

Zero to Hero, Hero to Zero

Zero to Hero, Hero to Zero:
In Search of the Classical Hero

Edited by

Lydia Langerwerf and Cressida Ryan

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P U B L I S H I N G

Zero to Hero, Hero to Zero: In Search of the Classical Hero,
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—Lydia Langerwerf and Cressida Ryan

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

LYDIA LANGERWERF AND CRESSIDA RYAN

When Captain Marco Kroon was informed of the Dutch Defence Minister's intention to recommend him for the Order of William, Netherlands's equivalent of the Victoria Cross, for his deployment as a lieutenant in Uruzgan province, Afghanistan, he professed that he had no idea as to why exactly he was thus singled out.¹ This confession fits in well with the modesty that today's heroes are supposed to exhibit and in line with this expectation Kroon emphasised that to his mind he had only done his job and any honour he deserved as a result of that belonged to his platoon as much as to him. Modesty, however, was not the only reason for his puzzlement. In fact, it proved difficult not only for him but also for the journalists interviewing him before the ceremony, to point to one specific heroic action that had earned him this prestigious award, which had not been given out for over fifty years. The public along with Captain Kroon had to wait for the Queen's speech on 29th of May 2009 to find out what made him a hero.² In this speech, Queen Beatrix noted that although there was no shortage of gallantry and bravery in Captain Kroon's fighting record, he deserved the award "not for one single act, but for his behaviour as a leader, as a soldier and as a person during the whole mission". She praised his inventiveness, ability and inspired leadership as the chief reasons for the fact that his platoon had successfully engaged the Taliban on many occasions without loss of life, and commented that while Captain Kroon was not afraid of taking great personal risk, the safety of his men always came first. In extremely dangerous situations, Captain Kroon made quick and often surprising decisions which enabled him to come to the

¹ Interview with Marco Kroon in 'Knevel en Van den Brink', 29-02-2009, *EO* (Dutch television)

² Cf. podcast of the ceremony on <http://www.nos.nl>, originally broadcasted 29-05-2009 (last accessed 9th June 2010).

help of allied troops in need while keeping his own men safe. In conclusion, the Queen emphasised that Captain Kroon had always acted professionally and within the mission's mandate and political goals, and that he had respected the instructions given to him.

In comparison, the Victoria Cross is given out generally not for one's general behaviour during a complete mission, but for one (or occasionally two) conspicuous heroic act. Lance Corporal Johnson Beharry, for example, received the VC because on two occasions he saved the life of a comrade at great risk to himself. The citation published in the *London Gazette* on 18th of March 2005 gives a detailed description of the two incidents.³ Similarly, Lance Corporal Bill Apiata received the VC of New Zealand 2nd of July 2007 because he carried a wounded comrade to safety over 70m of rocky terrain under heavy fire.⁴ Trooper Mark Donaldson of the Australian Army also received his country's VC, because during an ambush he first deliberately exposed himself to draw fire away from his wounded comrades and then crossed 80m of open terrain to carry a wounded Afghan interpreter to safety.⁵

There are some similarities between these three heroes and Captain Kroon. Most obviously, they were all recommended for their award on the basis of them saving others at great risk for themselves. It is nevertheless significant that while the official notifications of the awarded VCs give detailed overviews of the occasions on which the recipients demonstrated their gallantry, Queen Beatrix talked at great length on Kroon's inspirational character, deliberately not singling out any specific act. This difference is also conspicuous in the criteria for awarding the VC or the Order of William. While the Order of William is meant to honour "those who have distinguished themselves in battle through excellent deeds of courage, policy and loyalty", the VC is awarded for "the most conspicuous bravery, or some daring or pre-eminent act of valour or self-sacrifice, or extreme devotion to duty in the presence of the enemy".⁶ Illustrating the specificity, as well as the sublimity, of his heroism, Trooper Donaldson commented on his saving the interpreter: "I'm a soldier, I'm trained to

³ *London Gazette* (Supplement) no. 57587, pp 3369-3370, 18-03-2005.

⁴ 'Read the official citation for Corporal Apiata's VC' <http://www.nzherald.co.nz> (2nd July 2007).

⁵ 'Trooper Mark Gregor Strang Donaldson, VC' *Australian Department of Defence*, 16th January 2009.

⁶ <http://www.lintjes.nl/militaire-willemsorde/index.html>;
<http://www.victoriacross.org.uk> (last accessed 9th June 2010).

fight ... it's instinct and it's natural. I just saw him there, I went over and got him, that was it.”⁷

One British veteran appears to combine aspects of both Kroon's and the three VC-recipients' heroisms. Lt-Col Robert Leith Macgregor is the only person to have been awarded both the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Military Cross, for his service during the Second World War and Korean War, which included being shot down four times and stints in five PoW camps. His leadership, courage and *joie de vivre* earned him praise and respect in general. His DFC was awarded for his conduct at El Adem, where he landed under fire from four German Messerschmitts (he shot one down himself) and returned to base unscathed, while his colleagues were already lamenting his demise. The MC was awarded for his command of a mission against the Chinese in the Korean War, where his skillful management under Chinese fire during a mission on the Imjin river resulted in just one fatality. An individual and a collaborative act of bravery were honoured, recognising him as a hero in isolation and community.

The different ways in which these countries honour their heroes testifies to cultural differences in the experience and demonstration of heroism. Queen Beatrix may have emphasised in her speech that the values of courage, policy and loyalty are eternal, but nothing is further from the truth. Even in our own time it is by no means clear what makes anyone a hero. The different types of heroism displayed between the recipients of the Order of William and the Victoria Cross correspond to different culturally and historically determined attitudes towards warfare.

