later to christen The *Kalevala*--the first publication, The *Old Kalevala*, appeared in 1834, while the complete compilation, the *Kalevala*, appeared in 1849--was already an endangered species.

Principal characters. The literary material of the *Kalevala*--the name indicates the fictionalized but identifiable area around Kaleva, in North east Finland--touched ancient themes, the oldest of which, it is speculated, may be as much as 3000 years old--themes touching the origin and creation of the earth. The development of this epic material is episodic, though there are binding thematic elements to the whole. First in importance, there are three principal characters--Ilmarinen, Vainamoinen, and Lemminkainen--events about whom generate the development of the prolific stories of hunting, lust, combat, bride search, and magic transformation which are the material of the epic. That is to say, the *Kalevala* is episodic, in distinction, for instance, from a relatively linear narrative epic, like Virgil's *Aeneid*, or from many other folk or traditional epics, like *Manas* or *Gesar*, which though digressive, stick to a single main genealogical development. The kind of episodic development that characterizes the *Kalevala* can be indicated by a review of the developments with which the material begins.

The epic and nature. The epic opens with a discussion of the creation of the world--plants, earth itself, animals, man; then segues into the issue of heroes, and their search for spells or magic which will confer powers on them, such as the mastery of boat-building, which will make them leaders of mankind. (Due attention is given to the fact that heroes often fail, and are subject to humiliation.) At this introductory point the theme of the epic moves into the creation story by which the earth is created from shards of duck eggs, the first man (Vainamoinen) is born, and that man brings life and trees to what is still the barren earth. From that point on the epic moves into the life adventures of the three Ur heroes mentioned above, and creates an entertaining, conflict full cosmic panorama of the events of the original heroes of the earth.

Music. The epic that unfolds here is sung to music, and is built onto a pentachord scheme, arranged in two or four lines of five beats each.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

The Kalevala or Poems of the Kaleva District, trans. and foreword by Francis Magoun (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), pp. 3-173.

Or

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5186>

Secondary Source Reading

Oinas, *HES*, pp. 286-309.

TOTAL READING 193 PAGES

Further Reading

Schoolfield, *A History of Finland's Literature* (Lincoln, 1998).

Suggested paper topics

The nineteenth century, in Europe, saw a widespread revival of interest in the gathering of folk epic material, which was rapidly dying out under the pressures of Industrialization and Urbanization. What seems to you distinctive about the quest for such deep cultural roots, at such a time? Have we anything like it in our time? Does a discussion of Alex Haley's *Roots* belong here, and of the genealogical mania which swept the United States in the last two decades of the previous century?

We know what folkore is, and we know what the fully constructed epic is—especially the literary masterpiece like Virgil's *Aeneid*. Is the *Kalevala* a literary epic or a pure folk epic? In researching to consider this question, you might look into the fact that Dr. Lonrott was actually the composer of certain sections of the *Kalevala*, and that he was influential in shaping the structural patterns of the epic as he wrote it down.

EXCERPT**The birth of Wainamoinen: the primeval birthing of the first human, from the daughter of the Ether.**

*In primeval times, a maiden,
Beauteous Daughter of the Ether,
Passed for ages her existence
In the great expanse of heaven,
O'er the prairies yet enfolded.
Wearisome the maiden growing,
Her existence sad and hopeless,
Thus alone to live for ages
In the infinite expanses
Of the air above the sea-foam,
In the far outstretching spaces,
In a solitude of ether,
She descended to the ocean,
Waves her coach, and waves her pillow.
Thereupon the rising storm-wind
Flying from the East in fierceness,
Whips the ocean into surges,
Strikes the stars with sprays of ocean
Till the waves are white with fervor.
To and fro they toss the maiden,
Storm-encircled, hapless maiden;
With her sport the rolling billows,
With her play the storm-wind forces,
On the blue back of the waters;
On the white-wreathed waves of ocean,
Play the forces of the salt-sea,
With the lone and helpless maiden;
Till at last in full conception,
Union now of force and beauty,
Sink the storm-winds into slumber;
Overburdened now the maiden
Cannot rise above the surface;
Seven hundred years she wandered,
Ages nine of man's existence,
Swam the ocean hither, thither,
Could not rise above the waters,
Conscious only of her travail;
Seven hundred years she labored
Ere her first-born was delivered.
Thus she swam as water-mother,
Toward the east, and also southward,
Toward the west, and also northward...*

#14 Russian: Byliny

The byliny tradition. Like the Serbo Croatian folk epic traditions, the Russian tradition of *byliny* is both ancient and recent, fragmentary and interconnected into chains of epic material. The *byliny*, 'the tale of things that have happened,' or 'are past,' arose as a literary form in the Kievan period, 10th and 11th centuries, during the period when the Royal Dynasty of Kiev was at its height. This period of splendor, and of creativity in the *byliny* tradition, lasted until the arrival of the Tatars, and the virtual destruction of East Slavic civilization. The collection of these ancient folk materials began already in the 17th century, and—as was the case in Finland and Serbo-Croatia—came to intense ethnographic attention in the 19th century, that period in which national consciousnesses were forming throughout Europe, and peoples were turning back to recover their own historical roots. As with Dr. Lonrott in Finland, and Vuk (and others) in Serbo-Croatia, determined creators—Pavel Rybnikov and A.F. Gil'ferding are leaders in this—made the surprising discovery that in the relatively little visited northern reaches of Russia, around Lake Onega—there were treasure troves of literary material to transcribe and record, and to begin to comprehend.

Bylyna cycles. The bulk of this material, some of it rising to epic level in length and ambition, falls into a wide variety of categories—*Bylyna cycles*—as did the Serbo Croatian folk material we discussed. Some of the earliest of these creations are mythological, and deal with earth forces and shamanistic transformations, themes also familiar from Serbo Croatia and Finland. A larger body of works deals with the Kievan cultural period, and centers around the Grand Prince of Kiev, Vladimir. Much of this material concerns itself with the conflicts between the Kievans and their nemesis, the Tatars; and especially with the deeds of the Prince's entourage, his *bogatyri*. One of these faithful retainers becomes a major figure in Russian folklore, and gathers around himself, in a long folksong career which leads into the twentieth century, an accumulation of epic material which builds to epic proportions. This figure, Il'ja Muromec, appears first as a courageous and self-sacrificing servant of Kiev. Il'ja appears as a peasant, initially, paralyzed until Jesus Christ cures him and endows him with magical powers. These powers enable Il'ja to become a monster-slayer, lead him into events in which he has to fight with and slay his own son, and by the 17th century turn him into a folk hero invoked by the Russian peasantry in the course of revolutionary uprisings. There were even efforts, in the Stalinist period, to extend the growing tale of Il'ja, a unique and onward developing epic theme, by having the hero properly married in song, for the first time. That updated detail, in fact, may serve to hint at the kind of growing vigor of an epic folk theme, as it lives on into our time.

Folk and Literary Epic. The *byliny* traditions are far from the kinds of literary epic we have alluded to elsewhere in this course. In *byliny* and Serbo Croatian epic material we have anonymous work in which the author is very nearly a whole people, who contribute a little here a little there, while a whole loose fabric of epic intent emerges. It is hard to overstress the difference of this kind of epic creation from what we find in the makings of Virgil, Dante, or Milton. Between the two kinds of epic, literary and folk heroic, there is one chief common trait: largeness of scope, the ambition to formulate a far reaching point of view, and a lodging in traditional society-related poetry.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read **one** of the following two texts:

Byliny, Heroic Tales of Old Russia, Pronin, Alexander (Frankfurt, 1971), pp. 1-128.

Byliny Book: Hero Tales of Russia, Harrison, M.C. (Cambridge, 1915), pp. 1-100.

Secondary Source Reading

Oinas, *HES*, pp. 236-256.

TOTAL READING APPROXIMATELY 120 PAGES

Further Reading

Cambridge History of Russian Literature, ed. Moser (Cambridge, 1996.)

Suggested paper topics

In Stalin's time the Russian Directorate of Culture attempted to revive and continue the *byliny* tradition, fitting it into the new traditions of Soviet realistic aesthetic. These efforts were unsuccessful. Can you imagine why they were unsuccessful? What is the relation between the *byliny* culture, for example, and the society from which it grows?

Do you see any common traits between the two Slavic cultural traditions—Russian and South Slavic—in the way they deal with or generate epic cycles?

15 Italian: Dante

Dante the poet. Dante (1265-1321) was born in Florence, and though a good part of his life—from 1302 on—was spent in exile, in other parts of Italy, Florence and its political struggles and urban dynamic remained at the heart of his work and thinking. Florence was important to him *both* as a vigorous late mediaeval and as an early modern city, where trade, university life, and many new developments of Italian life—like the rapid development of the vernacular (Italian in its early form) out of Latin—made for a heady intellectual milieu. It is also important that the formative thirty-five years of Dante's life were spent in Florence, years during which he met the love of his life--Beatrice Portinari—married (someone else), had children, and, from 1295 on became active and influential in local politics.

The Divine Comedy. You will note that Dante composed his *Divine Comedy* between 1308-1321, which makes his greatest work the most nearly 'modern' of the epics we have so far reviewed. Dante's work is that of a 'literary author', one individual genius. (We cannot confidently find such a author of the mediaeval or ancient texts studied to date, with the exception of Virgil, and perhaps, depending on scholarship and interpretation, Turolodus of the *Chanson de Roland*—but in that case we deal with a 'compiler' rather than with a 'creator.')

It is not, of course, that Dante created in a vacuum. As the *Divine Comedy* shows, Dante was aware of many ancient and mediaeval texts which formed the background of his work—above all Virgil's *Aeneid*, the primary inspiration, Saint Paul, Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas, and the splendid secular lyric poetry of Provençal, which Dante knew intimately. All of this material was transformed in his creative work, especially in the *Divine Comedy*, where the already firm mediaeval literary tradition of 'journeys to Paradise' was raised to a new height.

Structure of the Comedy. What kind of epic does Dante put before us in the *Commedia*? With a bold stroke he makes of himself a modest pilgrim starting out on the danger fraught journal toward his heavenly home. (The reader will realize, from the start, that Dante is a serious believer, deeply concerned with the Church politics of his day, a hard spiritual judge both of himself and of many of his contemporaries.) During the first third of his journey, climbing level by level up from the depths of the Inferno, stopping to visit with those condemned for each of the Seven Sins, Dante is accompanied by Virgil, whose *Aeneid* we know as itself a kind of pilgrimage of discovery. (Virgil hung like a magic spell over the Middle Ages.) The second level of climbing continues under Virgil's tutelage, but as an unbaptized pagan Virgil can only go so close to the Paradisal mysteries and must, four cantos before the end of Purgatory, be replaced by Beatrice, the beloved woman Dante met only once or twice, in Florence, but who remained, for him, the Virgin Mary of perfection, and alone able to guide him to the effulgent summit of Paradise.

The two kinds of epic. The reader will find, in this epic, the same individuality of imagination and expression found in Virgil's *Aeneid*. We could not find two clearer examples of the literary epic, or clearer counterpoint to the collective, accretional structure of the heroic and folk epic: think, at the extreme of the latter example, of *Manas, Gesar, or The Niebelungenlied*.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read all of the following text;

Dante, *Inferno*, transl. Singleton (Princeton, 1970), pp. 1-369 **BUT** the text is Italian-English, facing pages, so that the number of pages you will read is 184 pages.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/8800>

Secondary Source Reading

TOTAL READING 184 PAGES

Further Reading

Francis Ferguson, *Dante's Drama of the Mind* (Princeton, 1953).

Suggested paper topics

What traits seem to you to distinguish Dante's *Divine Comedy* from the folk or heroic epic? Do the latter kinds of epic differ greatly from one another in the degree to which they are collective, and the voice of the people at large?

What use does Dante make of Virgil's *Aeneid*? Is it at all like the use Virgil makes of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*? Do you think Dante writes with Homer in mind?

