
Comparison Of Achilles And Roland

The two epic poems, "The Iliad" and "The Song of Roland" present two epic heroes, Achilles and Roland. Throughout many of the epic poems in history, the heroes tend to possess many of the same characteristics, such as: A noble birth, capable of deeds of great strength and courage, great warrior, etc. ("Characteristics of Epic Heroes") However, due to the rise of Christianity, some of these epic characteristics changed, while others stayed the same. In comparing Achilles and Roland, one can see what stayed the same, such as being skilled warriors, as well as specific changes. Among these changes are the hero's reasons for fighting wars, as well as emotions expressed as a hero throughout the poems.

One epic hero trait that remained the same is the reputation for being the most skilled warrior among their respective people. Throughout "The Iliad" Achilles is described as a powerful warrior. Ajax describes him as "Lion-hearted Achilles, the smasher of men," (Homer, 7 232) while Patroclus calls him the "By far the best of the Achaeans". (16, 22-23) The ornamental epithet of lion-hearted Achilles shows the bravery, courage, and boldness Achilles possesses, while the description of smasher of men describes quite simply his amazing success that he has on the battlefield against other men. By calling him the best of the Achaeans, Patroclus states Achilles renown among the people for being the best warrior that exists in their culture. The Achaeans understand this, which is why they try so hard to get Achilles to come back and fight on their side, knowing he can change the outcome of the war. Roland also shares this reputation among his people for being great in war, as understood when Turold describes his fighting during the war with the Muslims. "The count Rollanz, he canters through the field, Holds Durendal, he well can thrust and wield, Right great damage he's done the Sarrazines You'd seen them, one on other, dead in heaps, Through all that place their blood was flowing clear!" (Turold 1338-1343) This description of the end result of Roland's fight in this war, many dead bodies heaped into piles all around him, shows the great skill he possesses as a fighter and as the best among the Franks. The excerpts from both poems show that being the most skilled warrior is a hero trait that stayed constant over time.

Although Roland and Achilles were both great warriors, they differed in their reasons for fighting in war. While Roland fights in war to best serve his Lord and thereby fulfill his calling as a vassal to his Lord, Achilles only concerns himself with gaining personal honor and glory through his accomplishments in war. When the Muslim troops come to attack the rear troops that Roland leads, he gives a speech to motivate his troops: "That Emperour, who left us Franks on guard, A thousand score stout men he set apart, And well he knows, not one will prove coward. Man for his lord should suffer with good heart... So, if I die, who has it afterward Noble vassals he well may say it was." (Turold, 1114-1117 1122-1123) Roland understands that this may include suffering and even death but counts it as part of his duty to his Lord if those events come to pass. Thus, Roland's motives here are not to gain personal glory and honor through killing the Muslim troops; rather, his motive to fight is to show how great a vassal he is by perfectly serving his Lord and fighting for him. Achilles however, does not demonstrate this same motive to fight, his motive being completely personal. This becomes evident when considering the decision he makes when faced with two fates, "If I remain and fight to take the city of the Trojans, then my homecoming is no more, but my fame will be forever. If I return to my home in the land of my fathers, there will be no glorious renown, yet I will live long, and the doom of death will not soon

find me.” (Homer 9 407-413) When faced with the decision between a long life without glory and a short life full of glory, he chooses the latter, showing his true desires in life. Thus, his motive to re-enter the war between the Greeks and the Trojans is his desire to live this short life full of glory and recognition won on the battlefield. The differences between Roland and Achilles shows how Christianity shaped one’s personal motive to fight, as it became more important to serve one’s Lord as a loyal vassal rather than gain personal glory and honor through winning on the battlefield.

The next way that Christianity changed the epic hero is through the general emotions expressed throughout the poems. Achilles does not show a broad range of emotions, only anger, while Roland chooses to express sadness and regret at the events that happen during the war. As the beginning of “The Iliad” states, the theme of the poem is Achilles’ rage and the consequences of it. While this rage is demonstrated throughout the whole poem, it is best expressed after Achilles fights and kills Hector. Hector begs Achilles to return his dead body to his parents, which Achilles promptly refuses, and instead desecrates Hector’s dead body as he “Let Hector’s head drag on the ground. Then he mounted his chariot and loaded the famous armor. He snapped the whip and drove away, and his two horses gladly sped onward. The dust rose up from Hector’s head as he was dragged, and his dark hair spread out on either side, and all in the dust lay the head that before was so charming.” (Homer, 22 382-388) A warrior who respects the warrior code returns the body back to the family so they can hold an honorable and proper burial. This refusal to honor the warrior code and return Hector’s body to his parents for a proper burial is all prompted by Achilles’ anger after the death of Patroclus. He does not feel empathy for Hector’s parents or spouse, but rather lets his anger cloud and cover these emotions. Roland, however, does not express anger throughout the poem, but rather shows grief for what happens during the fight with the Muslims. After fighting valiantly, Roland and the Archbishop, the two remaining soldiers on their side, survey their troops, and when Roland sees the dead bodies of his comrades, feels the effect that these deaths have on him. “When dead he saw his peers, And Oliver, he held so very dear, Grew tender, and began to shed a tear; Out of his face the colour disappeared; No longer could he stand, for so much grief, Will he or nill, he swooned upon the field.” (Turold, 2215-2220) Rather than feel angry for what has happened and let that control his next decisions against the Muslims, all Roland feels is grief and pain for his dead friends. This shows a key difference that Christianity helped shape, as this type of empathy expressed by Roland is now a common sign of an epic hero. In Achilles’ case, a demonstration of such emotion detracts from his powerful figure and reputation as a strong warrior. For Roland, however, the open demonstration of pain, sadness, and grief for others is now a celebrated characteristic that heroes carry.

By comparing Achilles and Roland, one can see the effects that the rise of Christianity had on the characteristics of an epic hero. While the powerful and skilled battle hero remains, the motive of fighting for personal glory and honor as well as the lack of empathy and demonstration of it has now changed. The epic hero as seen through the example of Roland is an extremely loyal vassal who fights not for glory, but for his Lord. He also openly demonstrates empathy for others, showing a broader range of emotions than before. As evidenced by Achilles and Roland, the rise of Christianity created more changes than similarities in the characteristics of the epic hero.

Works Cited

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