



Exploring The Danger of Hubris in The Ancient Epics of Mesopotamia , Greek and Roman

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Abstract :

This study examines the central role of hubris in the ancient epics of Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome, where gods enforce moral order by punishing excessive pride and defiance of divine will. Drawing on The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Iliad, and The Odyssey, it explores the origins of hubris, from its Greek definition of dehumanizing others by force to Aristotle's categorization of it as a "form of slight" stemming from conceit toward both gods and people. These narratives reveal gods enforcing humility against excessive pride. In his rhetoric, Aristotle defines hubris as a degrading slight motivated by conceit that is different from simple ambition. The idea, which originally meant violent degradation of others or divine will, is still relevant today as a cautionary tale about overreach—timeless lessons for leaders and cultures prone to unbridled prosperity. The analysis reveals hubris as a timeless flaw, endemic to all societies, offering modern insights into the perils of unchecked arrogance amid success.

Keywords: Hubris, The Epic of Gilgamesh, The Iliad, The Odyssey, Aristotle

استكشاف خطر الغرور في الملاحم القديمة لبلاد ما بين النهرين واليونان والرومان

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الملخص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة الدور المحوري للغرور في الملاحم القديمة لبلاد ما بين النهرين واليونان وروما، حيث يفرض الآلهة النظام الأخلاقي بمعاقبة الكبرياء المفرط وتحدي الإرادة الإلهية. بالاستناد إلى ملحمة جلجامش، والإلياذة، والأوديسة، يستكشف هذا البحث أصول الغرورة، بدءًا من تعريفها اليوناني الذي يُشير إلى تجريد الآخرين من إنسانيتهم بالقوة، وصولًا إلى تصنيف أرسطو لها كـ"نوع من الإهانة" نابع من الغرور تجاه



الآلهة والبشر على حد سواء. تكشف هذه الروايات عن آلهة تُرسخ التواضع في وجه الكبرياء المفرط. في بلاغته، يُعرّف أرسطو الغطرسة بأنها إهانة مُهينة مدفوعة بالغرور، وهي تختلف عن مجرد الطموح. هذه الفكرة، التي كانت تعني في الأصل الإذلال العنيف للآخرين أو الإرادة الإلهية، لا تزال حاضرة اليوم كقصة تحذيرية من التجاوزات - دروس خالدة للقادة والثقافات المُعرّضة للرخاء الجامح. يكشف التحليل أن الغطرسة عيبٌ مُتأصل في جميع المجتمعات، مُقدّمًا رؤى معاصرة حول مخاطر الغرور الجامح في خضم النجاح.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الغطرسة، ملحمة جلجامش، الإلياذة، الأوديسة، أرسطو

1.1 Introduction :

The role of the gods in determining and guiding the destinies of men is a central feature of the ancient epics of Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome. These epics function as religious texts preserving the lessons and values of ancient and classical religious traditions, and consequently the portents offered by the gods serve as an opportunity for humanity. For epic characters, the wrath of the gods is irrefutably proved to be the implacable result of hubris, and hence the ultimate and most powerfully persuasive threat of punitive destiny. Those who spurn the warnings of the gods and proceed forth in defiant haughtiness, this most tragic and destructive moral failing, bring divine retribution crashing down upon themselves in a wave of supernatural fury. Hubris is an ancient idea that traced back to Greek mythology. Power, particularly unlimited and unfettered power, is intoxicating and manifests itself behaviorally in a number of ways, ranging from enhanced cognitive processes to a lack of restraint, bad judgment, severe narcissism, deviant behavior, and even brutality. Hubristic behaviour of overconfidence, great pride, and a refusal to ignore counsel drive powerful people in positions of leadership to overextend themselves, resulting in bad effects for themselves and others. Hybris, the word's original form, meant to degrade or humiliate via force. This phrase eventually came to signify the assumption that one may defy destiny or the will of the gods.

In ancient definitions, hubris referred explicitly to defiance of the gods or of divine order. However, the modern conception of hubris is broader. It also entails contempt for the general bounds of human capabilities and for other forms of authority. Anyone may exhibit hubris; it is not only those in myths and literature. From the time of the Ancient Greeks to the present, the concept of hubris has changed slightly. Today, it also alludes to a general lack of humility and a disregard for human limitations rather than only a defiance of the gods or the "natural order." The concept behind hubris in modern use is that anyone who behaves in ways motivated by excessive pride will ultimately not work out; in essence, it is the idea that arrogance makes people blind, and even if hubris leads to early success, it will inevitably lead to tragedy.



