The Middle Ages and Renaissance: 
Epic in the Christian Era

From the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance, the epic tradition resonates with the influence of the *Aeneid*. Yet Virgil’s long shadow falls across a territory marked by Christianity. Both epic poets and their commentators, writing in a Christianised age, felt the need to account for the pagan origins of epic heroism, which, whether as the wrath of Achilles or the unforgiving patriotism of Aeneas, could be perceived as cruel and unchristian. These needed to be reconciled with the demands of a Christian moral system, with its attendant emphases on compassion and kindness.

The encounter between what was perceived as a pagan – and possibly barbaric – code of honour on the one hand and Christian mercy on the other coincides with a clash between epic and romance. It is no accident that the epic legacy handed down from the classical age is distracted in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance by the possibilities offered by the intervening genre of chivalric romance, specifically, the *chansons de geste* (‘heroic songs’) of the tenth to twelfth centuries. The romance is fundamentally a Christianised genre, telling of the battle between chivalric good-heartedness and pagan wickedness. Such good-heartedness differs from the cool conduct exemplified by Aeneas, particularly in his killing of Turnus at the end of the *Aeneid* in the name of Roman victory. The history of epic in the Renaissance is the story of conflict between these two differing modes of heroic conduct, one premised on patriotism, the other on love and compassion, extremes emblematised by Aeneas in his desertion of Dido, and the knight of romance fighting for both honour and chastity.

In addition, the form of romance is given to allegory, with heroic action becoming a parable for the universal conflict between good and evil that,
The History of the Epic

for Christians, is supposedly constant and ubiquitous until the end of time. The allegorical tendencies of the Middle Ages reveal themselves not just in the detailed symbolism of the medieval romance, but in the tendency, too, to read classical epic as allegorical, in order to account for the sometimes inexplicable ways of pagan honour.

But the trappings of romance are not always easily integrated into epic, and the tight teleological focus of Virgilian epic does not give way lightly to the digressions of romance. The tension between the two is often expressed in Renaissance epics as a distraction from heroic quests, such as the fulfilment of honour, by the attractions of love and sex. Moreover, ultimately, the digressions of chivalric romance are not always easily accommodated to a Christian vision, and the history of Renaissance epic is the story of romance first embraced and then rejected in the search for a way to Christianise the epic.

The problems faced by the epic in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, writ large as the conflict between epic and romance, are discernible in the body of epic theory that accumulates in this period. Medieval epic theory as we know it today is piecemeal, consisting of descriptions of heroic poetry and commentaries on Virgil; yet, these – particularly the latter – do demonstrate that the question of Christianity and the epic was beginning to emerge. As we shall see, in Renaissance Italy the introduction of Aristotle’s *Poetics* allows the matter to be raised with greater force, particularly in debates about the importance and nature of the divine and marvellous in epic, as well as implicitly in the question of whether romance could be combined with epic.

The rise of classical knowledge, accompanied by an increasing moral anxiety, is a trajectory not just in epic theory but in epic poetry of the period. Once the concerns of epic theory have been outlined, this chapter will deal with a Christianised heroic narrative composed without the explicit knowledge of Virgilian epic (and, as an oral or ‘primary’ epic, situated outside the generic line of ‘secondary’ epics that takes us from the classical to the Renaissance epics). This is *Beowulf*, composed some time between the eighth and tenth centuries. A subsequent look at epics in the later Middle Ages clarifies the moral dilemmas faced by those Christian poets who knew of the classical epic form and who were aware of Virgil if not of Homer. The problem of understanding this inherited pagan epic heroism through Christian mores is first tackled by Dante in his *Divina Commedia* (‘The Divine Comedy’), written at the end of the thirteenth century. The possibility of romance as a way of dealing with this problem emerges in subsequent epics. Looking back briefly at the medieval romance, exemplified by the twelfth-century *Chanson de Roland* (‘Song of Roland’), in order to understand better its later