The picture becomes even more complicated when we note that the Order of William awarded to Captain Kroon has since come under significant discussion. Kroon, who retired from the army to take up fulltime responsibility for his own pub in Breda is currently being prosecuted for the possession of drugs and illegal arms.⁸ If convicted, he

⁷ Mark Donaldson cited in: 'VC for former Dorrigio pupil' <http://www.coffscoadadvocate.com.au> (last accessed 9th June 2010). Donaldson's sublime heroism is most apparent in his disregard for himself, as he stopped thinking and let his instinct take over.

⁸ It should be added that Kroon's defence rests on a vehement denial of these allegations and the counter-argument that he has been "set up". Interestingly, Kroon received a threat letter promising his fall "From Hero to Zero": www.rnw.nl/english/article/war-hero-claims-he-received-threats (last accessed 9th June 2010). The Ministry of Defence has publicly given Kroon its full support during trial. Defence Minister Van Middelkoop interviewed by the NOS Journaal (daily news) emphasised that Kroon was "not guilty until proven otherwise" and

will be stripped of his award. This policy to withdraw the Order of William if its bearer is convicted of any crime, is in stark opposition to the express statement that the VC may never be taken away, no matter what the circumstance. Can such an award be meaningfully removed? Does Kroon's recent behaviour negate the sustained valour for which he was given it? Would it be different if he had been given the award for a one-off act? The ontological status of the hero is at stake and we have to question at what point one becomes a hero, and conversely, what would strip one of that status. To some extent it is clear that even the modern conception of the hero is at least partly based on society's perception of an individual and their actions, rather than on some specific characteristic or essence in that person. In the case of the Order of William an award is given for past valour, but its recipient has to take an oath in return that he will at all times defend King and Country. This promise in effect turns him into one of the Queen's knights. We are therefore also faced with the question of the fallen hero. A hero is by definition someone who goes beyond what is normally expected or required of one. This means that they are always going to be, to some extent, difficult people with whom society finds it hard to work. So we may find ourselves condemning people for precisely the same reason that we exalt them, that is, their capacity for being exceptional. How do we deal with the person who is extreme? Can we allow for the rehabilitation and reintegration of someone who has surpassed the bounds of normality, or is there an element of broken trust with a hero who has transgressed the unwritten laws of normal conduct which makes a fallen hero impossible to tolerate?

Classical conceptions of heroism are at least as elusive and challenging. This volume addresses the question of heroism from a variety of viewpoints, using literary accounts both of Greek and Roman provenance in order not only to come closer to the classical ideal of heroism, but also to celebrate the variety of ways in which heroism was understood and bring understanding to the mentality underlying ancient debates on heroism. It is the concept which lies at the heart of the book, rather than any particular instantiation of it, as the different articles investigate the extent to which an individual can be considered heroic in their respective context.

that "the allegations do not count against his heroic acts in Afghanistan". The Ministry also pays for Kroon's lawyer. Cf. www.tctubantia.nl/regio/6175335/Kroon-beschuldiging-en-zijn-lachwekkend.ece (last accessed 9th June 2010). Marco Kroon was prominently present in full uniform during the ceremony on Remembrance Day (4th May 2010).

The first two definitions of the noun hero given by the Oxford English Dictionary are:

- 1.) A name given (as in Homer) to men of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favoured by the gods; at a later time regarded as intermediate between gods and men, and immortal.
The later notion included men of renown supposed to be deified on account of great and noble deeds, for which they were also venerated generally or locally; also demigods, said to be the offspring of a god or goddess and a human being; the two classes being to a great extent coincident.
- 2.) A man distinguished by extraordinary valour and martial achievements; one who does brave or noble deeds; an illustrious warrior.

The Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek lexicon (LSJ), by contrast, defines a *herōs* simply as a hero, glossing it as one of the Fourth age of men, one to whom divine honours are paid, later posthumously, or a founder of a city or tribe and therefore a local deity. Before we move in this volume to discuss the concept and its reflection in literature, we think first about what the word itself means and how it is used in ancient literature. Let us take the term with a certain angle of philological pedantry and examine the extent to which this definition is an accurate representation of the picture in Homer, tragedy and philosophy. What becomes clear is that it is one of those generally accepted terms people stop looking up in a dictionary because they think they know what it means. In thinking that we should worry about the concept rather than the term, people have missed the detail of what the term tells us about the ancient world. So let us start by moving away from the concept and towards a re-appreciation of the changing uses of the actual word *herōs* in classical literature.

In English, a hero displays great strength in the face of adversity, particularly in a martial context. He may be or become to some extent divine. In the following section of this introduction we offer some reflections on the ancient concept of the hero. We first consider the more literary life of the hero as demonstrated by the use of the Greek word for a hero, *herōs*, in Greek literature (primarily epic, tragedy and philosophy) and the extent to which this conforms to the modern idea of a hero, with a particular military slant. One's first impression, on considering the ancient hero, might be that this is a phenomenally overworked area and in terms of defining standard usage, little more could be added to any discussion. A close philological examination of the ancient literature, however, has proved more revealing than might have been expected, uncovering a host of assumptions and potential anachronisms and tautologies in critics' use

of the term. An overview is offered here. We then return to the historical implications of the use of this term and the geographical and historical dynamics of the concept of heroism. With these foundations in place we then turn to introduce the rest of the articles which make up this volume.

