The Homeric Morality of El Cid

The Spanish national epic *The Song of the Cid* is often remembered in its historical context – that of the religious wars between Christians and Islamic Moors on the Iberian Peninsula. While the poem certainly glorifies the Christian warriors in particular, upon closer examination *The Song of the Cid* seems to run counter to the values and moral system that Christianity is based upon. In addition, the role of the Moors in the poem is more ambiguous than might be expected at first glance. It is my contention that the poem in fact embodies an older value system more akin to the morality of ancient Greek epics by Homer than the philosophy of Christ.

In order to establish that this is the case, the parameters of the value systems in question must first be clearly established. Friedrich Nietzsche proposed in *On the Genealogy of Morality* a historical account of value systems. Nietzsche asserted that there have been two primary systems of morality in human history: first, “noble” morality with a conflict between “good and bad” (Nietzsche 10); second, “slave” morality with a conflict between “good and evil”, where the “evil” in the second system is roughly analogous to the “good” of the first (Nietzsche 17). The first system can be thought of as Homeric in nature – strength, power, wealth, vigor, and success are valorized as “good”, as they are in the Greek epics such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* (Nietzsche 12). Achilles and Odysseus fit this characterization – that is why they are heroes in their respective stories. In this case, “bad” is simply the absence of good; i.e. the peasant classes...
who suffer and toil and are pitied by the nobility as being less fortunate, if they are given any thought at all. In contrast, “slave” morality (as Nietzsche refers to it) arose in opposition to “noble” morality and is embodied in the tenets of Judaism and especially Christianity. Wealth, strength, power are characterized as “evil”, while meekness, mercy, compassion, humility and sacrifice are valorized as “good” (Nietzsche 17). In Homeric morality, one needs strong, worthy opponents to overcome in the pursuit of honor and glory. On the other hand, in Christian morality, one’s enemies are characterized as being “evil” and therefore possessing inferior souls, and are often demonized (Nietzsche 21).

*The Song of the Cid* is (somewhat ironically) quite devoid of Christian morality, in spite of the setting and the period. After the conquest of Murviedro, the Cid and his forces are surrounded by a numerically superior Moorish army from Valencia, prompted by a (well-founded) fear of the Cid’s impending conquest of their city. Instead of despairing upon seeing the Moorish army, the Cid, incredibly, rejoices, saying “Our Father in heaven, thank you!” (*The Song of the Cid* 81). Why does the Cid rejoice and praise God in this instance? At first, to the modern reader, the statement seems absurd. Is the Cid masochistic and eager for martyrdom? The text up to this point has no evidence to support this. Rather, it seems clear from the Cid’s previous exploits that he thirsts for battle and victory. The superior Moorish army is an opportunity, not a liability, in the pursuit of glory and material wealth. This raises the question, however: why would a good Christian desire this? The Cid goes on with his peculiar statement: “We’ve invaded their lands, we’ve wronged them over and over, we’ve eaten their bread and drunk their wine, here they are to besiege us; surely, they have that right. But unless they beat us in battle, we will not leave” (*The Song of the Cid* 81-83). There is much here of note. First, the Cid apparently shows no remorse regarding his military exploits against the Moors in spite of
using language that baldly describes the activities of violence, and he even claims that they have been “wronging” the Moors. There is no reservation in this statement; the Cid does not need to justify his actions. Indeed, he even seems proud of his accomplishments by emphasizing the material spoils of war – great wealth and pleasures of the body. This seems to be directly at odds with Christian doctrine, which emphasizes humility, mercy to one’s enemies, guilt for one’s sins, and a devaluation of the pleasures of the physical world in exchange for the virtues of the spiritual world beyond. Curiously, the Cid seems to acknowledge the merit of the Moors in the same breath; namely that due to his transgressions against them, it is expected that the Moors would want to fight back – they are not demonized as being “evil” for so doing. The language is not loaded against the Moors; it simply states fact and, moreover, even empathizes with their moral position, acknowledging that they have a “right” to fight the Cid. The enemy is not a reprehensible evil-doer; he is simply a worthy adversary.

A picture of morality begins to form; but its nature certainly does not seem Christian – instead the virtues of our hero are Homeric virtues. Like many ancient Greek heroes, the Cid is intoxicated with the allure of the physical challenge of honorable combat. After this statement and planning for the battle to come takes place, the Cid’s army prepares for the fight with an overwhelming sense of duty, but there is no mention at all of dread or fear on the part of the Cid or his men – there is no coward here, as would be consistent with the heroes of antiquity. Once the battle is about to be joined, the Cid rallies his troops by saying, “In the name of God and the apostle Saint James, at them, knights, with zest, and pleasure, and delight! Because I am Cid, Ruy Díaz from Vivar!” (The Song of the Cid 85). Immediately, the Christian God is invoked, as well as Saint James, to lend luck or good fortune to the ensuing battle (irrespective of the non-violent philosophy of Christ). It is deeply ironic that the Cid invokes Christian figures, but really
is it not that different from the ancient Greeks who invoked their particular gods before heading into battle, be it Athena or Zeus or Ares to bless their efforts? Perhaps more importantly, however, there is another example of the warrior spirit – suggesting that the knights should not only be prepared for battle, but to take pleasure and “delight” in combat, to pursue it with “zest”. Finally, the Cid ends his rallying cry with an affirmation of his identity – clearly there is personal pride at work, as well as the pride the Cid’s men have in him. Again, this is consistent with the noble conception of “good,” that is, being defined as oneself. In contrast, Christian doctrine characterizes pride as a cardinal sin. In sum, these are no reluctant defenders of the faith – they are warriors who take pride and joy in what they do.

The final passage of this battle contains yet more perspective, this time on the enemy and their fate. “There were a lot of Moors, they tried to stand and fight. Then Alvar Fáñez came at them, from the other side: Not wanting to retreat, they had to run or ride (if they could) for their lives. The battlefield became a happy place,” (The Song of the Cid 85). This passage, although quite succinct in its description of the battle, gives the impression that the Moors, in spite of their bravery and willingness to fight, are swiftly overwhelmed by the Cid’s forces. Once again, there is no overt vilification at work here – the Moors simply lose to the Cid’s superior tactics and fierceness in battle. Like the Cid’s men, the Moors are not cowards; they do not wish to retreat, but are left with no choice due to the reality of the situation. As a final note, the description of the battlefield as a “happy place” after the battle is won leaves no doubt as to the text’s attitude to warfare – winning is good and losing is unfortunate. Though this notion may seem simplistic, or even morally questionable by Christian standards, this is right at home in the ancient conception of “good”; a hero is measured by the victories he produces.
To conclude, this small passage of *The Song of the Cid*, which describes merely one battle of many, is entirely consistent with the Nietzschean conception of the Homeric moral system. It also seems flatly at odds with Christian morality, in spite of the faith being invoked and ostensibly fought for. However, it is abundantly clear this is in name only; the Cid fights for wealth, power, glory and honor – conversion, saving the immortal souls of the non-Christians are the last things on his mind. Indeed, elsewhere in the text the Cid is established to be good friends with a particular Moorish king. Religious distinctions serve as convenient delineations, as a mechanism to reach glory through combat – perhaps taking the place of nationalistic symbols in the modern age. Finally, it is historically intriguing that an epic poem from a Christianized 1207 Spain would be told in such a manner; certainly the stories of the classical age would have still held great power over the literary imagination. Perhaps the literary forms lagged behind the moral message itself?

**Works Cited**