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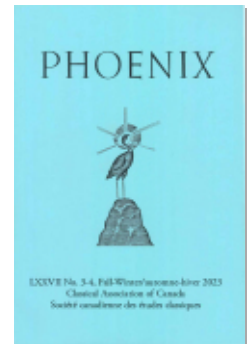
## Preface: Epic Heroism in Late Antiquity

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## PREFACE: EPIC HEROISM IN LATE ANTIQUITY

FOTINI HADJITTOFI

THE FIRST LINES of the *Iliad* establish a specific model of heroism, patently different from our own modern idea of which values a hero should embody or obey. The heroism of this foundational epic revolves around violence, wrath, and revenge—all for the sake of preserving one's individual honor (τιμή) and achieving fame and glory (κλέος).<sup>1</sup> Achilles, the first and quintessential epic hero, cannot allow his honor to be slighted without fierce retaliation; indeed, he is willing to sacrifice thousands of his comrades in the name of this *timē*. Odysseus, although in many ways a different type of hero, also comes to embody this ideal at the end of the *Odyssey* with his bloody, arguably excessive, vengeance against the suitors and his own slave women: the *mnēstērophonia* recalls with specific echoes the feats of the Iliadic Achilles.<sup>2</sup>

In the Hellenistic period, Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* redefines epic heroism by privileging cooperation and harmony over wrath and strife.<sup>3</sup> Yet Apollonius' intense engagement with the Homeric model of heroism—through themes, motifs, and verbal allusions—suggests that this poet is working against the benchmark which was set by his archaic predecessor, and which would not be easy to shift. For example, in Book 1 Jason accepts an apology by Telamon saying “but I shall not foster bitter wrath against you” (ἀλλ’ οὐ θήν τοι ἄδευκέα μῆνιν ἄέξω, 1.1339), adding that he sees Telamon's anger as justified because it was provoked on behalf of a friend and not over sheep or other possessions. The contrast here with Achilles' *mēnis*, which was fostered for a long time and was provoked by the removal of a “possession,” Briseis, is immediate and striking. As Annette Harder (2022: 491) has recently argued, Apollonius “evokes Homeric characters as a foil and thus draws attention to his heroes' roles and characteristics

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<sup>1</sup>Hom. *Il.* 1.1–3: μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος / οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρὶ Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε' ἔθηκε, / πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἀϊδὶ προΐαψεν (“The wrath sing, goddess, of Peleus' son Achilles, the accursed wrath which brought countless sorrows upon the Achaeans, and sent down to Hades many valiant souls”; tr. Murray 1924). For the intimate relationship between war, death, and heroism in the *Iliad*, see, for example, Schein 1984: 67–88.

<sup>2</sup>See Grethlein 2017. For the ethics of Odysseus' revenge, see Loney 2019: 119–171. Horn (2014) reaches a global understanding of the Homeric hero as an outstanding or outsized member of a heroic age or society who excels in the pursuit of honor and glory; this definition encompasses both Achilles and Odysseus.

<sup>3</sup>See Manakidou 1998; Mori 2008: 83–89; Harder 2022.

and invites his readers to consider the differences and similarities.” Apollonius’ innovations suggest that notions of epic heroism are neither constant nor static but are subject to change and recalibration in accordance with each society’s views on community, morality, and leadership.<sup>4</sup>

Building on Apollonius’ Jason and his inclination towards concord and forgiveness, Virgil’s Aeneas, who became the gold standard of epic heroism in Latin literature, is a hero whose objectives transcend his personal honor and glory, whose formulaic epithet is *pius*, and in whom many scholars have found a new heroic ideal of *humanitas*.<sup>5</sup> Yet even *pius Aeneas* can fly into a vengeful rage. After the death of Pallas, Aeneas experiences an outburst of furious anger similar to that of Achilles after the death of Patroclus: he mows down enemies in battle, captures four youths alive intending to sacrifice them, and kills a priest and a pair of suppliants (10.510–605). Aeneas’ anger surges once more at the very end of the epic, when he notices on Turnus the belt that his adversary had stripped from the slain Pallas (12.919–952). The *Aeneid*, then, ends on a note of vengeance, with its main hero killing a suppliant, aflame with epic, Achillean wrath.<sup>6</sup> It is little wonder that even the “humane” Aeneas was criticized by early Christian authors for his proclivity to violence.<sup>7</sup>

Late antiquity, building on earlier developments in the Flavian age and influenced by the rise of Christianity, saw a gradual reorientation of key concepts that underpin heroism, such as courage and manliness,<sup>8</sup> and the emergence of new types of heroes, namely martyrs, ascetics, emperors, and, arguably, heroic sophists championing the interests of their particular cities. A late antique tendency to interpret the heroes of the classical epic tradition under a moralizing, intellectualized light is best exemplified by the re-imagining of Odysseus in both

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Papaioannou on the Hylas episode (278–292, at 279), noting that “Since Hercules in the *Argonautica* embodies the Homeric tradition, his departure from the poem in the aftermath of Hylas’ disappearance allows Jason and his epic to steer clear from convention and evolve.”

<sup>5</sup>For a list of bibliographical references, see Clark and Hatch 1981: 37, n. 12. Cf. Fuhrer 1989: 69: “Vergil’s intentions seem to be to show his reader just what true heroism and greatness can be . . . . [W]e get a picture of a hero who is humane regarding both his weakness and his magnanimity.”