Homeric Heroism

Writing on several occasions about the relevance of Homer to today's war stories, the Guardian columnist Charlotte Higgins uses the term hero several times. She writes "Nor do the heroes of *The Iliad* suffer the long-term consequences of injury..." and "*The Odyssey* is a poem as full of twists and turns as the mind of its wily hero, Odysseus". She describes Hector as a hero, suggesting a non-partisan attitude to the *Iliad*, and writes of the hero's "willing, onward surge towards death".⁹ She sums up the supposed attributes of an Homeric hero when she describes Achilles:

"At the centre of the poem's most urgent observations on the nature of war is its hero, Achilles, an extreme character in all sense – *The Iliad's* most bloodthirsty warrior, the quickest to anger, but at times the most tender. He is tinged with the supernatural: his mother is a goddess; his armour is forged by the god Hephaestus; even his chariot-team consists of immortal horses, the gift of Zeus. He sees the war with an enhanced perspective; as Alexander points out, he is clear-eyed about the utter pointlessness of the conflict."¹⁰

Articles such as this invite us to use the Homeric hero as a paradigm for what might be expected in modern warfare, but to what extent is this accurate, appropriate or fair? First, however, we need to think about what Homeric heroism is and some of the differences between the two epics, in order to reassess the way we use the term and what relevance it might have for a modern audience.¹¹

⁹ See Wes (2002) on Shay (1994) and Trittle (2000) in this context, with a psychological angle. The article focuses on the concept of heroism and on universalities in the experience of war and is therefore very positive on the relevance of ancient literature for modern warfare (he includes comments on Thucydides and Euripides as well as Homer).

¹⁰ All references are to Charlotte Higgins, 'The Iliad and what it can still tell us about war', *The Guardian*, Saturday 30th January 2010, available online at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/jan/30/iliad-war-charlotte-higgins>.

¹¹ This concern over the context of the original works raises the "Homeric question", on which see further Nagy (1996 and 2003).

The standard formulation is to say that there are two major Homeric hero types typified by Odysseus and Achilles or Ajax, summarised as brains versus brawn.¹² Achilles uses his might to slaughter numerous foes and win battles for the Greeks, whereas Odysseus, with the epithet *polumētis*, cunning, uses his wits to think his way out of situations, often using deception, most clearly depicted in the Trojan horse and the escape from the Cyclops. This binary opposition does not do justice to either literary figure or to the subtlety of the authors who created them. Conventional criticism of this opposition has taken the following broad path:

- 1.) Achilles in the *Iliad* displays aspects of brain as well as brawn and therefore is not as simple a hero-type as people like to make out.
- 2.) Ajax may be a less ‘intellectual’ hero, and to this extent should have won Achilles’ weapons in being more like him (although this is already negated by point 1).
- 3.) Odysseus displays great physical strength as well as mental resolve, else he would not have endured the physical hardship of his travels. Surviving the journey from Calypso’s island, or the destruction of Charybdis, shows great strength. His performance at the games on Phaeacia attracts comment about his physical abilities, even if they are on the wane. Stringing the bow may involve a trick rather than pure strength, but it is still a physical challenge, and Odysseus’ impressive physique is frequently commented on. Odysseus may be seen to represent the development of the hero to integrate brains and brawn, compared with a less rounded character in Achilles.

Rather than pursue these ideas any further, becoming entangled in a long-running and not necessarily fruitful debate, let us return instead to the word *herōs* itself.

George Autenrieth glosses the term *herōs* as “hero, warrior, title of honor for the free and brave”.¹³ He notes that it can be used alone as a substantive, (A 4, K 179), in address (Y104, K416) or with names. He says that it never means demigod, which contradicts the OED definition already cited. This goes directly against the common understanding of the term. The usual conception of a hero is someone like Achilles or Heracles, who has a divine parent and so straddles the boundary between mortal and immortal worlds and characteristics. As such heroes are extraordinary

¹² See Finkelberg (1995, 1) for a formulation of this principle.

¹³ Autenrieth (1984, *ad loc*).

individuals capable of achievements far outstripping normal people. They have superhuman strength and endurance, killing ferociously and displaying a stamina for brutality and sheer physical force which goes far beyond what is usually expected. Or indeed accepted. A problem with heroes is that by straddling boundaries, they also transgress them. Heracles goes beyond what is acceptable in killing his wife and children. Achilles' wrath is so excessive that it precipitates great tragedy for the Greeks, hastening the end of the war with the death of Patroclus. Ajax' might is so tremendous that Athene has to make him mad or he would have killed the Greek leaders.

These examples all come from tragedy, however, and perhaps the modern reader imposes an impossible coherence of the conception of the hero onto Greek literature. Tragedy is concerned with the idea of *mēden agan* (nothing in excess). Excess in any form is not good, and so heroes will always be dangerous, whatever their type.

In order to assess the place of the Homeric hero a little more carefully, we can return to the text itself and do a very simple but obvious exercise. How is the word 'hero' and its cognates used in the Greek of Homer? Some surprising results emerge.

The word *herōs* and its cognates are used 74 times in the *Iliad*, with examples in every book except XIV. The greatest density is in Book XIII, with 11 examples, while it is used just once in books III, IX, XXI and XXII. It is surprising that at in Book XXII, the climax of the battle, we do not see the term used more frequently. This lack of examples suggests that we should explore the places where it is used more sensitively, to understand what it means to be called a hero in Homer.

Thirteen of the uses refer to the Achaeans or the Danaans as a group, as noted by Autenrieth. Our conception of the hero as a lone ranger is therefore blown away, since it is used to describe anonymous groups. A Homeric hero is not necessarily an outstanding individual, but could be a member of an heroic multitude. The fact that it can be used to describe everyone, at II.579, or the many at II.483, makes this particularly striking.¹⁴ These nameless heroes are prepared to face death on the battlefield at their master's command, without complaint, without question, without the honour of differentiation from the masses. To this extent they perhaps do reflect what we mean by a hero. The brave footsoldiers who go to war not necessarily blindly, but because it is their

¹⁴ II.483 "so Zeus made the son of Atreus on that day, outstanding in the mass and foremost among the heroes"; II.579 'And among them he himself armed in gleaming bronze, in the pride of his glory, and outstanding among all the heroes...' (trans. Martin Hammond).

job and their duty, are echoed not in the *best* of the Achaeans, but in each and every Achaean who fights.

