

TERMS

Formula – Variable descriptive verse fragments used by bards to construct the poem.
Multiformity – The notion that extant epic poems are not singular creations with one defined set of events or authorial intent but are rather one of many possible versions of a malleable tradition which allows for the bard space to improvise.

INTRODUCTION

Bards of the ancient world developed song traditions of epic poetry which relate historical and mythological events concurrently with religious and philosophical ideas. These epic poems served as a performative reification of mythologies and guide through example of the culture’s ideal way of life. Heroes of epics were role models in their virtues, and their stories were archetypal in the culture’s narrative consciousness. The purpose of this project is to use comparative textual analysis to examine an aspect of the philosophical underpinnings of these two cultures, in this case, their perceptions of truth, falsehood, and dishonesty – and how far each culture is willing to subvert expected cultural values and norms in their epic poetry.

ORAL POETICS AND COMPARATIVE EPIC

Milman Parry and Albert Lord theorized that the origins of epic traditions involved generations of singers retelling and shaping common stories of the heroic mythical past through improvised use of formulaic language and structure. Oral epic poems aren’t one defined text with a single author’s intentions or set writing style but are reflective of a multiform tradition. Examples of such poems in the Indo-European tradition specifically are Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Vyasa’s *Mahabharata*, and Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, which share a root in the Proto-Indo-European language family. Their shared language ancestry is accompanied by parallels in cultural rituals, forms, story patterns, and character values in members of their societies. One such cross-cultural trait is the value of honesty and truth-telling.



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TEXTUAL EVIDENCE

Iliad: “Son of Atreus, do not lie when you know the plain truth” (Book 4).
“Do not fear and let no thought of death be upon you.” [*after they’re finished learning about the enemy encampment from their prisoner*] “Do not, Dolon, have in your mind any thought of escape.” [...] “Dolon’s head still speaking dropped in the dust” (Book 6).

Odyssey: “As for the things you inquire and entreat of me, never would I say anything swerving away from the truth nor ever deceive you, but... facts unerring (Book 17).
“There it was that I looked on Odysseus [the disguised speaker] and gave him a guest-gift” (Book 19).

Mahabharata: “That which is untrue doesn’t have an existence. That which is true has no destruction” (Bhagavad Gita).
“Yudhishtira was scared of speaking a lie but was addicted to the prospect of victory. He said that Ashvatthama [son of the enemy he is addressing] had been killed and indistinctly added that it was an elephant [who shared the name]” (Drona Parva).

Ramayana: “The world is established in truth. The rishis and the gods also revere truth. A person who speaks truth in this world obtains what is supreme after death. A man who practices falsehood is feared like a snake” (Chapter 2).

CONCLUSION

Both Greek and Indian epic poems are markedly strong in their abhorrence with the misrepresentation of truth; conversely, their value for truth in interpersonal dealings is constantly featured in the speeches of their characters. They both occasionally subvert these standards, giving poetic cultural credence through oral tradition to the idea that even legendary heroes and gods sometimes disregard for varying reasons, and with mixed results, the universal disposition towards truth.