In his work "Rhetoric," Aristotle classified hubris as a "form of slight." To put it another way, in ancient Greece, hubris was symbolized by an action that would humiliate a victim only for the offender's personal gratification. This character fault, according to Aristotle, stems from hatred and/or arrogance toward other people, particularly the gods. Further examination of the Slight by Aristotle is useful in understanding what he means by "actualisation of an opinion." (Christensen,2017) Aristotle differentiates three types of slight: spite (epêasmos), disdain (kataphronêsis), and insult (hubris). Aristotle says relatively little about disdain, besides the tautological explanation that "whatever people think is of no worth, they despise, and what they consider is of no worth, they disdain" (Rhet. 1378b16-17)

1.2 Hubris's Fall: Divine Retribution Across Mesopotamian, Greek, and Roman Epics:

The term "hubris" comes from Greek mythology and refers to a dangerous mix of overconfidence, overambition, arrogance, and pride. Hubris was regarded as one of the deadliest characteristics in ancient Greece. Because he had created their wings out of thread and wax, Daedalus advised his son not to fly too high to avoid being too close to the heat of the sun or too low to avoid being too close to the moisture of the sea when they fled the labyrinth in Crete. Despite this warning, an overly ecstatic Icarus melted his wax wings and fell into the river after flying too close to the sun. Icarus' hubris, his disobedience to his father by soaring too high, serves as a cautionary tale about humility and moderation, as well as the perils of boldness.

In The Epic of Gilgamesh, both gods and humans have a clear place in a hierarchy. The gods, even among themselves, severely punish pride, which is demonstrated by going beyond the bounds of that position. Initially motivated by vanity, Gilgamesh's quest costs him dearly in Enkidu's death. In a similar vein, Enlil is humbled among the gods after giving the command for a flood to wipe out humanity because it was not his place to make such a haughty decision. Nevertheless, by the end of the epic, Gilgamesh has learned to be more humble, and one of the tale's main lessons is the "moral" of accepting one's place in the hierarchy of the world.

Thus, Gilgamesh displays hubris by sleeping with all the brides. At the same time, his sexuality and physical prowess are obviously recognized and crucial to his identity as a hero; he is oversexed to the point that the gods intervene to safeguard Uruk's citizens. Thus, despite his imperfections, Gilgamesh is the protagonist of the epic. Enkidu, too, is an imperfect hero, and since their strengths and shortcomings balance and complement one another, the two men accomplish great



things. However, the two heroes not only fail to fight heavenly decrees, but they also inflict tragedy upon themselves. The epic hero walks a tightrope between courage and conceit. This pride, or hubris, is a recurrent theme in the epic and Gilgamesh's downfall. Hubris found substantial associations with sexual misbehavior and general acts of aggression toward other people. Aristotle, for example, thought that those who engaged in these acts did so with the intention of degrading their victims while also having a deeper need to feel superior.

“Hubris consists in doing and saying things that cause shame to the victim ... simply for the pleasure of it. Retaliation is not hubris, but revenge. ... Young men and the rich are hubristic because they think they are better than other people.” (Aristotle, *Rhet.*, 1378b23–29) Aristotle claims that when people act with hubris, it is motivated by a desire for pleasure or a wish to feel superior to others.

The aura and might of the Wild Ox Gilgamesh could not be resisted. Neither the mother's daughter nor the father's son nor the noble's wife, the bride of the warrior, was in danger. "Is this the shepherd of the people?" asked the elderly men. Is this the people's knowledgeable protector? The author compares Gilgamesh to a "wild bull" in this passage to stress his immense power. He repeatedly repeats the phrases "nor" and "neither" to emphasize that no one in the city can overwhelm his immense hubris. The purpose of this paragraph is to assist in establishing Gilgamesh's character and to truly show the contrast in his character from the beginning of the poem to the end. (Ferry, 1992,p.87)

