



The Passions of Achilles: Heroic Character in Classical and Medieval Epic: Introduction

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Achilles is a hero of epic, a lover of war, and a bearer and conveyor of strong emotions. These qualifications endow Achilles with capacities for intense anger, grief, and love; the power of such experiences is the essence of his character, and is contained in his name in the components *akhos* and *laos*, “grief” and “host of fighting men”.¹ Ancient Greece after Homer knew Achilles well, from the Athenian tragic poets through Plato and Aristotle down to Alexander the Great and beyond. Through the ancient commentators of the third and second century B.C.E. the name “Achilles” became an exemplary concept for the representation of heroic emotions and strong feelings in associations between people.² Alexandrian scholars edited epics and tragedies in which Achilles was

¹ As shown by Nagy 1979:70 with respect to the centrality of Achilles in the *Iliad* and the epic tradition. The transmission of Achilles’ Homeric roots is traced by King 1987; for Achilles as lover, see pp. 171ff. For models of the hero in Homer, see van Wees 1998.

² Decisive for emotions in the classical world is Konstan 2006; on anger, see ch. 2. For anger in the medieval setting, see Rosenwein 1998. The standard work on the variable and adaptable forms of epic in the Romance languages is Duggan 2005.

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present and thus helped create a tradition of Achilles stretching from antiquity to the Middle Ages.

The recognition of Achilles' fundamentally passionate nature is the foundation of this volume and informs its orientation. The essays explore the characteristics and qualities that pertain to heroic character in Homer's and Vergil's epics, and the reception of these traits in late antiquity and the Middle Ages. The character of the hero in the classical and medieval world was on display, intended to be observed and actively evaluated by audiences. Heroic character is revealed over time through the public performances and the emotions they arouse.

This book looks at emotions as an expression of heroic forcefulness that is incited by and responds to the actions of others. Emotions are seen not as internal states but as reactions to provocations that give rise to actions. Such heroic activity is expressed in a vocabulary of emotions which is here probed across cultures, ideologies, and multiple genres of composition, in both literature and philosophy. At the centre is the transmission of the emotion of anger and its resultant effects on behavior. The collection examines the configuration of Achilles' passions over time, adding to the traditional interpretations of Homer and Vergil the ways their concept of heroism is refracted through the lens of late antique and medieval narratives. This method is that of *translatio*.

Translatio is a process of reflecting and connecting. Its *modus operandi* is the display of character and emotions as textual concepts and images. An image is created, deciphered, and then elucidated in a new cultural and ideological refraction. The truth of the text, therefore, is fluid. Its meaning is unveiled in the artistic and intellectual context of the mental impressions and images of a particular civilization. These are received and reflected in the refined and knowledgeable appreciation of the audience. *Translatio* is thus a rendering from one state and appearance to another. The exemplary instance for this volume is epic, which is examined in all its flexibility as it undergoes transformation of substance, form, and condition from Homer to Vergil and on to the Middle Ages.³

The idea of *translatio* places the emphasis on the inner workings of epic and the changes in the nature of heroic character and emotions over

³ For the methodology and system of *translatio*, see Deist 2003a. As a tool of literary criticism, *translatio* is more expansive than the ancient *imitatio*; as a term signifying "emulation" of "authoritative persons or texts," *imitatio* is a method of "absorption and reproduction of good models," thus a device of modern intertextuality: see von Albrecht 1999: 15-16,22.

time. The detailed investigations of emotions in antiquity, the intersection of such emotions with the public world, and the refractions of such understandings in other languages and cultures reveal the range of heroic nature. The essays demonstrate the varying qualities of epic through their engagement with the exemplary figure of Achilles. The chapters are arranged to indicate this movement, and at the same time to exhibit its coherence. The essays begin and end with the hero Achilles and the Trojan War. War, anger, love, suffering and pain, and heroic duty are multiple dimensions of experience represented by Achilles. They are traced through the process of *translatio* to reveal the reinterpretation and adjustments of heroic virtues other times.

Greece is “translated” into Rome through an examination of the differences between the way anger is represented in the *Iliad* and *Aeneid* (David Konstan). Tracing the trajectory of anger in the two poems, and supporting his analysis with reference to Aristotelian, Epicurean, and Stoic texts, Konstan concludes that the very concept of anger differed for Homer and Vergil. Marjolein Oele argues that Aristotle’s theory of suffering (*pathos*) and the emotion of pity (*éleos*) come together in the meeting between Achilles and Priam in *Iliad* 24: Aristotle’s recognition of the power of suffering and his conception of how human life is best lived help to reveal how Achilles and Priam establish a novel kind of friendship. Pamela Gordon shows how the Athenian reception of Briseis, the captive war prize of Achilles, highlights Achilles’ role as lover. The fluidity of images of Briseis in Greek pottery make it clear that there was serious interest in the story of Achilles and Briseis beyond the *Iliad*. The presence of Briseis in the Athenian potter’s quarter gives evidence of her importance to Achilles.