Where it is used of individuals, a number of noteworthy points emerge. The extraordinary characters whom we regularly term heroic are not regularly ascribed the term. Agamemnon appears as a hero (I.102, VII.322, IX.613 and XIII.112), but only with the patronymic Atreides. This makes his heroic description part of his general stock one, and also makes him, *qua* hero, part of a collective, even if of only two (alongside Menelaus). It is used four times of Patroclus, at XVII.137, XVII.706 (these lines are identical), XXIII.151 and XXIII.747. The latter two uses are of when he is already dead, and the first two are formulaic. Patroclus is not being termed a hero to demonstrate anything particularly noble about his actions.

The one other conventional hero of whom the term is used is Ajax, at VIII.268.¹⁵ As noted by Autenrieth, the term can also be used substantively that is, in place of a noun. When this happens we find that 26 people or groups are called heroes but not named. Sometimes it is clear from the preceding sentence which character is involved, but this is not true in all cases. The Iliadic hero can truly remain anonymous and not gain the individualised honour we might have expected to have been awarding him.

The term *herōs* and its cognates are used far less frequently in the *Odyssey*, just 40 times. Its distribution across the 24 books is also very inconsistent. It is used thirteen times in books I-IV, five times in XV and XXIV, four times in XI, and five times in VII-VIII, but not at all in books V, IX, XII, XIII, XVI, XVII or XX. It is never used of Odysseus, but it is used by Odysseus. The distribution is again significant in our understanding of Homeric characterisation. Books I-IV are often termed the Telemachy. They narrate Telemachus' travels to find out about his father, including visits to Menelaus and Nestor. To this extent, they are an Iliadic part of the book, tracing the fates of the Iliadic protagonists, and so it is unsurprising that we would find the Iliadic language of heroes used. Books VII-VIII feature the Phaeacians, whom Odysseus addresses as heroes; their otherworldliness is emphasised throughout the narrative. The term is used in the context of the contests in which Odysseus competes for

¹⁵ Other named individuals called *herōs* are Laomedon (VII.453), Adrastus (VI.63), Alkathous (XIII.428), Machaon (IV.200), Paionides (XI.339), Menoetius (XI.771), Thoas (XIII.92), Cebriones (XVI.781 and XVI.751), Deiphobus (XXII.298), Meriones (XIII.164, 575 and XXIII.893), Proteus (II.708), Peirous (II.844), Leitos (VI.35), Eurypylos (XI.819, 838), Idomeneus (XIII.384, 439), Moullos (XVIII.423), and Halitherses (XXIV.451).

honour. On Margalit Finkelberg's criterion (see above), where a hero is someone who labours for a prize, this makes good sense. The other dense points of usage are also in Iliadic books, such as XI and XXIV. Both of these are characterised by descents to the underworld and the appearance of dead warriors. Understanding *hērōs* to mean someone who has been prepared to die nobly, or in this case has in fact achieved that noble death, these examples fit the Iliadic pattern with which we are familiar.

Again, it is almost never used of anyone we would term a "hero". Agamemnon is never a *hērōs*, but this time Menelaus is (XV.52). Yet, as with Agamemnon in the *Iliad*, it is used adjectivally and not substantively, alongside the patronymic Atreides. This use links the *Odyssey* back to the *Iliad*, but also marks it as slightly different, given that it is Menelaus and not Agamemnon who is now the *hērōs Atreides*. Three of the Iliadic heroes are also given the epithet in the *Odyssey*.¹⁶ Other notable named individuals are Laertes and Telemachus.¹⁷ Laertes has not even fought at Troy, let alone died there. He is, however, a patriarch of a noble household held in great esteem. Perhaps we see in Laertes an example of the hero as one of the fourth age of men, or the founder of a city. The use of *hērōs* to describe Telemachus makes sense in the Iliadic context already described. Again, however, he has not fought in any battles and the poem deals with his coming of age as a hero. *hērōs* can be used of young or old and need not be directly linked to military prowess.

Several of the uses for Laertes and Telemachus, moreover, are in identical or formulaic lines, however, demonstrating its use as a stock term. This formulaic use is evident throughout Homer. Five examples of the term *hērōs* and its cognates are at line ends, suggesting a neat formula with which to end the standard dactylic hexameter.¹⁸ Another eight examples are at the start of lines, again as what appear to be stock epithet descriptions of groups and individuals.¹⁹

Autenrieth was right, then, to disclaim divine status for the Homeric hero. Pluralised, often nameless and almost never one of the famous characters we would think of as a hero, the Iliadic *hērōs* is a mysterious fellow. He dies for the cause because he has been told to. He takes commands from his superiors. He may be part of a collective. He is an

¹⁶ Eurypylus (XI.3520), Halitherses (II.157, XXIV.451) and Moullos (XVIII.423).

¹⁷ Laertes is called a hero at II.99, XIX.144, XXIV.134 and XXII.185.

¹⁸ III.415 of Peisistratus, IV.312 of Telemachus, IV.423 as a substantive by itself, XV.117 of Phaidios, XVIII.423 of Moullos.

¹⁹ IV.423 as a substantive, VII.303 in an address by Odysseus, XIV.317 King Pheidon, XV.52 of Menelaus, XV.62 of Telemachus, XV.121 of a son of Atreus, XXI.299 as a collective substantive.

ordinary man transformed into a hero by being called to a military death. This military context explains the increased frequency of the term in the *Iliad*. It is not that the *Odyssey* features fewer conventionally heroic characters, but that it deals less frequently with death or strife in a military context. This process might be left incomplete, such as for the Phaeacians, but we must remember that even the games in which they compete are a sign of war, harking back to the funeral games of Patroclus, for example. The *Odyssey* deals with a very different type of protagonist to the *Iliad*, but neither of their protagonists are heroes in the Homeric sense of the word.