EXCERPT

Canto I of the Inferno, the beginning. Dante takes his first steps into the Inferno.

*IN the midway of this our mortal life,
 I found me in a gloomy wood, astray
 Gone from the path direct: and e'en to tell,
 It were no easy task, how savage wild
 That forest, how robust and rough its growth, 5
 Which to remember only, my dismay
 Renews, in bitterness not far from death.
 Yet, to discourse of what there good befel,
 All else will I relate discover'd there.
 How first I enter'd it I scarce can say, 10
 Such sleepy dulness in that instant weigh'd
 My senses down, when the true path I left;
 But when a mountain's foot I reach'd, where closed
 The valley that had pierced my heart with dread,
 I look'd aloft, and saw his shoulders broad 15
 Already vested with that planet's beam,
 Who leads all wanderers safe through every way.
 Then was a little respite to the fear,
 That in my heart's recesses deep had lain
 All of that night, so pitifully past: 20
 And as a man, with difficult short breath,
 Forespent with toiling, 'scaped from sea to shore,
 Turns to the perilous wide waste, and stands
 At gaze; e'en so my spirit, that yet fail'd,
 Struggling with terror, turn'd to view the straits 25
 That none hath passed and lived. My weary frame
 After short pause recomforted, again
 I journey'd on over that lonely steep,
 The hinder foot still firmer. Scarce the ascent
 Began, when, lo! a panther, nimble, light, 30
 And cover'd with a speckled skin, appear'd;
 Nor, when it saw me, vanish'd; rather strove
 To check my onward going; that oft-times,
 With purpose to retrace my steps, I turn'd.
 The hour was morning's prime, and on his way 35
 Aloft the sun ascended with those stars,
 That with him rose when Love Divine first moved
 Those its fair works: so that with joyous hope
 All things conspired to fill me, the gay skin
 Of that swift animal, the matin dawn, 40
 And the sweet season. Soon that joy was chased.
 And by new dread succeeded, when in view
 A lion came, 'gainst me as it appear'd,
 With his head held aloft and hunger-mad,
 That e'en the air was fear-struck...*

Unit IV Early Modern Period

Overview

*In this unit we move to a quartet of highly sophisticated verse epics, created in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. The cultures surrounding these works are already part of the modern era—developing capitalist, competitive and aggressive, and grounded in a growing national self-awareness. None of these works has its roots in folk or heroic material, and each—to put the point positively—springs from a highly individualistic literary sensibility. The character of this work can be seen in the difference of treatment of the 'Roland figure,' in *La Chanson de Roland* and in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*—'the mad Roland'—which is a tale of fantasy, romance, and highly artificialized chivalry, composed for a literary audience familiar with literary tradition, through the cultured urban milieu of Ferrara, one of the most brilliant of the Italian city-states. The age of the 'naïve epic' is hereby declared dead. The same could be said for the creative stance of the other three samples, though they range widely in theme, from Christian theology to the celebration of national pride.*

La Chanson de Roland: a French epic compiled in the middle of the twelfth century, concerning the feats and death of a legendary hero fighting for King Charlemagne.

Ariosto's Orlando Furioso: a fifteenth century literary epic taking off on the exploits of Roland, in *La Chanson de Roland*. A chivalrous, fantasy filled, romantic epic.

Ferrara: A highly sophisticated north Italian city, in which the arts flourished throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

SUGGESTIONS FOR UNIT IV WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT

Can you tell, from the texts you are reading in this unit, that you have moved into a more 'modern era'? Is there a cultural distance between Dante's and Ariosto's work, which would support this sense of 'cultural development'?

Do the epics of this unit draw on the past, in the way that the epics of Unit III did, or is 'imagination' more nearly the source of these 'more modern' epics? Argue this issue, with details.

Both Milton and Dante deal in their epic writing with the fundamental themes of Christian theology—grace, the fall, paradise. How does Milton's treatment of these issues differ from that of Dante? Is Milton clearly the product of a more 'modern' culture than Dante?

16 Italian: Ariosto

Ariosto. With Lodovico Ariosto (1475-1533) we enter the early modern period in Western history. Ariosto was a man of his times. He was born the eldest of ten children, and thrown, by the early death of his father, into premature responsibilities, from which he was freed—and this will reflect the ‘new world’ of sophisticated and autocratic courts—by attracting the attention of the Cardinal, Duke d’Este, a ruling power figure. Although Ariosto chafed at the relationship with the Duke, he was already on his way to being incorporated into the patronage system of early modern urban life, a dependent but sustaining pathway to creative freedom in his time.

Florence and Ferrara. Already with Dante, who died in 1321, we had moved into a throbbing new post-mediaeval Florence, in which the cultural climate was slipping rapidly away from that which underlay the worlds of folk and heroic epic we have visited earlier—the worlds of archaic Germany, of rural and remote Icelandic conflict or of ancient Irish tales of kingships and their semi mythical battles. In Dante’s Florence we were surrounded by a distinguished University, a mercantile culture with stock market, and brilliant visual art. With Ariosto, however, we have taken many steps further into what we now call the early modern, the world of competitive capitalism, of an entrepreneurial (if not yet ‘middle’) class, of international trade, and of sophisticated urban venues which become matrixes of high culture and what we would call ‘society.’ The epics we see generated from this new culture, in 15th and 16th century Italy—epics by such as Matteo Boiardo and Torquato Tasso, as well as Ariosto—are by highly literate individuals, and spring from a huge recreation of the epic spirit. We may speak of Ariosto’s Ferrara, at his time, as one of the great centers of epic creation in world history.

Orlando Furioso. The Ariosto epic before us, *Orlando Furioso* (first publication 1516), is one of several contemporary Italian works playing off of *La Chanson de Roland*. It will be remembered that *La Chanson* was a grave and tense tale of heroism, deception, pride, and eventual heavenly ascension. *Orlando Furioso*—*Roland in Madness*—is profoundly different from the stern epic tone of the mediaeval epic. The tone of Ariosto’s work is heavy with romance, in the sense of the time; passionate and exaggerated love of man for woman (of Orlando for princess Angelica; of the Christian lady Bradamante for the Muslim Ruggiero); fantastic recourses taken to cure Orlando of his madness—for which the final cure is to be found by a trip to the moon, where lost things such as Orlando’s wits are stored; journeys around the world—to Japan, to the Hebrides—by Orlando in search of his lost love, the source of his ‘madness.’ This brief recounting hardly overstates the difference of *Orlando Furioso* from *La Chanson de Roland*. One might almost think that, although in *Orlando Furioso* we are remaining inside the epic tradition, we have in entering the modern period, with its highly individual authorship, left the ‘mediaeval scene’ far ‘behind.’ There is truth there. With some exaggeration we might speak of this highly sophisticated new Italian epic as Postmodern, with respect to the mediaeval. That is, the Renaissance Italian view of mediaeval folk and heroic epic material was that it provided rich raw material for creating a new vision of life, fitting ‘contemporary realities.’ Did Virgil not deal similarly with the ‘raw material’ given him by Homer?

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Orlando Furioso, A New Verse Translation, trans. David Slavitt (Cambridge, Mass. 2009), Cantos 1-10, pp. 1-202.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/615>

Secondary Source Reading

Bates, *CCE*, pp. 93-118.

TOTAL READING 227 PAGES

Further Reading

The Cambridge History of Italian Literature, Peter Brand and Lino Pertile (Cambridge, 1991).

Suggested paper topics

What attitude does Ariosto adopt toward the epic material he inherits from *La Chanson de Roland*? Is his attitude ironic? Is he simply looking for a springboard for a new kind of imaginative creation?

What kind of audience does Ariosto's work seem to presuppose? Whom would it have interested? Is that a quite different audience from what you would expect for *La Chanson de Roland*? What kind of difference do you hypothesize, between those two audiences.

EXCERPT

First canto of Orlando Furioso. We see the already wild Orlando come into conflict with King Charles, over the topic of a maiden.

I

*OF LOVES and LADIES, KNIGHTS and ARMS, I sing,
Of COURTESIES, and many a DARING FEAT;
And from those ancient days my story bring,
When Moors from Afric passed in hostile fleet,
And ravaged France, with Agramant their king,
Flushed with his youthful rage and furious heat,
Who on king Charles', the Roman emperor's head
Had vowed due vengeance for Troyano dead.*

II

*In the same strain of Roland will I tell
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme,
On whom strange madness and rank fury fell,
A man esteemed so wise in former time;
If she, who to like cruel pass has well
Nigh brought my feeble wit which fain would climb
And hourly wastes my sense, concede me skill
And strength my daring promise to fulfil.*

III

*Good seed of Hercules, give ear and deign,
Thou that this age's grace and splendour art,
Hippolitus, to smile upon his pain
Who tenders what he has with humble heart.
For though all hope to quit the score were vain,
My pen and pages may pay the debt in part;
Then, with no jealous eye my offering scan,
Nor scorn my gifts who give thee all I can.*

IV

*And me, amid the worthiest shalt thou hear,
Whom I with fitting praise prepare to grace,
Record the good Rogero, valiant peer,
The ancient root of thine illustrious race.
Of him, if thou wilt lend a willing ear,
The worth and warlike feats I shall retrace;
So thou thy graver cares some little time
Postponing, lend thy leisure to my rhyme.*

V

*Roland, who long the lady of Catay,
Angelica, had loved, and with his brand
Raised countless trophies to that damsel gay,
In India, Median, and Tartarian land,
Westward with her had measured back his way;
Where, nigh the Pyrenees, with many a band
Of Germany and France, King Charlemagne
Had camped his faithful host upon the plain.*

#17 Portuguese Camoens

Camoens. Luis de Camoens (1524-1580) was born a few years before the death of Ariosto, in a Portugal which was at the height of its early modern power. Between the first navigations of Henry the Navigator (1394-1460), who led the Portuguese navy in victories at Ceuta in North Africa, and in adventures up and down the coasts of Africa, and the defeat of the Portuguese by Philip II of Spain, in 1580, Portugal had become the leading European power at sea—trading and colonizing throughout Asia, exploring Africa, and claiming huge tracts of territory like Brasil. It is no wonder, then, that Camoens, a born poet, early conceived of his role as that of writing the national epic of Portugal—quite naturally in the fashion of Virgil, his chief model—celebrating the extraordinary greatness of his time.

Family background. Camoens was born an only child, and was soon deprived even of a father, for his dad, like many adventurous Portuguese of the time, left the family to go to India in search of riches; the man died and was buried in Goa, never to return to Portugal. The young Camoens got a good education with the Jesuits and the Dominicans, and then at the University of Coimbra, where he fully mastered Latin, Italian, and Spanish. After a couple of indiscreet love affairs he was banished from Lisbon (1548), then not much later, having joined the military, fought at the battle of Ceuta (1549), at which the Portuguese were victorious but Camoens lost an eye. For the next thirty or so years of his life Camoens was on the move, imprisoned, then sent with the military on a three years mission, making his way slowly home. He published his major work, *Os Lusíadas*, that is *The Sons of Lusus*, or *The Portuguese*, in 1570. (Portuguese national mythology maintained that the nation's foundational father was the mythical Lusus.) Despite some success with this book, Camoens passed a seriously impoverished final ten years in Lisbon. To make things worse, in 1578 he learned of the destruction of the Portuguese army by the Moors, and in 1570 he learned of the humiliating incorporation of his beloved native land into the Spanish Empire.