Accordingly, Hubris is seen as a personal trait rather than a group one. However, the group to which the offender belongs may face the same repercussions if the improper conduct occurs. Furthermore, hubris demonstrates a disconnection from reality and an overestimation of one's achievements, powers, and competence (Roman & Monica, 2010, p. 16). Quality, on the other hand, is not related to traditional expectations such as high regard. Instead, it refers to fluctuating self-esteem and exaggerated personal perceptions in the face of modest reality (Hansen, 2005, p. 73). Regarding the aforementioned negative features, Greek and Roman mythology avoid associating themselves with the attribute (Hansen, 2005, p. 34). Nemesis, the goddess of vengeance, often punished hubris in Greek mythology; the word "nemesis" is occasionally used to describe the destruction or punishment brought on by hubris.

On the other hand, in early Greek epics, hubris is also exploited by displaying negative human characteristics such as a love of social standing, insatiable appetites and desires, the perversion of divine or natural laws, and the



perdition of the paths of God. The war it causes is not located in the epic; only the moral consequences of the exegetical act are presented. The wrong that Odysseus commits to the Cyclops is the act of being cruel and arrogant, and his main motivation is to obtain fame. The admiration and envy of an individual seeking to pay Odysseus back play a crucial role in achieving kleos. The impossibility of Odysseus obtaining kleos is demonstrated in the games. A rival explains, 'I pray instead for disaster to befall him and never return, though I win an illustrious prize wherever I am.' (Coolidge, 1980, p. 54).

In many myths, humans who exhibit arrogance and hubris discover the folly of overexerting their egos in painful ways. Hubris is a Greek concept referring to human pride that puts one on par with the gods. In ancient Greece, hubris is one of the worst attributes one can possess, and it always results in disaster. This last characteristic helps us understand its position in tragedy in specific: hubris is when too much of a good thing produces harm. Some Greek cities viewed hubris to be a crime, or more accurately, they considered crimes like rape and murder to be crimes of hubris. Hubris is a trait that many characters in Greek tragedies exhibit, and it ultimately leads to their demise. These kinds of character defects were common in old Greek tragedies such as Oedipus and Achilles. The adage "Pride goes before a fall" encapsulates its core concept. Hubris was a lethal transgression of boundaries in ancient Greek culture, particularly those set by the gods. It was not only conceit. The ancient Greeks thought that excessive pride or self-confidence undermined divine power and that the gods imposed limits on human behavior. Nemesis, the heavenly vengeance for such deeds, was strongly linked to hubris. Nemesis served as both retribution and a force for balance and justice, reminding mortals of their position in the world. The interplay between hubris and nemesis was central to Greek tragedy, in which characters who displayed hubris were ultimately undone by their own actions.

Zeus binds Prometheus to a rock on Mount Caucasus and commands an eagle to consume Prometheus' liver forever after Prometheus, the Greek Titan, transfers knowledge—represented as fire—to humans. Knowledge is a nice thing...until you have too much of it and get burnt. On the other hand, however, the most iconic definition is Achilles' refusal to fight the Trojans. Despite The Iliad's formal status as an epic, Achilles' hubris shares many traits with tragic heroes like Hamlet, who overthinks his actions, and Oedipus, who is driven by an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Homer is obviously aware that the same traits that lead to heroism can also lead to tragedy. Odysseus' men are often punished for their conceit, most notably for eating the sacred cattle of the sun god Helios and for unleashing the very winds that would bring them home. It should be noted that



throughout the story, these same men are urged to pillage the possessions of others, and no one is less dependable than Odysseus himself.

In an effort to dodge the Oracle of Delphi, which predicted that he would kill his father and wed his mother, Oedipus leaves his Corinthian home. He kills a man he encounters while traveling, who turns out to be his biological father, whom he was unaware of (Laius). Later, Oedipus frees Thebes from the Sphinx, and as a result, he is given the kingship of Thebes and marries the queen (Jocasta), who has always been his true mother. Oedipus exhibits several traits that could be considered hubris, including his insult of the blind prophet Tiresias, his excessive pride that prevents him from seeing the truth, and his desire to avoid his fate. When the truth is revealed, Oedipus' mother commits herself, and Oedipus blinds himself in grief. There are several examples of hubris in the history of Greek heroes and tragedies: The death of Niobe's children served as retribution for boasting about having more children than Leto, the mother of Apollo and Artemis; When Pentheus refused to worship Dionysius, his own mother, who had become enraged, tore him apart; After rejecting Echo's overtures, Narcissus offended the gods and was cursed to fall in love with his own reflection. As a result, he wilted away, preoccupied with his own image. The list continues. Finally, these stories and the tragic consequences for everyone involved serve as a reminder of the value of humility and the perils of hubris. Hubris upset the natural order, resulting in an unavoidable nemesis: the gods' wrath.