***herōs* in Plato**

Although Autenrieth states that a hero is not the same as a demigod, this is precisely the opposite of what we see presented in Plato. The term *herōs* and its cognates occur 37 times in the Platonic corpus and its usage merits careful attention. 20 of those 37 examples come from either the *Republic* or the *Cratylus*. The *Cratylus* is a long and sometimes tedious dialogue which deals with defining terms for things. Where many Platonic dialogues focus on the definition of abstract concepts, here we see Socrates and Cratylus discuss a whole range of words, many of which appear far more concrete. One of these is the hero. At *Cratylus* 398c6, Cratylus asks Socrates “So this hero character then, what would that be?”. Socrates replies at 398c11 “Surely you know that heroes are demigods?”. Phrased with a negative to mark a question with an implied answer of “of course I knew that, how silly of me”, the idea that heroes are demigods is taken as uncontroversial. Does this mark a misunderstanding of Homer, a shift in the Greek concept of hero or perhaps something else entirely? Perhaps it is a bit of each of these, linked to the ideas of what gods and men are or can be. In order to understand the position more clearly, we should think about where else Plato uses the term.

The formulation in the *Cratylus* is again phrased in terms of a plural. The conception of heroes as a common body is still there for Socrates. Six of the Platonic uses are explicitly in an Homeric context. One of these comes in the *Ion*, at 531d1, where Ion and Socrates discuss what Homer or a rhapsode reciting Homer knows, for example. Thirteen come in the context of formulae about gods and daimons. Plato depicts heroes as more than mortal in a very literal sense. Or does he?

The greatest density of the Platonic references to heroes is in the *Republic*, where he uses *herōs* and its cognates twelve times. This is a very non-religious dialogue in the Olympian sense. The major theme is “what is

justice?” and Plato answers this by outlining how his perfect city would function. One of the examples of a hero is Patroclus at 391b3. Self-sacrifice as well as excessively brave deeds become a part of the definition of a hero, perhaps beginning to look closer to the modern conception. Moreover, in *Republic* V we have the analogy of the cave. Living in this world is like sitting in a darkened cave watching the shadows of reality flit across the wall. Men are called to break free of their bonds and escape to the light, where they will come into contact with the reality of things, and will become like gods themselves.

Similarly in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates discusses death and dying as he prepares for his own death, he suggests that we are to become like gods ourselves. For Socrates, philosophy itself is a way of life which prepares us for death.²⁰ Philosophy therefore makes us heroes. So to see the term hero used frequently in Plato in an Homeric and / or religious sense is in keeping with the depictions in the *Iliad*. Every man can become a hero, indeed it is what we are called to be. Heroes are demigods not because they have divine parents but because they have realised the divine aspect of themselves and transcended their humanity. The Platonic use of the word *herōs* is so different from Homer that a change in the term demi-god is not inexplicable. Those individuals in the *Iliad* called to greatness in knowing how to die are exactly what we do see Socrates aspire to.

The Sophoclean Hero

But what of the tragic hero? The idea of the Sophoclean hero permeates Sophoclean scholarship, and the reception history of Sophocles' plays. To return to the modern press, Steven Leigh Morris began a trend in American war journalism when he wrote an article about the use of the plays *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* as expressions for the military's response to modern warfare.²¹ Greek drama has consistently been used as a vehicle for commenting on modern warfare; *Troades* remains the most performed Greek tragedy since the Second World War, and the twenty-first century has seen no decline in this tragic trend. When the war in Iraq started, we had the *Lysistrata* and *Philoctetes* projects. The *Lysistrata* project used a series of globally coordinated rehearsed and unrehearsed readings and performances as a form of peaceful protest against the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The *Philoctetes* project offers artistic ways for veterans to process

²⁰ See Ahrens Dorf (2010, *passim*).

²¹ <http://www.laweekly.com/2008-08-28/stage/the-u-s-marine-corps-discovers-the-greeks/> (last accessed 9th June 2010).

their experience of war, and those around them to help them through its aftermath in a cultural form.²² We read of veterans and warriors, but Leigh Morris does not use the word hero once. To what extent is tragedy heroic in the sense of involving a *herōs*?

Bernard Knox's 1964 book *The Heroic Temper* is often cited as the starting point for such discussions. Sophoclean heroes are isolated, exaggerated figures whose inability to interact with society on its terms causes their downfall. This monumental figure dominates conceptions of Sophoclean drama. Most recently, it is clearly evident in Peter Ahrensdorf's book *Greek Tragedy and Political Philosophy*, which focuses on the heroes of the Theban plays. He analyses them in terms of their commitment to rationalism and piety, addressing the age-old question of who the hero of the *Antigone* is by asking whether Antigone or Creon best exemplifies struggles to integrate both aspects (his answer is Antigone).

In terms of the *Oedipus at Colonus* in particular, discussion of heroes abound. Cedric Whitman writes about the hero in his collective context. For Whitman, the *OC* is a play which deals with the reintegration of the transgressive hero.²³ Tragedy may demonstrate how dangerously anti-social and destructive the heroic individual is, but it is also a genre which attempts to absorb these excessive figures and somehow reconcile their excess with normal life. The answer tragedy finds is in the establishment of hero cult.²⁴ The end of the *Trachiniae*, for example, sees Heracles on his way to an apotheosis, which is borne out by the end of the *Philoctetes* where the divine Heracles summons Philoctetes to Troy.

At the end of the *OC*, Oedipus retreats into the grove of the Eumenides, called to a new existence by an unnamed god; he has become a new kind of hero. No longer is he the powerful individual whose excessive nature results in his own destruction and that of his home city. Now he finds himself transcending his humanity, gaining a cult, and becoming a protective saviour for Athens. The hero has been reintegrated into the city. Such is the conventional reading of the play, but in strict philological terms, it perhaps offers a misguided reading of the protagonists' characters.