National Glory. The great epic poem Camoens brought out of his experiences may be considered an extended paean to the glory of Portugal. This epic consists of ten cantos, 1102 stanzas, composed in ottava rima (decasyllables), and working an ABABABCC rhyme scheme: thus a substantial poetic unit for foundation. Like the *Shahname* (#22) for Persia, *Os Lusíadas* presents a sketch of the entirety of Portuguese history. The core of the narrative, however, is the discovery of the sea route to India by Vasco da Gama; a discovery which opened the Asian spice market to the Portuguese, as well as a highway to trade and colonization in the Far East. The historical narrative itself, which seems to scholars to be unusually 'factual' for a major national praise epic, anatomizes battles—three formative struggles in the build up of Portuguese power--distributes praise over the outstanding military and naval leaders of the nation, and undertakes occasional mythological excursions, as when Venus enters to praise the exploits of the Portuguese in India. The constant background presence of Virgil shows up in phrases and anecdotal reminiscences, and in the whole design of Camoens' work, which is so earnestly devoted to placing the greatness of his nation in the framework of the historical events which have founded it.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read **all** the following text:

The Lusiads, trans. Landeg White (Oxford, 1997), pp. 1-288.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/32528>

Secondary Source Reading

TOTAL READING 288 PAGES

Further Reading

A Revisionary History of Portuguese Literature, Miguel Tamen and Helena Buescu (London, 1998).

Suggested paper topics

Does the genre of the epic seem to you naturally affiliated with the theme of national (or regional, or ethnic) pride? Which epics seem to you have promoted that theme? Is there ever an element of national critique—as distinct from pride—in the development of that theme?

Camoens is frequently discussed as a quite reliable historian, not inclined to exaggerate the triumphs of his heroes—especially of Vasco da Gama. Does this seem to you remarkable? Have you read other epics, in this course, which you would trust as 'history'?

EXCERPT

Invocation to the Muse: paean to the brave Portuguese sailors who opened the oceanic path to the East

ARMS and the Heroes, who from Lisbon's shore,
 Thro' seas where sail was never spread before,
 Beyond where Ceylon lifts her spicy breast,
 And waves her woods above the wat'ry waste,
 With prowess more than human forc'd their way
 To the fair kingdoms of the rising day:
 What wars they wag'd, what seas, what dangers pass'd,
 What glorious empire crown'd their toils at last,
 Vent'rous I sing, on soaring pinions borne,
 And all my country's wars the song adorn;
 What kings, what heroes of my native land
 Thunder'd on Asia's and on Afric's strand:
 Illustrious shades, who levell'd in the dust
 The idol-temples and the shrines of lust:
 And where, erewhile, foul demons were rever'd,
 To Holy Faith unnumber'd altars rear'd:
 Illustrious names, with deathless laurels crown'd,
 While time rolls on in every clime renown'd!

Let Fame with wonder name the Greek no more,
 What lands he saw, what toils at sea he bore;
 Nor more the Trojan's wand'ring voyage boast,
 What storms he brav'd on many a perilous coast:
 No more let Rome exult in Trajan's name,
 Nor Eastern conquests Ammon's [68] pride proclaim;
 A nobler hero's deeds demand my lays
 Than e'er adorn'd the song of ancient days,
 Illustrious GAMA, [69] whom the waves obey'd,
 And whose dread sword the fate of empire sway'd. {3}

And you, fair nymphs of Tagus, parent stream,
 If e'er your meadows were my pastoral theme,
 While you have listen'd, and by moonshine seen
 My footsteps wander o'er your banks of green,
 O come auspicious, and the song inspire
 With all the boldness of your hero's fire:
 Deep and majestic let the numbers flow,
 And, rapt to heaven, with ardent fury glow,
 Unlike the verse that speaks the lover's grief,
 When heaving sighs afford their soft relief,
 And humble reeds bewail the shepherd's pain;
 But like the warlike trumpet be the strain
 To rouse the hero's ire, and far around,
 With equal rage, your warriors' deeds resound.

And thou, O born the pledge of happier days,
 To guard our freedom and our glories raise, {4}
 Given to the world to spread Religion's sway,
 And pour o'er many a land the mental day...

#18 English: Spenser

Spenser the poet. Edmund Spenser (1552-1599) was an English poet—an 'epic poet' among other things—who lived and died about a generation later than Camoens and three or four generations later than Ariosto, whom he greatly admired. We are with Spenser, therefore, far into the Renaissance, and into a Europe in which the trappings of science, capital economy, and a degree of internationalism set the stage for a new degree of individuality in the artistic creator. While we can say the same for Ariosto and Camoens we may want to mention a peculiarity of Spenser's work, which sets off his distinctive 'intellectuality,' especially in his greatest work, *The Faerie Queene* (first part published in 1590, second installment in 1596.) While Ariosto fancifully plays with the artistic values of the *Roland* tradition, and Camoes brilliantly highlights the achievements of the Portuguese nation, Spenser sets out to argue a set of ethical principles, and in so doing calls on a wide literary tradition to support his abstract contentions. In Spenser the age of the printing press has come to its maturity, and the notion of the intellectual reader and writer is taking hold of European culture.

The poet's background. Edmund Spenser was born in 1552, and graduated from Cambridge University. Soon after graduation he was posted to Ireland on government service, and remained there as Colonial civil servant until the publication of the first part of the *Faerie Queene*, which attracted favorable attention from Queen Elizabeth I—she was the queen in *The Faerie Queene*--and although we have reason to believe she never looked at the poem, Elizabeth arranged for Spenser to be given a pension, with which he returned to live in England.

The Faerie Queene. *The Faerie Queene*, one of the longest poems in English, consists of over 2000 stanzas of a form we have come to call Spenserian: it consists of nine line stanzas, of which the first eight are five footed, and the ninth is an hexameter. The theme of the epic is praise of the Tudor Monarchy and especially of Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603), with a strong thematic favoring the Protestantism to which Elizabeth had redirected her nation. (Spenser's fascination, with literature and the book, meshes with his Protestant turn of mind.) The initial conception of the epic, which was left incomplete at Spenser's death, was to include twenty-four books, of which each was to be focused around a single virtue. Each of the first twelve books, which were completed, was to be based on a particular private virtue, each of the second twelve on a public virtue. (Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* was the basis for this partition.) The presentation of the books was allegorical, with many layers of meanings coagulating around the actions of each of the Knights who are central to each of the books.

The individualist epic. Spenser's avowed purpose, in writing this brilliant and elegant laudation, was to 'fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle disciplines,' an aim which we may want to contrast to those of earlier epic writers. With the weakening of the oral tradition in general, and of the folk and heroic epic tradition, especially in Europe, the epic becomes the vehicle of personalized statements, and reflects personal attitudes—as distinct from large scale expressions of 'global attitude,' like Virgil's spokesmanship for the Roman Empire, or Dante's for the theological totality of the Catholic Church.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

The Faerie Queene, ed. Roche (London, 1987), Book I, pp. 1-163.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15272/15272-h/15272-h.htm>

Secondary Source Reading

Bates, *CCE*, pp. 133-145.

TOTAL READING 175 PAGES

Further Reading

The Faerie Queene: A Reader's Guide, ed. Elizabeth Heale (Cambridge, 1999).

Suggested paper topics

You are very aware that Spenser's epic is part of the literary epic tradition. The same with Ariosto and Camoens, as well as with the considerably earlier Dante. Please reformulate the difference between literary and folk or heroic epic. What cultural conditions seem to you essential, to provide a basis for literary epic?

Does the epic as a whole, as you have been encountering it, seem to you often to be about praise? Is there some intrinsic relation between the epic and praise? What examples would you offer, for the permeation of praise into the epic?

EXCERPT

Canto I: we meet the Red Cross Knight and the lady he serves.

A GENTLE Knight^o was pricking on the plaine,
 Ycladd in mightie armes and silver shielde,
 Wherein old dints of deepe wounds did remaine,
 The cruel markes of many'a bloody field;

Yet armes till that time did he never wield:
 His angry steede did chide his foming bitt,
 As much disdayning to the curbe to yield:
 Full jolly knight he seemd, and faire did sitt,
 As one for knightly giusts and fierce encounters fitt.

II

And on his brest a bloudie Crosse he bore,
 The deare remembrance of his dying Lord,
 For whose sweete sake that glorious badge he wore,
 And dead as living ever him ador'd:
 Upon his shield the like was also scor'd,

For soveraine hope, which in his helpe he had:
 Right faithfull true he was in deede and word,
 But of his cheere did seeme too solemne sad;
 Yet nothing did he dread, but ever was ydrad.

III

Upon a great adventure he was bond,
 That greatest Gloriana to him gave,
 That greatest Glorious Queene of Faerie lond,
 To winne him worship, and her grace to have,
 Which of all earthly things he most did crave;
 And ever as he rode, his hart did earne
 To prove his puissance in battell brave
 Upon his foe, and his new force to learne;
 Upon his foe, a Dragon horrible and stearne.

IV

A lovely Ladie rode him faire beside,
 Upon a lowly Asse more white then snow,
 Yet she much whiter, but the same did hide
 Under a vele, that wimpled was full low,
 And over all a blacke stole she did throw,
 As one that inly mournd: so was she sad,
 And heavie sat upon her palfrey slow;
 Seemed in heart some hidden care she had,
 And by her in a line a milke white lambe she lad.

V

So pure and innocent, as that same lambe,
 She was in life and every vertuous lore,
 And by descent from Royall lynage came...

#19 English: Milton

John Milton. John Milton (1608-1674) was classically educated at St. Paul's School—where he was trained on tricks like translating Greek texts into Latin texts and back—and then at Cambridge, where he revealed an immense talent for foreign languages, and a voracious appetite for Greek and Latin poetry. Noticed for his brilliance and public spirit—at this tumultuous time in British history when the Stuart Monarchy was overthrown, King Charles beheaded, and Oliver Cromwell found himself in charge of a most contentious term as Head of State—Milton attracted the attention of Lord Grenville, acquired an influential civil servant position, and became the Latin Secretary to Cromwell. Hostile to Catholicism and monarchy, a passionate supporter of liberty and freedom of speech, and for a while a devotee of Cromwell's Puritan regime, Milton gradually lost his infatuation, for the increasingly autocratic regime, and then lost his own eyesight in 1654, perhaps from retinal detachment. In the remaining twenty years of his life, Milton brought to fruition the heroic poetic task he had set himself already when he was twenty, to write a great epic, to offer his nation the highest level of imagination in the most prized genre of literature.

Milton's education. Milton wrote widely, in Latin, Italian, and chiefly English, and he wrote in many forms, from theological disputations to political pamphleteering, but from early on he set himself the challenge of writing the great epic of his time, an epic matured by the reading of, among others, epic poets like Ariosto and Camoens. It was thus that by the time he retired from Cromwell's service, and lost his eyesight, he turned himself to the creation of two epics, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, which risked entirely new dimensions of the epic tradition we have studied in this course. While the epic we have come to know here is (for the most part) concerned with war, valor, national values, traditional tales and heroic lore, it has not—with the exception of the *Divine Comedy*—been concerned with 'spiritual themes,' and above all not with the interior (intimate) dimensions of such themes. (Arguably, even Dante does not enter such intimacies.) The epic had long been viewed as a genre with an exteriorizing face.

The language of *Paradise Lost*. What may most trouble you, as you enter the texture of *Paradise Lost* (1658-1664), is the unfamiliar Latinate structure of the language, with any number of syntactical forms which are unfamiliar today, an erudite vocabulary carefully chosen from a variety of foreign languages, and a highly theological background roster of mediaeval texts. What may soothe you, as you get into the epic, is the profound humanity of the themes Milton deals with. When he deals with paradise lost he deals, though in formal and 'classical' verse forms, with the pathos of the human fall, by which he means, through a poetic narrative of great sensitivity, the choice of the human kind to choose self-interest and self-indulgence (the fall) over self-discipline and obedience. The treatment of the figure of Adam, our first fallen father, and of Jesus, faced with the temptations offered him by Satan, drives us to self-awareness, as do the apocalyptic battle scenes raging in Heaven, between the forces of Satan and of the angelic hosts who rule in heaven. Wherever Milton picks up the classical, Homeric/Virgilian echoes, of the battle between value and chaos, he turns it to an intimate theme in which the contemporary reader can still find his/her personal battles reenacted.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read the following text:

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Kastan and Merritt (New York, 2005), Book 1-6, pp. 1-210.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/26>

Secondary Source Reading

Bates, *CCE*, pp. 146-166.