The medieval narrators were confronted with Homeric and Vergilian concepts of emotions and value systems. In the process of *translatio*, they decoded such foreign materials, shifted and recreated meaning, and threw new light on such concepts for a feudal audience within a Christian religious and moral framework. Beginning in late antiquity, Christians took that powerful heritage and made it their own, in the process dismantling the core meanings of pagan tales and replacing them with Christian ways of thinking. The late antique writers were moralists who took aim against what they saw as pagan lust in defense of Christian values. Thus, the late antique master of mythography, Fulgentius, mounted an attack on pagan culture and its heroic ideals, as Emily Albu argues. He took as his target the most influential text from the Roman past, the *Aeneid*. His book-by-book interpretation of the *Aeneid*

constructs a new ideal for Christian *virtus* by expanding or redefining the concept to include “chastity” and “continence”. Virtue and restraint were for Fulgentius the true content of Vergil’s *Aeneid*.

In the Middle Ages, the *translatio* of Homer and Vergil evolved in new ways. The Homeric and mediaeval epics share certain traits of technique. One is the traditional oral nature of epic. Moreover, with respect to the motivation of conduct, the character of the hero is judged in dialogue and action. An identical scenario in the *Iliad* and *Raoul de Cambrai*, a late twelfth-century *chanson de geste*, is the occasion for an examination of heroic anger by Laurence Harf-Lancner. The emotions of the warrior, the anger specific to Achilles (*mēnis*), the murderous madness of the warrior in battle and the danger of excess (*hubris*) are analysed in both poems. In both epics, savage violence is confronted with humane and moral values. Within the Romance tradition of epic, the renowned hero Roland reveals a new sense of responsibility across a century that evolves over different versions of the epic. Broadly speaking, heroic conduct is seen, as Joseph J. Duggan shows, as a function of intention, not the deeds performed. The issue of legal guilt shifts, under the influence of the scholastic philosopher Peter Abélard, from the sinful act to the intention of the person committing the act. The older layer of jurisprudence in the trial of Ganelon from around 1100 changes into an enquiry into Ganelon’s state of mind a century later. At the end of the Middle Ages, when the distinctions between *chanson de geste* and romance became blurred, ancient heroes merge with medieval heroes. As Michelle Szkilnik argues, by the fifteenth century the *furor* of the ancient warrior serves two important purposes: it is unleashed against enemies of the Christian faith, and it is channeled into values prized in late medieval French courts: submission to the prince and religious duties. At the crossroad of epic and romance, the tale of *Trois fils de roi* combines heroic virtues with Christian duties.

French antique romances (*romans d’antiquités*) refashion Homeric and Vergilian epic materials in the twelfth century through vastly different lenses for the new empire founded by Henry II in England. The transmission from Homer and Vergil is coloured by aristocratic feudal concerns, with Christian moral requirements as the substratum. The romance *Roman d’Enéas* is a *translatio* of Vergil’s Dido (as argued by Rosemarie Deist). In the *Aeneid*, Vergil applies the male Roman value system to Dido, the queen of Carthage, and exhibits the power of suffering through complex mental images of Dido. Betrayed and robbed of motherhood, Dido is transfigured into the exemplary Stoic *vir* worthy

of suicide by the sword. The Roman representation of maleness is thus shifted onto the ideal Roman *matrona*, the *univira* married to just one husband. In a *translatio* of aristocratic principles of power, Dido's Roman capacities for emotion are transformed, in the *Roman d'Enéas*, under the aegis of feudal aristocratic legitimacy and influence. The Trojan War is now seen to revolve around emotion, the *passio* of suffering from the endless destruction of war and the cost of human lives. As Matilda Bruckner shows, the author of the *Roman de Troie*, Benoît de Sainte-Maure, situates his work at the crux of epic, romance, and history. In bringing back Homer and the monuments of the past, the *Roman de Troie*, addressing a francophone public in the context of a Christian society, offers a view of history and human life that is profoundly Homeric in that it accepts the finality of death for all humans in the rise and fall of Priam's Trojan empire. This trajectory of suffering takes the form of a network of predictions and formal lamentations (*plaintes*). The same material is arranged differently in the thirteenth-century German epic *Liet von Troye*. As Maria Dorninger argues, this poem is something of a message to the troubled Empire plagued by continual armed conflict, and the Fall of Troy serves as a cautionary example for a Christian empire. War and destruction are determined by the human passions of greed, betrayal, and by human vulnerability. In this environment, the Homeric Achilles becomes weak in battle, is led into a trap, and is destroyed, as is Troy, by deceit.

The essays in this volume trace, analyse, and synthesize these intricate layers of the transmission of Homeric and Vergilian heroic status and emotions across time and literary categories. Interestingly, the divisions between these categories become less hard and fast when seen in the light of the fundamental issues of war and the hero. In a certain sense, despite the altered cultural conditions of the medieval period, the hero transcends time and place and becomes indeed "classic".

This volume is the result of a colloquium held at the University of San Francisco in 2008. The lively intellectual exchanges among the scholars who came together made this event an experience worth remembering. The highlight of the conference was an unforgettable performance by Stanley Lombardo. Professor Lombardo selected passages from his translation of the *Iliad* in which Achilles' character is prominently visible, and he thereby brought to a conclusion the series of papers on heroic character in epic.

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