The term *hērōs* and its cognates does not appear a single time in any of the remaining plays or fragments. Not in the scholia, not in the very

²² <http://www.lysistrataproject.org/>, <http://www.philoctetesproject.org> (last accessed 9th June 2010).

²³ Whitman 1951 and 1966.

²⁴ On hero cult and tragedy, see Seaford (1994), Garland (1992); on hero cult in Sophoclean tragedy, see: *Ajax* Henrichs (1993); Heracles in *Trachiniae* Easterling (1981), Holt (1989); *Philoctetes* Harrison (1989); Oedipus in the *OC* Méautis (1940), Easterling (1967), Burian (1974).

Homeric aspects of Philoctetes, Heracles or Ajax. Sophocles never calls a character a hero.

This lack of conventional heroism is evident in the *OC*, contra the position sketched earlier. Oedipus does not have a divine parent. He is not a demi-god. He remains marginalised, in Colonus on the outskirts and not in Athens proper. He is thoroughly mortal, and he knows it. Disagreement continues over whether Oedipus achieves daimonic status at any point in the play, however, following Linforth's denial that Oedipus becomes a hero.²⁵ Oedipus does not become a god, that is clear, but he is called both offstage by divine thunder (from 1456), and away from the grove by an unnamed god (1627-1628).²⁶ Gaining in power throughout the play he appears to transcend human status. In his rehabilitation as a man (promised by the gods at 392) he overshoots the mark and leaves mankind behind. This play remains a tragedy of excess, of the failure of the protagonist to conform to the principle of moderation in all things.²⁷ Adams notes Sophocles' interest in heroes and *daimons*, but only describes Oedipus in the *OC* as the former.²⁸ Some commentators read his curse as a true call to the gods, who then effect it, as with Theseus in *Hippolytus*. For Winnington-Ingram, however, the mystery of the play rests at least in part on the gods being able to take Oedipus to themselves as one of their own, while Wallace suggests that a lack of divine reaction to the first version of the curse tells us that Oedipus is coming closer to the divine sphere.²⁹ For Waldock, the play is about Oedipus' apotheosis.³⁰ Bernard Knox concurs: "Oedipus Coloneus who in the first scene is a resigned, humble, feeble, old man, taught, as he says, by time (7), ends by condemning his enemies to defeat and his sons to death at each other's hand before he transcends human stature and time alike in his mysterious god-directed death".³¹ A theme of transfiguration permeates discussions of the play,³² as we can

²⁵ See Kamerbeek (1984, 19), referring in particular to Linforth (1951, 97-104) where he denies any simple reading of Oedipus as a hero.

²⁶ One of the clearest expressions of the assumption of Oedipus' apotheosis and heroisation comes at Reinhardt (1979, 193-194).

²⁷ See Reinhardt (1979, esp. 204, 216, 219-20) for a particularly forceful declaration of this.

²⁸ Adams 1957, 18.

²⁹ Winnington-Ingram 1954, 17; Wallace 1979, 45.

³⁰ Waldock (1966, 219), in disagreement with Bowra (1940). See also Musurillo (1967, 131) Markantonatos (2002, 219) and Kelly (2009, 74, 82) for a summary of prior opinions.

³¹ Knox 1966, 26-27. Bowra (1940, 311), Adams (1957, 176) and McDevitt (1972, 22) agree.

³² See also Burton (1980, 251).

imagine that Oedipus effects his own curse, which has ramifications for our interpretations of any resolution further on.³³ So Oedipus is not the typical hero, and if anything, he demonstrates how even divinely favoured rehabilitation is only possible for man if he transcends his humanity, making the *OC* a profoundly depressing and hopeless play for those mere mortals hoping for salvation from their sinful lives.

To what extent is this pattern also evident in Aeschylus or Euripides? Given Aeschylus' earlier time of writing, especially the Persian war context in which the Greek *poleis* had to come together in an Iliadic way, we might expect to see the term *hērōs* used in a similarly Homeric sense. In fact, Aeschylus only uses the word once in an extant play, at *Agamemnon* 516. This is in the Messenger's speech, the first occasion when a Trojan veteran has reached home soil after the war, and so an Homeric echo would be expected. As an example of an unnamed plural, this is entirely in keeping with the examples already discussed.

There are a further fifteen examples of *hērōs* or a cognate word attested in fragments and scholia associated with Aeschylus. Ten of these are plurals, and only one is associated with a named individual (Lamachos, at Mette Fragments Tetralogy 26, play A, fragment 212, line 45). The contexts demonstrate that Homeric connections continue to be made. At *Symposium* 180a4 Plato refers to one of the examples describing Patroclus; in the *Deipnosophistae*, Athenaeus refers directly to Aeschylus and Homer together, at I.19 and I.30. The Aeschylean hero is not marked out using the Homeric terms, but where *herōs* is used, it is in an Homeric context.

There are no examples of the term *herōs* in complete plays of Euripides, but there are two examples in fragments. This does not give us much to go on, but it suggests something comparable to the Sophoclean position. The Homeric allusions by means of heroic terminology have receded from the text, and the idea of the tragic hero is expressed by other means.

So what kind of a character is the tragic hero? The *locus classicus* for thinking about the character of the tragic hero is Aristotle's *Poetics*. *herōs* and its cognates are used 35 times in the Aristotelian corpus in general. There remain the links with the divine which we saw with Plato, so that five of these examples are mentioned in connection with gods. Only one example is explicitly Homeric, which is at *Nichomachean Ethics* 145a20. In the *Poetics* in particular, *herōs* and its cognates are used six times. Five of these are in an adjectival form, that is, as "heroic". At 1459b32 and 34 it

³³ On the potency of the curse see also Morwood (2008, 80-81).

is the hexameter which is described as heroic, not a person. Heroic comes to mean epic.

When Aristotle discusses tragic protagonists, they are not *hērōes*. The main character of a tragedy should be someone who is good, but not too good, to whom bad things happen which have at their root some sort of error, the *hamartia*.