TOTAL READING 230 PAGES

Further Reading

From Virgil to Milton, C. M. Bowra (New York, 1962).

Suggested paper topics

Have you seen another epic, than *Paradise Lost*, which is devoted to intimate human issues of choice, self-discipline, moral battlegrounds, freedom of the will? Would the *Divine Comedy* be an example?

Does Milton succeed in transforming the conventional battles of the epic into moral/personal battles? How about the struggles of heroes against evil? Does the losing of paradise in *Paradise Lost* resemble the losses of heroes in traditional epic?

Excerpt

From the beginning of Book I of *Paradise Lost*. A survey of the creation and man's fall.

*Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit
 Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast
 Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
 With loss of EDEN, till one greater Man
 Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
 Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
 Of OREB, or of SINAI, didst inspire
 That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
 In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth
 Rose out of CHAOS: Or if SION Hill
 Delight thee more, and SILOA'S Brook that flow'd
 Fast by the Oracle of God; I thence
 Invoke thy aid to my adventurous Song,
 That with no middle flight intends to soar
 Above th' AONIAN Mount, while it pursues
 Things unattempted yet in Prose or Rhime.
 And chiefly Thou O Spirit, that dost prefer
 Before all Temples th' upright heart and pure,
 Instruct me, for Thou know'st; Thou from the first
 Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
 Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss
 And mad'st it pregnant: What in me is dark
 Illumine, what is low raise and support;
 That to the highth of this great Argument
 I may assert th' Eternal Providence,
 And justifie the wayes of God to men.
 Say first, for Heav'n hides nothing from thy view
 Nor the deep Tract of Hell, say first what cause
 Mov'd our Grand Parents in that happy State,
 Favour'd of Heav'n so highly, to fall off
 From their Creator, and transgress his Will
 For one restraint, Lords of the World besides?
 Who first seduc'd them to that fowl revolt?
 Th' infernal Serpent; he it was, whose guile
 Stird up with Envy and Revenge, deceiv'd
 The Mother of Mankind, what time his Pride
 Had cast him out from Heav'n, with all his Host
 Of Rebel Angels, by whose aid aspiring
 To set himself in Glory above his Peers,
 He trusted to have equal'd the most High,
 If he oppos'd; and with ambitious aim
 Against the Throne and Monarchy of God
 Rais'd impious War in Heav'n and Battel proud
 With vain attempt. Him the Almighty Power
 Hurl'd headlong flaming from th' Ethereal Skie
 With hideous ruine and combustion down
 To bottomless perdition, there to dwell...*

Unit V Modern Period

Overview

We confine ourselves here to two epics of war torn twentieth century Euro-American culture, for in their different ways these texts exemplify the new ground rules of the epic voice in the modern era. (There are 'traditional' epics aplenty in the modern era—Carol Spitteler's *Olympian Spring*, in the nineteenth century, Nikos Kazantzakis' *Odyssey in the twentieth*, and any number more, if we expand the definition of the epic—but in the modern period the traditional epic is widely being reinvented to meet the new conditions of society, in which the heroic, and even the visionary, are in the process of redefinition.) The epics by Pound and Eliot might be viewed rather as idiosyncratic meditations on history and morality, than as 'grand tales,' yet they are an unmistakable addition to the growing understanding of the epic tradition.

Carl Spitteler: Swiss poet (1845-1924) and autobiographer; best known for his epic *Olympic Spring* (*Olympische Fruehling*, 1900-1905) in which the Greek gods are brought back to earth to live among us.

Nikos Kazantzakis: A Greek poet and novelist (1883-1957), known for powerful fictions and his huge epic poem, *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* (1958), in which he plunges Odysseus into challenging new adventures set in the 'modern world.'

Pound, Ezra: An American poet of the first half of the twentieth century, known for his extensive epic meditation on history, called *The Cantos*, 1917-1969, and for notorious fascist ideas found in those poems.

Eliot, T.S.: American poet known for lyrics and for his brilliant epic poem, 1921, *The Wasteland*, in which he summons up the war shattered atmosphere of America and Europe in the first decades of the twentieth century.

SUGGESTIONS FOR UNIT V WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT

Both Eliot and Pound generate their epic poetry around a severe and learned interrogation of the nature of history. Have we encountered before such a motivation for the creation of epic?

Eliot's *Wasteland* is only a little over 4000 words long. Can it still qualify as an epic? Has size anything to do with the definition of the epic?

Ezra Pound has been widely criticized for the fascist turn in his ideology, both in his epic *Cantos* and in his public statements? Does a vicious ideology necessarily undermine creative work?

#20 American: Pound

Ezra Pound. Ezra Pound (1885-1972) was born more than two and a half centuries after John Milton, and to read the epics of the two men is to measure the profound change of society that had taken place between them, a change seemingly greater—perhaps an illusion?—than the change between the *Aeneid* and the mediaeval epics we tracked. Both the *Aeneid* and those mediaeval epics shared a sense of the nature of epic—anonymous narrator recalling great deeds in high diction—a sense which Pound, and Eliot whom we will consider next, did not share with them. How does Pound enter literary history, and how does he shape it through his own epic, *The Cantos* (1917-1969)?

Pound the student. Ezra Pound was born in Idaho, and in childhood transported by his mother to the East Coast, where he received a good private school education, finding himself admitted at age fifteen to the University of Pennsylvania. Amazingly enough he advanced in graduate work almost to the dissertation level, and continually displayed the literary and historical brilliance that was to mark his whole life, while at the same time behaving scornfully and contemptuously toward his 'pedantic' teachers—from whom nonetheless he learned a lot. The same pattern of adolescent naughtiness, and brilliant insights, followed him into a temporary teaching job at Wabash College—which he called the 'sixth circle of Hell.' It was not long before he left the United States for Europe, where the chief drama of his creative life would take place. It was in Europe that he would, for the most part, conceive his epic poem *The Cantos*. And it was in Europe that he would first come into contact with the global realities of his time, for Pound, like T.S. Eliot a few years later, stepped into a Europe broken and traumatized by World War II.

Pound in Europe. The story of Ezra Pound in Europe in the 20s, 30s, and 40s is a tale of high poetic success, in which his earlier intense studies of world poetry bore brilliant fruit, and of social/political extremism and finally disaster. The disaster—Pound's conversion to Fascism of both Hitler's and Mussolini's style, his prolonged period of broadcasting Fascist propaganda from Italy during the War, and his ultimate twelve year incarceration in St. Elizabeth's Psychiatric Hospital in Washington D.C.—interwove bizarrely with the extraordinary poetry Pound was writing throughout these years, in which he let the history of European culture write itself through his brilliant verbal recreation of the sounds of the Hellenic, the Renaissance, the Provençal, and the Confucian worlds. Pound turned himself into an epic poet by rehearsing the poetic voices of his cultural past, by interpreting all of Western history, and by finding a supple inner voice by which he could take on the cultural tones of many ages. It stands to reason that, in the course of constructing this set of complex historical 'songs,' 'cantos,' Pound interwove his own fascist value system, the key planks of which were these: that capitalism and usury are at the root of all the social evils of the twentieth century, and that the Jews are at the root of both these causative forces. In an interview late in his life Pound recanted all these positions, feeling that he had been a dupe and a fool. But by that time his reputation was made—as a brilliant epic (and lyric) poet, as a madman, and as a political pariah.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read all of the following text:

A Draft of XXX Cantos (New York, 1948) pp. 1-167.

Secondary Source Reading

Bates, *CCE*, pp, 211-233.

TOTAL READING 189 PAGES

Further Reading

Ronald Bush, *The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (Princeton, 1976).

Suggested paper topics

Pound's epic work is clearly interwoven with a fierce politics, and in fact you will see in his epic, say in a character like Sigismundo Malatesta, that Pound finds characters who rhyme with him throughout history. Do other epics we have read reflect the political or social attitudes of their creators?

Pound tends to present history to us in discrete snapshots, rather than in a single ongoing narrative. Do you see this snapshot technique in other epics we have read? Do you see elsewhere, in epic, close up portraits of historical figures?

#21 American: Eliot

T. S. Eliot. T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) was born in St. Louis, Missouri, son of a middle class business family. From early life on he was plagued with poor health—a congenital double hernia which kept him out of peer group activities—and he became an addict of literature, cowboy adventure and *Tom Sawyer*. His interest in literature and languages, as well as anthropology, grew rapidly and by his early teens he was publishing poetry regularly. From 1906-1909 he studied at and graduated from Harvard, at which he not long after began graduate work in philosophy. In the subsequent years he enrolled at Merton College, Oxford, traveled on the continent, returned to work on his Harvard dissertation—on F.H. Bradley's idealism—and then returned again to study again in England, which was to prove his decisive residence. In 1914 he was introduced to Ezra Pound, in London, an event which was decisive for Eliot's future as a poet; Pound was impressed by the slightly younger poet, and would go on, in only subsequent years, to introduce Eliot to significant writers, and to critique Eliot's poetry—a critical intervention which greatly improved Eliot's *The Wasteland*, our second modern epic choice.

The Wasteland. Pound's *Cantos* were in form and spirit unlike any epic material, literary or folk, which we have looked at before. (There has been some thought that the age of epic creation ended in the nineteenth century, with William Wordsworth's highly personal but extensive *The Prelude*. But we continue to see major epic efforts, in some ways traditional in nature, by poets like Nikos Kazantzakis or Derek Walcott.) Yet epic we can call *The Cantos*, for they maintain a sustained vision of history as a whole, especially as it bears on political/moral values. When we come to Eliot's most extensive work, *The Wasteland* (1922), we are more conflicted, than with Pound, about the word *epic*; and yet if Eliot's poem, only 434 lines in length, made up of five parts, and with no narrative passage extending more than thirty lines unbroken, is considered as an epic, then we need to see it as a kind of limit case of the epic, in which we see some of the serious issues facing any contemporary work that seriously claims to be *epic*. That seems the productive lens through which to see Eliot's *Wasteland*, in our course.

War, faith, the epic. The framework for Eliot's 'epic' is the same post World War I environment in which we met Pound's *Cantos*. The war brought deep disillusionment to European and American intellectuals, who had been unaware of the brewing economic and societal malaise, which followed the growing industrialism inherited from the 19th century. And it was not just a question of economics, but also of a maturing of that 'loss of faith' issue, to which Matthew Arnold had addressed the well known poem, 'Dover Beach.' All of these factors, and especially the issue of 'faith,' impacted the Eliot who became a British subject in 1927, and who announced that he had become "an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature, and a **royalist** in politics." Eliot, like many other western intellectuals, was torn between traditionalism—his final choice—and the revolutionary world promised on the horizon by such new faiths as Communism. *The Wasteland*, consequently, sprang from Eliot's sense of the jagged, but powerfully traditional world he inherited, with its quests for value, spirituality, and human hope in the midst of confusion and despair. Eliot's epic is the heroic effort to create a narrative of historical meaning in a world challenging the very idea of historical continuity.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read all of the following text

The Annotated Wasteland, with Eliot's contemporary prose (New Haven, 2005), pp. 1-270. (Suggestion, Eliot's prose, which is a valuable accompaniment to the *Wasteland*, can be omitted from the assignment, if the amount of reading is too great.)

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1321>

Secondary Source Reading

Bates, *CCE*, pp. 211-233.

TOTAL READING 292 PAGES

Further Reading

Norton Critical Edition of The Wasteland, ed. North (New York, 2000)

Suggested paper topics

Does Eliot's *Wasteland* seem to you to qualify as an epic, despite its brevity, its fractured narrative, its anguished search for meaning? The poem ranges widely over cultural history, reaches into the origins of Western European culture, and reaches for paths to 'salvation' as ardently as does Milton. Is it an epic?"

Both Pound's and Eliot's 'epics' reflect a complex attitude toward mirroring back the whole culture we have come from. Have you seen anything like that complex attitude in the earlier epics you have read in this course? If not, to what do you attribute the new complexity of the modern epic writer?