In other Sophoclean plays, his representation of hubris does not consist of an appreciation of its multifaceted form, but rather of a unique expression, usually of the act of challenging an established law. The law, it should be noted, does not necessarily have to be a human law. It can be a divine ordinance or an unwritten law. As arrogant subjects and moral origin, profoundly different from that capable of representing a physician hit by humankind's passions and mercifulness, which our very complex modern languages are no longer able to fully catch. Oedipus is truly one of the greatest tragedies, for it reveals what is, for ancient Greek culture, the dividing terrain of human moral attitude.

In some ways, Roman literature stands apart from Greek literature, not as a continuation of it, but as the imitation of one nation by another. A comparison with Greece and a contrast with it can suggest that, while Athens' creative force was diverse, Rome's role was subordinate and derivative. Roman writers had confidence in their works, admired themselves, and turned contemptuous eyes toward the Greeks. The Roman love of power and glory increased in the same measure that virtues became weaker, and the pleasure of literary beauties surpassed the love of arms. The symbols of their greatness are, for example, the Aeneid and



the Gallic victories. The Romans first had oral literature about the ways of war. When they conquered Greece, they set about forming their own poetry and chose to recreate on their land a culture that was already weakened and no longer even lived, but was in retreat. They chose to hurry muddy Greek springs to fill their parched Latin veins.

Homer demonstrates in *The Iliad* that hubris is not a positive trait, as overconfidence leads to inordinate pride, which inevitably results in a horrible downfall and loss. This concept is initially mentioned when Helen leaves with Paris. To incite all the Greek rulers, Agamemnon takes advantage of Helen. Agamemnon understood that if they defeated Troy, he would gain control of a major trade route, making him the uncontested ruler of all of Greece. The gods, however, refused to provide a fair breeze so that the ships could sail, even though all of the monarchs had gathered in Greece. Agamemnon said, "Give me a fair wind and a hope of glory if it will cost me my kingdom and my life." Achilles is enraged and pleads to his goddess mother, "If I'm going to die soon, shouldn't I have what I want?" (Homer, 1990, 18.94-126) Thetis, who is only concerned about her son, asks Zeus to force the Greeks to lose until Achilles battles again. As the Greeks are gradually driven back, Agamemnon asks Achilles to return Briseis. Achilles becomes weaker due to his arrogance, and the Trojans are on the verge of setting fire to the Greek ships. Achilles refuses to fight even while a ship is on fire and instead dispatches Patroclus. Patroclus is eventually slain. Achilles regrets his actions and feels guilty. He promises to exact revenge for Patroclus's passing. He returns to the path of a hero through his humility, which motivates him to struggle for his own redemption. These are only a few of the numerous examples in the *Iliad*, but they demonstrate what hubris is.

If Achilles, Odysseus, Agamemnon, and the other Homeric heroes symbolized individual heroics, often known as hubris, Aeneas represented Roman ideals such as endurance, piety, honesty, and subservience to a greater cause—Rome itself. Aeneas has no place for hubris, although Agamemnon, Achilles, and Odysseus have enough. As the *Aeneid* continues, Aeneas becomes more and more an instrument of fate, determining that Rome must be founded. Most importantly, the *Aeneid*'s entire tone varies from that of the Homeric epics. This is partially due to the fact that epics were seen as instructive in Greece, and Aeneas is a Roman hero who would have looked out of place in Greece or Troy, from which we are told he escaped. Augustus demanded an epic that would educate in the Roman way. Meanwhile, Virgil instilled Roman pride by emphasizing the value of family and heritage. He exploited the role of the father in particular to help readers realize the value of love, respect, and duty.