Margalit Finkelberg suggests that the difference between an Iliadic and an Odyssean hero is that the Iliadic hero provides an example of how to die, while an Odyssean hero provides an example of how to live.³⁴ Following Peter Ahrens Dorf, a tragic hero negotiates this boundary by providing an example, or rather a counter-example of how to live in the face of awareness of one's mortality.³⁵ Their views of what constitutes a hero in Greek terms overlap considerably. Exploring uses of the term *herōs* itself demonstrates a far greater gulf. The idea of the *herōs* as expressed using that word denotes a sense of belonging, particularly in a martial context, and therefore inevitably in one of death. Associated with this comes the idea of the remote past, of people somehow more august than ourselves. As the term develops, then, we see it linked in to ideas of cult aetiology and divine heritage. This religious connotation is also partly dependent on changing conceptions of the gods, as we see in Plato.

It is clear then, that thinking about the word *hērōs* and the concept of heroism is not necessarily linked, and that conventional assumptions and stereotypes still need to be investigated on their own terms. The contributions united in this volume are all concerned with the problems this causes for engaging with heroism in historic actuality. These heroes' inherent excess, transgressing the maxim of *mēden agan* (nothing in excess), makes them at once amazing, but also tragic, as they fail to find a place within the world and can only find peace outside of it. The articles in this volume address the realisability and desirability of emulating heroic ideals, the place of heroism in civic community, the representation of historical personalities as heroes and changing concepts of heroism.

Heroes and Zeroes in History

In modern concepts of heroism, three aspects appear to be universal: a hero should possess courage, be prepared to sacrifice himself and benefit others. This is a heroism tied into a prioritisation of society over the individual. This importance that the hero must have for his or her

³⁴ Finkelberg 1995.

³⁵ Ahrens Dorf 2010.

community is also the reason for the reluctance that modern day heroes often show in their heroisation. Proud Achilles is far from Captain Kroon's mind when he confesses that he thought the Order of William was only for "those who can walk over water", and not for mere mortals like himself.³⁶ Lance Corporal Apiata's biography is aptly called "the reluctant hero".³⁷ Today's heroes, it seems, would rather have stayed zeroes. In contrast, "The best of the Achaeans" is throughout the *Iliad* not very good to the Achaeans, spending most of his time sulking and staying away from the fight as he has not received the honours he believes he deserves.

The problem that Achillean heroism is not beneficial to the community was also a point of anxiety in ancient literature. Most of Plato's dialogues on courage employ Achilles as a counter-example to the Athenian youth.³⁸ Achilles' *thumos* is to be emulated only when it can be controlled. In the phalanx there is no room for Achilles' rampages. Heroism there is to stay and defend the man next to you. Like Homer's nameless heroes (and like Kroon's platoon, the men of which received some measure of honour at least through Kroon's award), the Athenian men should be prepared to face death as instructed.

Alcibiades' sorry fate, not least in Plato's representation of him in the *Symposium*, illustrates what an imitation of Achilles may cost. His continued popularity as a hero nevertheless also testifies to the continuing admiration for his daring deeds. Alexander the Great may have been one of the most brilliant imitators of Achilles. Without his ambition to emulate his daring, he would not have won his magnificent feats. But his later downfall exemplifies the dangers of excess. In imperial Rome the tyrannical features of emperors demanding to be treated like gods is a frequent *topos* in historiography.³⁹ It is nevertheless undeniable that these same tyrants, Nero is a case in point, are also among the most popular emperors. These historical emulators of Achilles tread a fine line between

³⁶ Marco Kroon, interviewed in 'De wereld draait door' VARA (Dutch television) 12th February 2009 (podcast accessible at <http://www.uitzendinggemist.nl>, last accessed 9th June 2010).

³⁷ Little 2008.

³⁸ Cf. Hobbs (2000, esp. 59-68).

³⁹ See, for example, Suetonius' *Lives of Nero* and *Caligula*. The most extreme example is probably Commodus' self-representation as Hercules and gladiator, denounced in the SHA, Commodus; Herodianus 1.14.7-8 and Dio 72.15.2. The sources are discussed in detail by Hekster (2002, 103-111) and Van den Hengel (2009). Relevant in assessing the importance of guarding the boundary between emperor and god is the practice in triumphs to place a slave behind the emperor whose job is to make him "remember he is a man". Cf. the recent discussion in Beard (2007, 85-92).

heroisation and demonisation. They also demonstrate the truth that it is not so much their actions that makes them into heroes but the celebration of their actions by their historians.

The reception of Flavius Josephus' account of the mass suicide of the *sicarii* (knifemen) at Masada in the modern history of Israel illustrates how the needs of society demand particular readings of one and the same event.⁴⁰ Josephus originally demonised these rebels as *sicarii* and criticised their headstrong violence against the Roman victors. From the 19th century onwards, however, the episode in Josephus' *Jewish War* has been reread as a patriotic example of unwavering heroism. This necessitated some creative reading as the original account by Josephus is profoundly pessimistic in tone. Had the rebels realised sooner that their cause was lost they might have surrendered, like Josephus himself did. This much more preferable reaction to Roman dominance is now no longer available to the *sicarii* and they can only escape being put to death by choosing to die themselves. The Zionists focused on the rebels' continued resistance against the Romans three years after the destruction of the Temple and reinterpreted their collective suicide as a fight to the death. In their commemoration of the event the fact that they had taken their own lives is glossed over and Josephus' narrative was supplemented by depictions emphasising the confrontation between the Romans and the *sicarii*. After World War II, Masada was viewed as a counter-example for the victims of the Holocaust. Whereas the Jews in Exile had suffered their persecution at terrible cost, the Masada rebels had defended themselves and had at least died heroically. The commemoration of Masada received yet another meaning during the 70s and 80s when in light of a more appreciative attitude towards the Jews in Exile, and a growing realisation of the vulnerability of Israel as a state surrounded by Arabic states, the desperation of the Masada-rebels received more attention. In a tragic employment of the narrative, the suicide of the rebels came back to the fore.