EXCERPT

From Book I of *The Wasteland*. (Text from from Bartleby.com.) A picture of Post WW II culture and society.

I. THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD

*APRIL is the cruellest month, breeding
 Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
 Memory and desire, stirring
 Dull roots with spring rain.
 Winter kept us warm, covering* 5
*Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
 A little life with dried tubers.
 Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
 With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
 And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,* 10
*And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
 Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
 And when we were children, staying at the archduke's,
 My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
 And I was frightened. He said, Marie,* 15
*Marie, hold on tight. And down we went.
 In the mountains, there you feel free.
 I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter.*

*What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
 Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,* 20
*You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
 A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
 And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
 And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
 There is shadow under this red rock,* 25
*(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
 And I will show you something different from either
 Your shadow at morning striding behind you
 Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
 I will show you fear in a handful of dust.* 30

*Frisch weht der Wind
 Der Heimat zu,
 Mein Irisch Kind,
 Wo weilest du?*

"You gave me hyacinths first a year ago..." 35

Unit VI Non Western Epics

Overview

Our selection of non western epic poems takes us to widely separated places—from Central America to Mesopotamia, from Thibet and North India to West Africa—and yet without exception these epics have their roots deep in history, for the most part drawing on materials of great antiquity. In the case of the Popol Vuh, Gilgamesh, or the Mahabharata that antiquity long precedes the Christian era, while The Shahname or The Tale of the Heike plunge deep into the origins of the national histories of Persia and Japan respectively. None of these epics is the creation of a distinct and individualistic poetic voice, and such works as Manas or King Gesar are deeply embedded in folk heroic traditions. Whether or not there is something in common to the texts that follow, apart from their being 'non-western,' will be up to the student to debate.

Popol Vuh: *A Guatemalan folk epic, long preserved in hieroglyphic form until it was first written down in the eighteenth century, recounting the Mayan cosmogony and early migrations of the early Mayans.*

Gilgamesh: *A Mesopotamian epic whose origins go back to the second millennium B.C., and which depicts the strivings and losses of a great leader, Gilgamesh.*

Mahabharata: *An anonymous Indian epic compiled and composed between the second century B.C. and the second century A.D. The basic theme concerns the struggle between two powerful North Indian families.*

Shahname: *An epic poetic history of the people of Iran, by the poet Ferdowsi (932-1020 A.D.)*

Manas: *The Kyrgyz folk hero, Manas, is supposed to have lived some one thousand years ago, and at that point to have entered folk heroic poetry which grew into a vast poetic web sung to this day in the land of Manas' exploits.*

King Gesar: *A Thibetan folk epic first written down in the twelfth century, but with roots—entangled with the family and person of the hero, King Gesar—which go back to the third and fourth centuries A.D.*

SUGGESTIONS FOR UNIT VI WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT

Have you read epics, in this Unit, that clearly concentrate on the folk hero? What would be examples? In which of those epics does the folk hero seem to be nearly of universal human interest?

Do you see something in common to the epics of Manas and King Gesar? Do they resemble any of the folk hero epics you read in Unit III?

We look into two vast Indian epics in this unit. Do you see something in common to them both? What? How does the widely branching unfolding narrative, of these two epics, compare to the equally unfolding narrative pattern of Gesar or Manas?

The Popol Vuh is an epic without characters—loosely speaking. Does it still qualify as epic poetry? Is cosmogony a legitimate form of the epic, as you understand the form? Explain.

The Shahname and The Tale of the Heike both plumb the history of their cultures. Is this kind of epic plumbing akin to history in the academic sense? Could one learn about Persian history or the history of Japanese family conflicts from these two works?

#22 Mesopotamian Gilgamesh

Mesopotamian epic. With this Sumerian/Babylonian/Akkadian epic of a little over 3000 lines, we move into an epic mode far different from and also older than the works of Homer, and more or less contemporaneous with the Indian epics we review below (# 23, 24). To be sure we cannot date the origins of the oral mythical material that makes up Homer's creation, but the middle of the second millennium B.C. is plausible, while the earliest origins of this Sumerian epic of *Gilgamesh* go back at least a millennium farther. We know, for one thing, that there was an historical Gilgamesh—model for the ruler and principal character in the epic—and that he was the 5th king of Uruk, ancient Iraq, and was reputed to have reigned for 128 years. (Of him we know that he was also reputed—on the mythological level—to have been a demigod of superhuman strength, while on the historic level he carried out such practical actions as rebuilding the sanctuary of his queen mother, or the walls of his city—an action figuring importantly in *Gilgamesh* itself.) While the Homeric epics clearly have historical prototypes, they have been totally washed away in heroic memory by the time they were written down.

***Gilgamesh*.** Historically based though it may be, however, the *Gilgamesh epic*, which has proven hard to reconstruct, from its clay tablets in three languages and in various stages of fragmentation, navigates literary territory far less 'down to earth' than the ground level of Homer's work. The barest outline of the story will show this. The poem opens with an introduction in which the hero, Gilgamesh, is described as an old life-weary leader, a remarkable tone setter for this epic which is tinged with the doom in things. (We also find this sense of inherent life sadness in *The Niebelungenlied* and the *Njalasaga*.) This profile is immediately overridden by the image of Gilgamesh the kingly, striding proudly around his city, a prototype of the mortal heading for a fall. The epic, as it plays out, will be all about that fall.

The story of the epic. The remainder of the epic concerns the quest life of Gilgamesh himself. From the very start he is involved in an existential discovery. Having been a proud and dogmatic ruler, he is accosted by the gods themselves, who create an anti-Gilgamesh to confront and thaw him out of his stubborn pride. This confronting wild man, Enkidu, is seduced by a whore who brings out his own sexuality and with it his humanity, and thus prepares him for existence in the human community where he can interact with Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh and Enkidu fight upon first meeting, then bond—as the gods had wished for Gilgamesh—and bonded they set off to find and kill the giant monster Humbaba. (One may think of the Laestrygonians in the *Odyssey*, or of Grendel in *Beowulf*, classic underworld figures from the repertoire of world epic.) The two questers struggle until finally Enkidu cuts off the monster's head, whereupon they return to Uruk. Shortly after returning, Enkidu is assailed by a terrible dream, and dies. Destroyed with grief, Gilgamesh falls prey to a terrible fear of death, and determines to go on visit to the one man who is known to have survived death; immortal Utnapishtim, a kind of Babylonian Noah who has survived the flood, and who gives Gilgamesh a magic plant of rejuvenation—which shortly after he loses. Gilgamesh's immortality hopes are shattered, and he speaks movingly about the fragility of life.

The meaning of *Gilgamesh*. Where Homer is indirect, though richly aware of the complexity of life and the challenges it raises, *Gilgamesh* is 'allegorical,' deeply (if poetically) inspecting the largest questions life poses: is death the end? what is the relation of nature to society? what is friendship? The fragmentary condition of the

cuneiform tablets, on which the epic is written, seems to echo the fragmentariness of our passage through life.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read **all** of the following text

Gilgamesh: A New Rendering in English Verse (New York, 1992), pp. 1-99.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/18897>

Secondary Source Reading

Bates, *CCE*, pp. 1-12.

TOTAL READING 111 Pages

Further Reading

Damrosch, D., *The Buried Book: The Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York, 2007.)

Suggested paper topics

The *Gilgamesh* epic is customarily viewed as a dark commentary on human life and death. Do you see the epic that way? Are there elements of joy and hope in the epic? Does Gilgamesh seem to you have grown happier after his maturing encounters with Enkidu and Utnapishtim?

What is the history of the discovery of the *Gilgamesh* tablets, and how has that discovery impacted the poetry and imagination of our time?

Excerpt from *Gilgamesh*, Columns 1 and 2: Gilgamesh dreams his future, including the birth of Enkidu. (Each line refers to a line on the cuneiform tablets.)

EXCERPT

Introduction to the character and mission of Gilgamesh. (Trans. Kovacs, 1998; free electronic version.)

Tablet I

*He who has seen everything, I will make known (?) to the lands.
 I will teach (?) about him who experienced all things,
 ... alike,
 Anu granted him the totality of knowledge of all.
 He saw the Secret, discovered the Hidden,
 he brought information of (the time) before the Flood.
 He went on a distant journey, pushing himself to exhaustion,
 but then was brought to peace.
 He carved on a stone stela all of his toils,
 and built the wall of Uruk-Haven,
 the wall of the sacred Eanna Temple, the holy sanctuary.
 Look at its wall which gleams like copper(?),
 inspect its inner wall, the likes of which no one can equal!
 Take hold of the threshold stone--it dates from ancient times!
 Go close to the Eanna Temple, the residence of Ishtar,
 such as no later king or man ever equaled!
 Go up on the wall of Uruk and walk around,
 examine its foundation, inspect its brickwork thoroughly.
 Is not (even the core of) the brick structure made of kiln-fired
 brick,
 and did not the Seven Sages themselves lay out its plans?
 One league city, one league palm gardens, one league lowlands,
 the open area(?) of the Ishtar Temple,
 three leagues and the open area(?) of Uruk it (the wall) encloses.
 Find the copper tablet box,
 open the ... of its lock of bronze,
 undo the fastening of its secret opening.
 Take and read out from the lapis lazuli tablet
 how Gilgamesh went through every hardship.
 Supreme over other kings, lordly in appearance,
 he is the hero, born of Uruk, the goring wild bull.
 He walks out in front, the leader,
 and walks at the rear, trusted by his companions.
 Mighty net, protector of his people,
 raging flood-wave who destroys even walls of stone!
 Offspring of Lugalbanda, Gilgamesh is strong to perfection,
 son of the august cow, Rimat-Ninsun;... Gilgamesh is awesome to
 perfection.
 It was he who opened the mountain passes,
 who dug wells on the flank of the mountain.
 It was he who crossed the ocean, the vast seas, to the rising sun,
 who explored the world regions, seeking life.
 It was he who reached by his own sheer strength Utanapishtim, the
 Faraway,
 who restored the sanctuaries (or: cities) that the Flood had
 destroyed!
 ... for teeming mankind.*

*Who can compare with him in kingliness?
Who can say like Gilgamesh: "I am King!"?
Whose name, from the day of his birth, was called "Gilgamesh"?
Two-thirds of him is god, one-third of him is human.*

23 Iranian Shahname

Ferdowsi the poet. Abu al-Qasem Mansur, who assumed the poetic name Ferdowsi, has long been the classical poetic voice of Iranian culture. Ferdowsi lived from 932 A.D. to 1020 A.D. and is best known for his *Shahname*, or *Book of Kings*, a large epic of nearly 50,000 lines. He was born in the city of Tus, in eastern Iran, was a Shi'ite Muslim, and belonged, as a *dehqan*, to an upper middle class family, landed gentry. He was born into a Persia which was at his time trying to absorb the full meaning of the Arabic conquest of the Sassanid Empire, which had effectively introduced Islam into the old Iranian culture, and which threatened to wipe out consciousness of the Persian tradition. Ferdowsi's epic poem was an effort to preserve the memory of the history of Persia.

The *Shahname*. His poem is a poetic epic of the history of the people of Iran from the earliest times, in fact from the creation of the world, to the poet's present, the fall of the Sassanid Persian dynasty to the Arabs in the seventh century. His primary vehicle of writing this history is a long line of quantitatively measured poetry—the *motaqareb*—consisting of eight feet (unstressed-stressed-stressed, and fluid with substitutions and extensions.) This meter provided a long flexible line with capacity to house the historical weightiness which informs the whole epic. The epic traces from the creation of the first man and the invention of the arts that civilize us, to the mythical period of heroes and their feats, and to the present. There is, on the whole, a tragic tone to the epic—though it is famed for its benign descriptions of nature, and especially of sunrises—which may derive from the awareness that the traditional Persian religion of Zoroastrianism has been replaced by Islam, and from the sadness that the Sassanid Persian dynasty has been replaced.