Aeneas, for example, acquired wisdom from his father through a vision. By making an offering to "Lar of Troy," he showed his commitment to his family, to all earlier Trojan families, and to all future Roman generations. The Romans had a motive to honor and preserve their heritage because of this all-encompassing duty. The use of violence to humiliate the victim was the definition of hubris in ancient Athens (this sense of hubris might also characterize rape). Aristotle defined hubris as shaming the victim solely for the committer's own gratification: "doing and doing things that make the victim feel ashamed, not to achieve anything other than what is done, but merely to enjoy it. (Cudjoe et al., 2011). Those who act in exchange for something do not commit hubris; rather, they revenge themselves. The cause of enjoyment for those committing hubris is that by causing harm to others, they believe they are superior; this is why the young and wealthy are hubristic, as they believe they are superior when they commit hubris." ((Aristotle, *Rhet.*, 1378b)

All of the Mesopotamian, Greek, and Roman literature deals with ethical decisions and their consequences. They are often freely chosen by an individual hero. The main characteristic of this type of hero is hubris. Hubris is a person with overwhelming pride who expects the unexpected dangers of their own downfall and who defies the gods in their quest. The idea that pride comes before a fall is a moral that the scribes chose to integrate into the tales of warrior kings. The result of hubris directly corresponds to cognition and culminates in unimaginable transformations of the victim. There comes a point where hubris no longer offers control over the events or spirits set upon by the gods. This oversetting will result in harsh and cruel retribution because, in a state of spirit, those affected deeply violate cosmic order. In simple terms, the gods' vengeance will seek their victims. This theme of hubris is likely associated with historical events of significance that occurred during the eras in which each epic was written.

1.3 Conclusion :

One harmful kind of arrogance is hubris. It transcends taking pride in one's accomplishments or enjoying the good fortune of those one loves. A hero is motivated to act as though he can prevail at all costs by hubris, which is an inflated feeling of self-confidence. A hero is suffering from hubris if he thinks he is the exception to divine order or if he thinks his social standing, intelligence, or power will allow him to defy the law. As they do with Gilgamesh, who exaggerates his semi-divine status, the gods in ancient tales detest hubris and frequently punish it with poetic justice. A hero's conceit serves as both a plot point and a moral lesson because one of the goals of epics is to teach young listeners about what their civilization expects of them. According to the ancient Greek concept, hubris is



always bad. It refers to excessive arrogance or pride rather than simple ambition or self-confidence, which may be neutral or even desirable.

Throughout the ancient epics of Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome, humans repeatedly provoke divine retribution through acts of hubris. Most of these tales of god-sent punishment are direct results of the presumptuous taking of liberties by people who have suffered hard times but have become successful in a land where life is difficult and the rewards from the environment are few and far between. From the ancient epics of Mesopotamia to the Greek and Roman tales of warrior kings, a common theme is the discovery of the dangers of hubris, and the consequences are devastating. In the Sumerian epic poem *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the personal journey is to learn humility. In the Greek epic *The Iliad*, the hubris of three great cities led to battles between Greek and Roman heroes, with one army lacking divine support. This self-confidence in hubris, with no regard for divine support, led to the sacking of the Roman army, and Emperor Darius was killed at the end. The Greek epic *The Odyssey* provides another example of a Roman general abusing hubris at the end of the Greek war, telling the tale of his passage home, during which only one ship survived. The term hubris offers an interesting moral lesson that the ancient scribes explored as a common theme through the interactions of warrior kings with their gods.

In explorations of pride and hubris in the three major ancient epics, it was discovered that in many ways the thrilling journey of the greatest hero of a cultural group into hubris and then out — or beyond — provides lessons appropriate for modern, overindulgent societies. This extensive treatment brings the findings together in a synthetic analysis and shows how present concerns may be interpreted using epic stories as a foundation. Hubris is not unique to ancient heroic societies, but it is endemic to all societies, making the classical theme as relevant today as it was in the ancient world. The main conclusions and revelations from this study show that all ancient cultures presented a pattern in which their heroes displayed hubris, yet brought us ongoing insights into the circumstances that occasion pride, into the multiple versions of hubris, and into the cosmic, oppositional locations, as well as the consequences and the waning or re-entry into proper heroic behavior of the heroes. The heroes' foils and mirror characters displayed the proper path.

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