The valuation of this incident was and still is a politically sensitive topic. Josephus opposed the rebellion, but wrote with some admiration of the *sicarii's* suicide, seeing it as a sign that the rebels had finally realised the uselessness of their rebellion. He depicts his own surrender to the Romans after the siege of Jotapata in 67 AD as a better example to follow, but also notes that at this point in the war the *sicarii* had indeed no hope of

⁴⁰ On the changing role of the Masada-episode in the development of Israeli identity: Schwartz et al. (1986, 147-164); Zerubavel (1994a, 72-100), (1994b); Ben-Yehuda (1995).

mercy on the Romans' part.⁴¹ The Zionists opposed suicide as an option and chose to believe that the rebels had defended themselves to the bitter end. In both these versions self-sacrifice is heroic only when it serves a greater good. It is, however, also clear that a variety of interpretations is possible. Josephus' original account is moreover somewhat confusing. His depiction of the rebels as *sicarii* is in line with his general demonisation of them, yet, he makes room in his account for the Romans' amazement at the rebels' "nobility" on finding their lifeless bodies.⁴² This is in stark contrast to his account of his own surrender, where he expands on the sinfulness of suicide. What is "heroic" and what is "demonic" depends very much on the victor's point of view.

The necessity of serving a greater good may also be recognised in a passage in Pausanias' *Periegesis*. Pausanias tells the story of Timanthes of Cleonae, who after his retirement from athletics practiced each day at drawing the great bow. When after a short absence he found that he was no longer able to do this, he committed suicide by throwing himself into a fire. Pausanias comments: "In my view all such deeds, whether they have already occurred among men or will take place hereafter, ought to be regarded as acts of madness (*mania*) rather than of courage (*andreia*)."⁴³ The comment is illustrative of Pausanias' disapproval, but may also be understood as referring to an existing habit of believing such acts to be courageous.

Pausanias' juxtaposition of madness and courage also points to another difficulty in the identification of heroism, namely the problem of defining courage. We have seen that the Order of William mentions courage alongside loyalty and policy. The VC honours daring and valour. Its recipients moreover seem to have been involved in instinctive deeds of heroism, where more often than not they literally acted without thought for themselves. Realisation of the risks they took comes later, if they have survived at all. Captain Kroon, however, was honoured as a good leader who kept a clear mind in the most extreme circumstances. Discussing his decision to ask for fire from air support on his own position he made clear that this was a carefully deliberated request. He knew the risk was high, but if the decision was not taken the Taliban fighters would have overrun his troops and the bodycount would have been much higher.⁴⁴ Kroon, in

⁴¹ The Roman attack on Masada begins at *BJ* 7.252ff. Josephus' speech at Jotapata, *BJ* 3.363-382 can be read in conjunction with Eleazar's speeches at *BJ* 7.323-336 and 7.341-388. Cf. Rajak (1993, 81-91).

⁴² *BJ* 7.402-406.

⁴³ Paus. 6.8.4

⁴⁴ Marco Kroon, as in n.36.

sum is honoured not because he knows how to face death, but because his preparedness for this confrontation is instrumental in his own as well as his men's survival. Moreover, since the Order of William refers to past heroism as well as future responsibility, it requires a live recipient.

The importance of deliberation as a part of courage is also a classical theme. Plato has Socrates say in the *Laches* that *andreia* in every circumstance, so not only in battle, cannot go together with the absence of knowledge (*epistēmē*), since courage without understanding is only *afrōn tolmē*: “foolish daring”. *tolmē* is necessary for *andreia*, but *tolmē* on its own is not just foolish, but even potentially harmful. In order to be truly courageous one must not only be willing to put oneself at risk, but must do so rationally and responsibly.⁴⁵ Plato's analysis of foolish daring has also informed classical historiography, in particular Thucydides, whose use of *tolma alogistos* is part of his denunciation of the topsy-turvy world created by internal strife. The danger of mistaking prudence for cowardice is clear in Aristotle's definition of *andreia* in his *Eudemian Ethics*: “the attribute of a man whose actions demonstrate a reasoned, and moderate negotiation between ‘boldness’ (*thrasos*) and ‘fear’ (*phobos*)”.⁴⁶ *andreia* means that the human instinct of fear must be overcome and mastered.⁴⁷ Courage is thereby the opposite of giving in to fear, of cowardice. But it is also inherently different from the daring which results from blindness to danger. The courageous man assesses the risks of going to battle realistically and goes nonetheless in the confident knowledge that they are worth whatever goal he fights for.⁴⁸

A worthy death is therefore central to the classical conception of heroism, but also a subject of heated debate. This is clear also in the extent to which this book centres on heroic death. We start with Dimitra Kokkini's discussion of Euripides' *Alkestis*. Admetos, the king of Pherai, Thessaly was destined to die young unless he was to find someone willing to take his place. His wife Alkestis offers herself up to save him and at the

⁴⁵ Plato, *Laches* esp. 191d-192d; cf. Schmid (1992).

⁴⁶ Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 1228a26-30a37. Cf. Bassi (2003) 25-58.

⁴⁷ Roisman, 2003.

⁴⁸ Pears 1980, esp. 183-187; Compare also Pericles' Funeral Oration at Thuc. 240.30: “the man who can most truly be accounted brave is he who knows the meaning of what is sweet in life and of what is terrible, and then goes out undeterred to meet what is to come” with the discussions in: Balot (2001, 508-9 and 512); Bosworth (2000, 6): “voluntary death in battle is proof that the individual has seen the worth of community and constitutes the highest form of *arête*”.