Rostom. Two well known episodes from the work will suggest this tragic tone. The one, made famous by Matthew Arnold in his long poem *Sohrab and Rostum*, is the complex tale of how one of the heroes of the Persian forces, the powerful and highly civilized Rostom, killed his son in battle, not realizing whom he was fighting. The other episode, following not long after, plays a variation on the Biblical tale of Potiphar's wife, and involves a handsome young man, Siyavush, who catches the eye of a warrior's wife, who, on being rejected by the young man, falsely and fatally accuses him of having tried to rape her. Such episodes stud this unremittingly dramatic epic, and leave us questioning whether we are in fact free, as the Zoroastrians insist we are, and as, in the end, the epic tries to reassure us is the case. The freedom we come to accept, as operative throughout the epic, is the capacity to choose the good, which is noted in all of the major figures, flawed as they are, and which keeps the dark suggestions of the epic under control.

Epic and nationalism. From a distance, on the far side of the complex stories which make us this epic—as they do *Manas* or the Indian epic—we see the overriding intention of Ferdowsi, to celebrate the dignity and honor of the Persians, and to exhort them to remember their multi-century greatness. We might want to cite Virgil and, later, Camoens as fellow examples of the desire both to celebrate and promote national history in epic.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

The Epic of the Kings, trans. Reuben Levy (Costa Mesa, 1996), pp. 1-217.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/10315>

Secondary Source Reading

Oinas, *HES*, pp. 76-98.

TOTAL READING 239 PAGES

Suggested paper topics

Do you think the epic an especially appropriate literary form for celebrating a nation's history? How widespread is that kind of celebration among the epics we have read? How do we celebrate our national history today? Does that celebration ever assume an epic form?

We discussed the (at least occasionally) tragic tone of the *Shahname*. We have discerned that tone in other epics—like *Gilgamesh* or the *Njalasaga*. Do most epics have a tone? Or does the epic style, in general, conduce to distance, grandeur, and absence of attitude—as is often said of Homer's work.

EXCERPT

From beginning of the epic, describing the life of the first ancient lawgiver of Persia.

*His reign was thirty years, and o'er the earth
 He spread the blessings of paternal sway;
 Wild animals, obsequious to his will,
 Assembled round his throne, and did him homage.
 He had a son named Saiámuk, a youth
 Of lovely form and countenance, in war
 Brave and accomplished, and the dear delight
 Of his fond father, who adored the boy,
 And only dreaded to be parted from him.
 So is it ever with the world—the parent
 Still doating on his offspring. Kaiúmers
 Had not a foe, save one, a hideous Demon,
 Who viewed his power with envy, and aspired
 To work his ruin. He, too, had a son,
 Fierce as a wolf, whose days were dark and bitter,
 Because the favoring heavens in kinder mood
 Smiled on the monarch and his gallant heir.
 —When Saiámuk first heard the Demon's aim
 Was to o'erthrow his father and himself,
 Surprise and indignation filled his heart,
 And speedily a martial force he raised,
 To punish the invader. Proudly garbed
 In leopard's skin, he hastened to the war;
 But when the combatants, with eager mien,
 Impatient met upon the battle-field.
 And both together tried their utmost strength,
 Down from his enemy's dragon-grasp soon fell
 The luckless son of royal Kaiúmers,
 Vanquished and lifeless. Sad, unhappy fate!
 Disheartened by this disastrous event, the army immediately retreated, and returned
 to Kaiúmers, who wept bitterly for the loss of his son, and continued a long time
 inconsolable. But after a year had elapsed a mysterious voice addressed him,
 saying:—"Be patient, and despair not—thou hast only to send another army against
 the Demons, and the triumph and the victory will be thine.
 "Drive from the earth that Demon horrible,
 And sorrow will be rooted from thy heart."
 Saiámuk left a son whose name was Húsheng, whom the king loved much more even
 than his father.
 Húsheng his name. There seemed in him combined,
 Knowledge and goodness eminent. To him
 Was given his father's dignity and station.
 And the old man, his grandsire, scarcely deigned
 To look upon another, his affection
 For him was so unbounded.
 Kaiúmers having appointed Húsheng the leader of the army, the young hero set out
 with an immense body of troops to engage the Demon and his son. It is said that at
 that time every species of animal, wild and tame, was obedient to his command.*

#24 Indian: Mahabharata

Composition history and epic. We have seen that the time gap between 'original events' and 'writing down' is often very wide in the epic; in the *Iliad*, in *Manas*, at the end in the *Popol Vuh* (#29), but nowhere more evidently than in the Sanskrit epic, the *Mahabharata*. That epic, with the *Ramayana* one of the two literary cornerstones of Indian culture, comes down to us from great antiquity. It is thought that the seminal events lying at the heart of the epic took place in the Indian Iron Age, probably the tenth century B.C., and describe cultural conflicts dating from that period. After that, however, and no doubt while an accreting oral tradition was building, nearly a millennium passed before the first writing down of the work. It is estimated that the major ancient recension of the literary material took place between the second century B.C. and the second century A.D. The author is alleged to have been one Vyasa, a name meaning in Sanskrit 'the Arranger,' and suggesting of course that the 'author' may have been nothing but a redactor of traditional materials, as Homer, by one theory according to which 'Homer' means 'the stitcher,' may also have simply been the name for such an ancient 'editor.'

The initial family struggle. The tale itself has at its core a (at that time) world shaking battle between two families who were struggling for hegemony in North India, the Pandava and the Kaurava princes. Much of the epic does indeed concentrate on that battle, perhaps a core of some 24,000 verses, but this is in fact a tiny fraction of the whole work. (The whole work, some 1.8 million words, some 200, 000 verses, is 10 times the length of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined.) The whole epic branches out around the core theme, and does so after a literary device, frame-story construction (*Rahmenerzaelung*, in literary critical parlance), by which the narration of the tale is sequentially picked up by one after another of a series of narrators, each of whom introduces the preceding, with the consequence both that there is much repetition—with subtle variation—in the telling, and that there results what we might today call a postmodern irony concerning the veracity of the narrator of each section of the poem.

Collateral developments of the epic. The collateral richnesses of the epic are inexhaustible, and we can only make a couple of soundings. The first is a thought about the structure and the tensions built into the epic. Two huge and powerful armies face one another. But because the battle participants share a common cultural background, there are inevitably many family members who find themselves on opposite sides of the battle from one another. Obviously this situation generates every kind of tension and conflict, combats between father and son, combats between a warrior and the man who has violated his wife. One of the most powerful sections of the epic, the now so-called *Bhagavad Gita*, which is a part of the *Mahabharata*, deals with a profoundly felt dilemma facing the warrior Arjuna. Arjuna finds himself drawn into battle against close relatives on the other side of the divide, and must decide whether it is acceptable to kill kinsmen. Turning to his charioteer, Krishna, Arjuna enters into a long and transcendent discussion, powerful and influential to readers then and now, in which he is led to the conclusion that it is possible to act as a warlike killer of kin and at the same time to disassociate, to live on another plane, spirit. The justification for this view point is brilliantly worked through in dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna. The *Mahabharata* is replete with insert dialogues in which the profundity of early Indian thought is expressed in exquisite prosody.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Mahabharata, Stories of the Great Epic, vol. I (San Diego, 1993), pp. 1-250.

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/15474>

Secondary Source Reading

TOTAL READING 250 PAGES

Further Reading

Winternitz, Maurice, *History of Indian Literature*, vol. I (Delhi, 2008).

Suggested paper topics

There is a pronounced philosophical dimension to the *Mahabharata*, with many examples of discussions such as that Arjuna carries on with Krishna. (These discussions, with their enduring implications, have rendered the present epic a continuing favorite with readers today.) Have you read other epics, in this course, in which the philosophical dimension is prominent? Is there any natural affiliation between the epic and philosophical speculation?

Is warfare the chief generator of epic material, in the texts we have read? Is there some intrinsic relevance of the battle to the 'great events' the epic is typically concerned with? Have wars, in our own time, been a natural seed bed of epic writing and thinking?

EXCERPT

From *Mahabharata* Section xvi, Astika Parva. The myth thinking of the epic as exemplified in conceptions of time and birth.

"Saunaka said, 'O Sauti, relate once more in detail this history of the learned and virtuous Astika. Our curiosity for hearing it is great. O amiable one, thou speakest sweetly, with proper accent and emphasis; and we are well-pleased with thy speech. Thou speakest even as thy father. Thy sire was ever ready to please us. Tell us now the story as thy father had related it.'

"Sauti said, 'O thou that art blest with longevity, I shall narrate the history of Astika as I heard it from my father. O Brahmana, in the golden age, Prajapati had two daughters. O sinless one, the sisters were endowed with wonderful beauty. Named Kadru and Vinata, they became the wives of Kasyapa. Kasyapa derived great pleasure from his two wedded wives and being gratified he, resembling Prajapati himself, offered to give each of them a boon. Hearing that their lord was willing to confer on them their choice blessings, those excellent ladies felt transports of joy. Kadru wished to have for sons a thousand snakes all of equal splendour. And Vinata wished to bring forth two sons surpassing the thousand offsprings of Kadru in strength, energy, size of body, and prowess. Unto Kadru her lord gave that boon about a multitude of offspring. And unto Vinata also, Kasyapa said, 'Be it so!' Then Vinata, having; obtained her prayer, rejoiced greatly. Obtaining two sons of superior prowess, she regarded her boon fulfilled. Kadru also obtained her thousand sons of equal splendour. 'Bear the embryos carefully,' said Kasyapa, and then he went into the forest, leaving his two wives pleased with his blessings.'

"Sauti continued, 'O best of regenerate ones, after a long time, Kadru brought forth a thousand eggs, and Vinata two. Their maid-servants deposited the eggs separately in warm vessels. Five hundred years passed away, and the thousand eggs produced by Kadru burst and out came the progeny. But the twins of Vinata did not appear. Vinata was jealous, and therefore she broke one of the eggs and found in it an embryo with the upper part developed but the lower one undeveloped. At this, the child in the egg became angry and cursed his mother, saying. 'Since thou hast prematurely broken this egg, thou shall serve as a slave. Shouldst thou wait five hundred years and not destroy, or render the other egg half-developed, by breaking it through impatience, then the illustrious child within it will deliver thee from slavery! And if thou wouldst have the child strong, thou must take tender care of the egg for all this time!' Thus cursing his mother, the child rose to the sky. O Brahmana, even he is the charioteer of Surya, always seen in the hour of morning!

"Then at the expiration of the five hundred years, bursting open the other egg, out came Garuda, the serpent-eater. O tiger of Bhrigu's race, immediately on seeing the light, that son of Vinata left his mother. And the lord of birds, feeling hungry, took wing in quest of the food assigned to him by the Great Ordainer of all."

So ends the sixteenth section in the Astika Parva of the Adi Parva.

#25 Indian: Ramayana

The power of epic in India. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are the two great epics of ancient India, and together have exercised an unremitting influence on later Indian culture—to this day, as we know from cinema, fictions, and stage productions.

Hindu mythology. Like the *Mahabharata* the *Ramayana*—the story of the ‘going forward of Rama,’ an avatar of the god Vishnu, one of the major Hindu gods—is deeply embedded in ancient Hindu mythology and story. Like the *Mahabharata* the *Ramayana* is a tropically complex narrative, involving many subtales and unexpected digressions, and yet this epic in verse is more focused than the *Mahabharata*, which, like *Manas*, sprawls into a seemingly unlimited number of tales. As with the *Mahabharata* a major battle lies at the core of the epic, the battle between a cohort of uncivilized demons who live in splendor on an island called Lanka, and a collection of monkeys and bears who attack them viciously. The struggle between these two forces is furious in itself, but the incursion of the demonic into human civilization is even more bitter; for these demonic forces try to impose grossness and sensuality wherever they go. Rama, the main protagonist of the epic, and his brother Laksmana, are deputed to combat these transgressors. The last of the seven books of the epic is devoted to the battle discussed above, while the previous six books are devoted to the mythological foreground of the present battle. It is in the (once again infinitely overgrown and complex) narrative laying out of that background that the foundations of the whole tale are established.

The inspirational tone. The basic theme, of the earlier tales of the epic, which recur constantly to moral and philosophical themes like those of the *Bhagavad Gita* in the *Mahabharata*, involves the deeds of Rama and his wife Sita, the exemplar of the faithful spouse—as Rama is of the honorable man of the house—the abduction of Sita by the evil demon Ravan, and Rama’s miraculous feats against the power of demons and monsters. (The story astounds us with its magic realism, in which ordinary causality, human limitations, and levels of courage are raised to miraculous levels, and only the careful metric, and interspersed moral discussions, maintain the bond between these tales and any kind of ‘realism.’ Fantasy, romance, idealism, moral consciousness, exaggerated evil, monstrousness: all of these themes abound in the foundational books of the epic.) The tone is in the end inspirational, as Indian tradition sees it, with the divine and the human blended in a fantasmagoria of moral and romantic actions.

The creation of this epic. The poem in question is huge, some 50,000 lines depending on the way the metric is counted, and comes down to us in several thousand different manuscripts. (Manuscripts of ancient Indian texts were typically copied off onto parchment of palm leaves, and variations among texts are considerable, so that the establishment of a canonical text is almost impossible. The oldest manuscript to which we still have access dates from the 11th century A.D.) A single author is credited with the authorship of the *Ramayana*: Valmiki, who is a comrade of Rama in the epic, is credited with the authorship of the work. The creation of the work, and the basic historical frame of the *Ramayana*, are thought to have been realized in the 5th-4th centuries B.C., although the tales embodied in the *Ramayana* are far older than that.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read the following text:

The Ramayana (Bombay, 1958), pp. 1-238 (Books I-IV).

OR

Project Gutenberg <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/24869/24869-pdf.pdf>

Secondary Source Reading

Oinas, *HES*, pp. 49-73.

TOTAL READING 262 PAGES

Further Reading

Winternitz, Maurice, *History of Indian Literature*, vol. I (Delhi, 2008).

Suggested paper topics

Compare the *Ramayana* with the *Mahabharata*, as a complex ancient Indian epic. Which seems to you the more vivid? Can you see why the *Ramayana* remains of vital interest in Indian culture, and a reference point for understanding the entire Indian past?

The *Ramayana* is full of fancy, fantasy, romance, dream sequences, monstrous melodramatized evils, and yet the moral seriousness of the collection of tales remains evident. Do you find this blend unfamiliar—or natural? Is the western reader accustomed to dealing with this mixture of, say, musical comedy and moral dignity?

EXCERPT

From Canto II of *Ramayana*; a vignette exemplifying fascination with the power of nature to become godlike at all times.

*Obedient to his master's hest
 Quick from the cot he brought the vest;
 The hermit took it from his hand,
 And tightened round his waist the band;
 Then duly dipped and bathed him there,
 And muttered low his secret prayer.
 To spirits and to Gods he made
 Libation of the stream, and strayed
 Viewing the forest deep and wide
 That spread its shade on every side.
 Close by the bank he saw a pair
 Of curlews sporting fearless there.
 But suddenly with evil mind
 An outcast fowler stole behind,
 And, with an aim too sure and true,
 The male bird near the hermit slew.
 The wretched hen in wild despair
 With fluttering pinions beat the air,
 And shrieked a long and bitter cry
 When low on earth she saw him lie,
 Her loved companion, quivering, dead,
 His dear wings with his lifeblood red;
 And for her golden crested mate
 She mourned, and was disconsolate.
 The hermit saw the slaughtered bird,
 And all his heart with ruth was stirred.
 The fowler's impious deed distressed
 His gentle sympathetic breast,
 And while the curlew's sad cries rang
 Within his ears, the hermit sang:
 "No fame be thine for endless time,
 Because, base outcast, of thy crime,
 Whose cruel hand was fain to slay.
 One of this gentle pair at play!"
 E'en as he spoke his bosom wrought
 And laboured with the wondering thought
 What was the speech his ready tongue
 Had uttered when his heart was wrung.
 He pondered long upon the speech,
 Recalled the words and measured each,
 And thus exclaimed the saintly guide
 To Bharadvája by his side:
 "With equal lines of even feet,
 With rhythm and time and tone complete,
 The measured form of words I spoke
 In shock of grief be termed a loke."
 And Bharadvája, nothing slow
 His faithful love and zeal to show,
 Answered those words of wisdom, "Be
 The name, my lord, as pleases thee."*

#26 Thibetan: King Gesar

The epic of *King Gesar*. The epic of *King Gesar* (*Caesar*; probably from Roman culture through Byzantium, through Turkish into Thibet) is a cycle of poems and tales with a complicated creative history behind it. (The *Manas* epic will come to mind at several points, here.) This Thibetan epic appears first to have been written down in the twelfth century, and to record the life and heroic deeds of the culture hero Gesar, who was Master and Lord of the legendary kingdom of Ling. (Right here, however, the complexities set in, for many of the events recorded in the epic appear to derive from Thibetan social life of the third to sixth centuries A.D. Thus there is extensive social-historical material here. It must be added that from the first compilation, in fact, different versions of the epic sprang up in various languages among Central and East Asian peoples, in each case feeding in new historical material. It was not until the 18th century that western scholars began to edit down toward a single written text and to deal with its immensity—so large that the Chinese version of the Tibetan compilation currently runs to 120 volumes.) The enormous epic, over a million lines in length, according to one of many calculations to this day, appears in different versions in many parts of the world surrounding Thibet, its first home—in the adjacent provinces of China, in Nepal, in Burma, spreading as far west, in fact, as the *Manas* epic spread east. The *Gesar* epic is regularly performed, plays an active part in the cultural life of present day Thibet, and is maintained in existence by over one hundred official Thibetan bards, who, though fewer in number by the day, are a lifeline to the traditional oral presentation of what was probably a written compilation epic from the start. In other words, the oral tradition surrounding *Gesar* is essentially a by product of writing—though, to wrap up these complexities, almost all the bards currently sustaining the epic are illiterate.

The plot of the epic. The story, we said, is about the legendary exploits of King Gesar, who is generally thought to have been an historical figure. All the tales turn around a similar plot line, but the variations are endless, and often fantastic—where ‘fantastic’ is also the loose word to describe, say, the tales in *The Ramayana* or in *Manas*. In the skeleton plot, Gesar is given a miraculous birth, a neglected and even contemptible childhood, a fast climbing rise to power and a gorgeous wife, an effective exercise of power which enables him to win possessions and armies through marvelous feats. In his brilliant power the hero is able to protect his people, and to die at peace, fading away into a hidden realm from which he will return. Onto this skeleton many variations have been built, often to satisfy the regional expectations of the bards and hearers of the epic. The degree of Buddhism present in a version of the epic is likely to have great effect on the work. This will show up in, for instance, the accounts of the birth and death of the hero. The Buddhist strain will feature the hero as demon killer, and as a flying mythological creature wiping out the evil of the world, whereas in Buddhist shaped accounts of the hero’s death he will pass into a Buddhist underworld, undergo ritual preparations, and be in wait for a benign/vengeful return to earth. A story revealing the growth power of this epic relates how current events are often built into recent versions of the epic, and that one version of the story—remember the isolation of Thibet through the 20th century—involved the journey of Gesar to wipe out Hitler and the forces of Nazi evil.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read **all** of one of the two following texts:

David-Neel, Alexandra *The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling* (London, 1958), pp. 1-271.

The Warrior Song of King Gesar, trans. Penick (Boston, 1996), pp. 1-149.

TOTAL READING 149 OR 270 PAGES

Further Reading

Chadwick, N.K. and Zhirmunsky, V, *Oral Epics of Central Asia* (Cambridge, 2010.)

Suggested paper topics

What do you see in common between *Manas* and *Gesar*? Do their narratives cover the same time span? Are their heroes similar? Is their pattern of creation—the relation of oral to written elements—similar?

Are you satisfied with *epic* as the term to cover this kind of work? If so, is it folk epic of the kind of met in, say, *The Tain* or the Serbo Croatian epic songs? Or, and remember *Gesar* grew from a 'compilation,' is this Thibetan epic in some sense a 'literary epic?'

#27 Japanese *The Tale of the Heike*

The bards of the epic. *The Tale of Heike* is a vast Japanese epic—prose and poetry intertwined—compiled in 1371 by a blind Buddhist monk, Kakuichi. The authorship of the poem is essentially unknown, though it was in its time attributed to a provincial governor, who called in the above talented blind bard to chant the entire poem. How exactly the traditional material was then shaped by its Buddhist compiler, and how much simply assembled, is debatable, especially as there have from the start been many different versions of the epic. From the start, in any case, the recitation of the poem was entrusted to blind bards, *biwas*, who passed the material on from one to another—in fact the latest traditional blind singer of this material passed away only in the nineties of the last century. With him passed away, or at least paused, the elaborate presentational art of this work—a combination of set poetry pieces (*waka* work), prose narrative, and recitative.

The plot of the epic. The core theme of this epic is the downfall of the powerful leader of the house of Taira—Heike means ‘Taira’s house’—Taira no Kiyomori, whose power was locked in total conflict with a rival house, that of the Genji—note that the epic *Tale of Genji* is the other renowned epic of mediaeval Japan. The leader of the rival house, the house of Minamoto, is a powerful antagonist to the Taira in the second and third parts of the epic, while Taira dominates the first. The tale itself involves intrigue and armed conflict leading up to the downfall of Taira, but provides abundant room for illustrative narrative enrichment. The collective messages are two: that all in human affairs is impermanent; that the law of *karma* finds itself not only into history—one noble house reaping the bad harvest of its predecessors—but in the individual life, in which bad actions lead to suffering. One might think of Ferdowsi’s *Shahname*, with its similar historical pessimism, here embedded in a Buddhist world view.

Powerful episodes. Episodes of every kind—from brutal to amatory—stud the narrative, though almost all turn on the double theme of *karma* and impermanence. One episode introduces us to Mongaku, who in his 19th year turned his mind toward enlightenment, and began subjecting himself to dreadful punishments, standing in icy water under a cataract, lying for days in the bush without eating, tortured by insect bites of every kind. (And in the end, it must be said, finding himself rescued by angelic forces and given a kind of permanent immunity to pain; an antidotic approach to the difficult world.) Another episode carries us through the trials imposed on the dancers Gyo and Ginyo, once court favorites in the eyes of a capricious monarch, victims of his errant eros, and in the end nuns tucked away in their early twenties in the peace of a hermitage where the world could not hurt them. A third episode—among thousands, for this epic is built incrementally on such evidentiary pieces—concerns the fateful encounter of Kumagai Naozane with a fleeing enemy, whom Kumagai soon captures, prepares to kill, and then, though discovering that the young man is of noble rank, great personal beauty, actually beheads, lest he himself seem a coward in the eyes of his approaching comrades. The profundity of this episode is in the global sadness of Kumagai, at the killing act he has no choice but to perform.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

The Tale of the Heike, trans. R. Tyler (New York, 2012), pp. 1-250 (Books I-IV.)

TOTAL READING 250 PAGES

Further Reading

Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature from Earliest Times to the Later 16th Century, Keene, Donald (New York, 1999).

Suggested paper topics

Certain epics emphasize the impermanence and uncertainty of human life, while others, obviously, stress the heroic, military, and active. Which kind of epic is *The Tale of Heike*? Is it a combination of the two kinds? Which epics that we have read seem to you to have been predominately concerned with the impermanence of life?

Does the bardic tradition, behind *The Tale of Heike*, remind you of the transmission traditions of other epics we have read? Is there usually a long tradition of oral presentation of epic work? Is there frequently a special class of singer or bard appointed to the maintenance of an epic?

#28 Turkic: Manas

Manas: Hero and Art. *Manas* is both the name of the hero of one of the world's longest epics (500,000 lines by one count, arguably the longest epic in the world), and of the epic itself. Though parts of this immense oral epic have been (and in places still are) sung throughout Central Asia, and as far East as to the Uighur people of Xinjiang Province in China, the work is now pre eminently the national epic of the Kyrgyz People. This has been the case especially since 1995, when the Government of Kyrgyzstan celebrated what they touted as the one thousand year anniversary of the birth of the hero Manas. On that occasion the government invited distinguished guests from around the world to listen to recitations and to visit the birthplace of the hero Manas. There is much dispute about the origins and age of this huge epic, which has different text histories in different regions, though a leading opinion is that in fact the core of the epic was created in the eighteenth century, and reflects seventeenth century interactions between the Turki speaking nomads of the Central Asian mountains, and the Mongols to the north of them. This opinion allows that the figure of Manas himself may have been interpolated into the epic in the eighteenth century, while older strata of the epic may have included tales involving the introduction of Islam into Kyrgyzstan, and be extremely hard to date.

The Oral Epic. *Manas* is by any interpretation a fully oral epic, created among nomadic peoples of Central Asia whose creative traditions were and still are preserved by non-writing peoples. While much Central Asian oral poetry is performed, sung to instrumental accompaniment, *Manas* seems to have been recited throughout, with ample opportunity for digressions and embellishments; there are some eighty versions of the epic—but with neither music nor song—though a *recitative* tone conveys the language. (The metric is for the most part lines of seven or eight stressed syllables with end rhymes and very conspicuous internal alliteration.)

The setting. The setting for these recitals will typically have been the nomadic *yurt*, crowded with clan or visitor listeners, avid to hear the familiar tales, and prepared for a long night of singing, which could often last from evening to dawn, as the reciter grew more and more entranced by his recitation. The reciters of this epic, called *manaschi* today, are, though dwindling in number, honored community members. Two particular *manaschi*, Sagymbai Orozbekov (1867-1930) and Sayakbai Karalaev (1894-1971), are widely considered the finest *manaschi* to have performed. It is not unusual for these singers to have acquired their roles in a dream appearance to them of Manas himself, and to spend initiatory craft training periods sleeping near the nationally revered 'tomb of Manas.' There is also a close bond between shamanistic practice and the singing of the *Manas* epic, so that visions with healing implications become active components of many recitations of *Manas*.

The tales themselves. The tales that were unfolded, in that setting on the Kyrgyz steppe, would have been as familiar to their listeners as those of any of the oral epics we mention in this course. The core theme of *Manas* is the heroic battles of Manas and his descendants (seventeen generations in one version) and supporters against the Khitan and Oirat enemies to the north, and the subsequent return of the Kyrgyz to their ancestral homelands. In the first of the three books of the epic—as scholarship has tamed this very wild oral plant—we deal with the prehistory, birth and deeds of Manas himself; noting that he was born into power like a lion, 'butting from the belly's breach, bearing blood in both his hands,' that he is strong and mischievous as a youngster, and that he leads his people into battle against the

Uighurs, whose ruler gives his daughter to Manas in marriage. Manas then leads his united and stronger people against the Afghans, whom he defeats. In the second book, we follow the life of Senetei, the son of Manas. In the third book we meet and follow the adventures, deeds and death of Seitek the grandson of Manas. In each of these books, however, and depending on the version we read, the narrative development branches out richly into sub themes. Teams of editors remain busy with the job of editing, pruning, and publishing this creation, which surpasses any other text we meet in this course, in its current actuality for the culture that bore it.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

The following two web addresses will give you a distinct idea of the sound and material of this epic, as will YouTube. Attend to these websites, and read selectively in the two secondary texts listed below. It might be easiest to define this assignment in terms of hours devoted to it; three or four hours with these online recordings and translations will suffice.

<http://www.angelfire.com/rnb/bashiri/Manas/manas.html>

A broad general introduction to the Manas epic, with generous (if seriously old fashioned) translated selections. The translation essay is roughly 50 pages long, online.

<http://www.silk-road.com/folklore/manas> The text, plus taped material, will run to some 5000 lines. (Approximation.)

TOTAL READING VERY APPROXIMATELY 125 PAGES

Further Reading

Spirited Performance. The Manas Epic and Society in Kyrgyzstan. N. van der Heide, Amsterdam, 2008.

Hatto, A.T., ed. *Traditions of Heroic and Epic Poetry, Vol. I, The Traditions* (London, 1980).

Suggested paper topics

Although *Manas* is now captured by the traditions of writing, and even scholarship, it is an exclusively oral epic. (Listen to versions of it, as you catch them on YouTube, and see how various are the versions of the epic offered by current performers.) Have we encountered other purely oral epics in this course? Do you see any special problems associated with the conversion of such oral epic into a written text? Does *Manas* itself present unique difficulties when it comes to converting it into a 'publishable scholarly text'?

The trained and acclaimed *manaschi*, or reciters of *Manas*, are frequently viewed as shamanistic visionaries. They invoke the spirits of Manas and his people for the recitation of their poems, and they pay homage, in their career building, to the tomb of Manas himself. Do you see this shamanistic element in the *Manas* material you have read? Have you seen elsewhere, in our work in this course, association

between epic reciter and the inspirational material in what he recites? Have you seen the reciter as inspired performer?

#29 African: Sundiata

The Malian epic. The epic of *Sundiata* is a semi-historical Malian epic, orally composed in the 14th century by, so far as we know, *griots*, the traditional singers of Malian culture. (Still a creative force in West African culture, *griots* have always been of social and spiritual importance—frequently preserving mysterious insights—while at the same time serving as praise singers and historians of inestimable value for supporting great tales and powerful figures.) The foundations of the present epic are the creator of the Malian Empire, Sundiata Keita (1217-1256), and thus the epic is supported by events from the (at the time of composition) fairly recent Malian past. We have no record of an individual author for the work—though there must at the least have been an early, 14th century, compiler. The post composition history of the epic is impossible to trace: oral tradition will have been the chief maintaining force, until at least the late 19th century, when in the period of Colonialism French officers and Arab scholars managed to piece together something like the present, scholarship-shaped text of the poem. It is worth noting that the epic continues to be sung, studied, and discussed throughout the West Africa of the former Malian Empire.

Folk lore motifs. Like many of the works we have discussed, *Sundiata* weaves into itself folk tale motifs: the ugly hunchback woman—a buffalo in this case—whose womb will bear the saving hero; the young hero to be who is virtually retarded in his physical development—until his lion like strength explodes from him; the hero and his powerful antagonist exchange ritual jibes at one another—

'Know, then, that I am the wild yam of the rocks; nothing will make me leave Mali. Know, also that I have in my camp seven master smiths who will shatter the rocks'. 'Then, yam, I will eat you.'

'I am the poisonous mushroom that makes the fearless vomit.'

'As for me, I am the ravenous cock, the poison does not matter to me.'

Mythical-historical space of the epic. Meanwhile the story itself moves through a space which is partly mythical-poetic, and partly historical, as said above. We can see through the poem the power development of the original hero of the Mandinke people, and the grand uncle of Sundiata, Mansa Musa (1288-1337), who was to become the most powerful of the rulers of Mali, and to amass immeasurable wealth. We can see the early exile and wanderings of the founder of the Malian Empire, the struggles for power which eventuated in the decisive Battle of Kirina (1236), in which Sundiata trounced his most effective foes, and the return of Sundiata to his own people, the Mandinkes, from whose bosom he had emerged a long time, and many struggles, earlier.

Epic composition and historical background. Among folk/heroic epics, we have found, some came into being long after the events that lie within them, while others were composed/compiled in relative proximity to their founding events. Of the latter kind is *Sundiata*, as are *La Chanson de Roland* or *El Cid*. Of the former kind, far more numerous, would be epics like *The Tain*, *The Iliad*, or the *Mahabharata*. Of the latter kind, *Sundiata* for instance, we can truly say that they are living history, and in some senses the kind of record a historian must value.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read **all** of the following text:

Sundiata, an Epic of Old Mali, trans. G.D.Pickett (London, 1971), pp. 101.

TOTAL READING 101 PAGES

Further Reading

Finnegan, Ruth, *Oral Literature in Africa* (Open Book Publishers, 2012.)

Suggested paper topics

Is it easy, in cases like *Sundiata*, to draw the line between what is history and what is poetry? Or are the two genres very close, especially when it comes to the establishing of the foundations and developments of oral cultures? Should we see the role of the *griot* as one of keeping the records, or rather of an inventor of praise songs?

Sundiata is roughly contemporary with *El Cid* and *La Chanson de Roland*. Do you see something 'European' about the latter, and 'African' about the former? What seems 'African' about the former, 'European' about the latter, or do you dispute any difference of this sort?

#30 Mesoamerican: Popol Vuh

Guatemalan epic. *The Popol Vuh* (Sacred Book, National Book, Book of the Community) is a Mayan Indian epic cosmogony, a collection of traditional stories about the gods and mortals of the cosmos, and a history of the rulers of the Mayan people to the year 1550. It is a highly literary collection, of texts of great importance to the Mayan people, specifically to the Quiche Mayan who live in the central Highlands, and one of whose sacred sites was the town of Chichecastanango--still today, more than five hundred years after the Spanish conquest of Central America, a busy center of Mayan life. This epic is basically an account of creation. Is it the first such epic we have studied?

The Popol Vuh. As with so many of the epics we have read, the *Popol Vuh* has come to us at a point far later than its original composition, and mediated by other hands than those of the original. The story of the text that reached us is initiated by one Spanish priest, Father Jimenez, who was in the mid 18th century assigned to missionary residence in the church of Chichicastenango. It was there that he found the Spanish text on which our present version of the *Popol Vuh* is based. That text itself, he was able to discover, was itself based on a compilation of texts made in Spanish in the middle of the 16th century, at the time of the Spanish Conquest—and in fact of the fairly complete destruction of communities and texts in highland Guatemala. But that only takes us back to the Spanish versions of the original of this text, which scholarship has identified as based on a set of Mayan hieroglyphic texts. We are left with a vast range of possible dates for the initial glyph carving. One reigning opinion is that at least the most recent of the original hieroglyphic materials must have dealt with an extensive period of Mayan migration, occurring between 800-1000 A. D. Thus what we have, in the translated text before us, is at a characteristically (for the epic) distant and complex remove from the original material underlying it.

Literary power of the epic. The epic remaining is of high verbal quality, and yet, for it is a creation story and not precisely a literary creation, it proceeds in thought patterns which will challenge the Western reader. (The same might be said for *Gilgamesh*?) The four major parts of the epic are clear—though they are interspersed with lateral stories which, as in other epics we have read, do not further the line of the main narrative. First comes the story of the Creation. We have surprises here, which signal the difference in perspective of this epic from the Near Eastern/Hebraic accounts. First the Gods create animals of all the kinds familiar to Mayans of the time and place. But the animals refuse to praise the gods in a suitable fashion or language—simply screeching out their own distinctive sounds. So the gods decide to make human beings, so proper praise can be offered to them. But the gods make human beings out of wood, and those beings are without souls, thus unable to coordinate with the cosmos. Finally the humans we know, with souls, step onto the planet and praise. (Is it not evident that the perspective of this creation story differs in many ways from familiar Western creation stories?) The remainder of the epic deals with such seminal events as the invention of the sacred Ball Game, important in Mayan ritual, the creation of societies, the aforementioned migration, and the chronological history of the Mayan people.

Readings

Primary Source Reading

Read one of these two translations of the *Popol Vuh*:

The Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiche Maya, trans. Goetz and Morley (Norman, 1950), pp. 1-235.

Popol Vuh, trans. Dennis Tedlock (New York, 1985), pp. 1-227.

TOTAL READING ROUGHLY 230 PAGES

Further Reading

Sylvanus Morley, *The Ancient Maya* (Stanford, 1947).

Suggested paper topics

Are you satisfied to consider a creation myth account as an example of epic? What has the *Popol Vuh* in common with other epics we have worked on in this course?

We have been dividing epics into two categories, literary and folk-heroic. Into which category does the *Popol Vuh* fall?