<sup>6</sup>The ethical status of this final scene has been the subject of longstanding scholarly debates. Gill (1997) is probably right to conclude that the Stoicizing patterns of the Virgilian narrative lead us to see Aeneas’ surrender to passion at this point as an instance of the hero falling short of a standard that he should otherwise be able to achieve.

<sup>7</sup>Lactantius wonders if Aeneas is called *pius* only because he showed respect to his father and asks, ironically, what is more pious than to immolate human victims (*Div. inst.* 5.10). In Orosius’ *History against the Pagans* (1.18), Aeneas arrives in Italy only to involve its peoples in strife, hatred, and ruthless wars. Sedulius, a Christian poet of the fifth century, applies vocabulary allusive of Virgilian Aeneas to a demonic spirit that Jesus expels (*Carmen Paschale* 3.291–312); as Hutchinson (2016: 292–296) notes, the allusions rely on a pessimistic reading of the Virgilian hero, especially his behavior at the end of the *Aeneid*.

<sup>8</sup>For epic heroism in the Flavian age, see Cannizzaro 2023, especially 147–267 on *virtus* shifting from the martial to the private sphere. For the shifts in late antique concepts of manliness, see Kuefler 2001.

philosophical and literary texts and in the visual arts. The Homeric hero's gory *mnēstērophonia* is largely forgotten, and his adventures become sublimated into a spiritual quest. Building on earlier, standard readings of Odysseus as an ethical exemplum,<sup>9</sup> Stoics, Neoplatonists, and Christians were equally keen to turn this hero's struggle against the waves and his burning desire to return to Ithaca into an allegory of the soul's toils in the world of materiality and its yearning to return to its spiritual home.<sup>10</sup> This transition from archaic hero into late antique spiritual and even divine man (θεῖος ἄνθρωπος) was also successfully effected by several other heroes, most of whom did not have the baggage of a specific epic poem attached to them: Orpheus came to occupy a central position in the visual vocabulary of both pagans and Christians;<sup>11</sup> Perseus became a symbol of victory against such evils as usurpers, barbarian invasions, internal passions, and even heresy;<sup>12</sup> and Heracles' proverbial endurance turned him into an emblem first of the Stoic, and later the Neoplatonic, sage.<sup>13</sup>

This type of heroism—the straightforward triumph of an unambiguous “good guy” against evil or sin—casts aside some quintessential aspects of traditional (i.e., Homeric) epic heroism. A question that needs to be addressed is how, or to what extent, late antique texts incorporate or transform the morally ambiguous ideal of achieving personal honor (τιμή) and glory (κλέος) at any cost and the level of violence that this traditional heroism implies.

Greco-Roman culture was not the only Mediterranean culture to be grappling with these issues in late antiquity. A different textual community, rabbinic Judaism, dealt with its own warrior heroes—men of supernatural strength like Samson—by, on the one hand, drawing attention to the limitations of this physical strength and the dangers inherent within it, and, on the other, redefining heroism as self-control and academic achievement, transferring the mighty deeds of the heroes to the rabbis' own “battlefield of the Torah.”<sup>14</sup>

This two-pronged strategy was also available to the Greco-Roman authors who are examined by the contributors to this special issue. It was always possible, for example, to highlight the moral shortcomings of Achilles as the nega-

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Hor. *Epist.* 1.2.18: *utile . . . nobis exemplar Ulixen* (“Ulysses as a useful example for us”); Plut. *Quomodo adul.* 10.

<sup>10</sup> See, among others, Pépin 1982 and Marksches 2005: 71–81. For Odysseus' philosophical journey up to, but not including, late antiquity, see Montiglio 2011. For the late antique visual sources, see Moraw 2020.

<sup>11</sup> For the iconography, see Vieillefon 2003. For Orpheus as a Neoplatonic holy man in the *Orphic Argonautica*, see Schelske 2012: 67–115.

<sup>12</sup> In the fifth century, the mythographer Fulgentius (1.21) interpreted Perseus' killing of the Gorgons as an allegory of the noble man who “kills” the terrors within his own soul; see Pàmias 2018: 118–119. In the sixth century, the panegyrist George of Pisidia uses the myth of Perseus in praising the emperor Heraclius' victories against external foes (*Heraclius* 2.11–14 and 71–97) and also in describing the battle for the salvation of the soul (*On the Vanity of Life* 154–166); see Whitby 1994: 209–210.

<sup>13</sup> See Eppinger 2015: 105–156; Allan, Anagnostou-Laoutides, and Stafford 2019: 21–132.

<sup>14</sup> See Marks 1983: 194.

tive side of his extraordinary skill as a warrior (see Dominik, below, 309–334). Throughout their rhetorical training, students would have learned to compose invectives against him (as well as encomia). They would also have practiced *ethopoeiae*, taking the part of his Homeric interlocutors and trying to convince him to change his ways. In the context of panegyrics, the moral shortcomings of epic heroes can be highlighted as evidence that the recipient of the panegyric, the *laudandus*, is a superior hero, since he has the martial skills without the moral failings.<sup>15</sup>

As well as drawing attention to the limitations of traditional epic heroism, the poets, orators, historiographers, and biographers of late antiquity could also redefine the model by drawing it into their own intellectual realm. A pagan orator such as Libanius could point to the risky business of *parrhesia* in a world dominated by Christians as the mark of his own personal glory (see Stenger, below, 206–223). Christian authors can be keen to appropriate for themselves and their subjects the same epic *kleos* that they apparently renounce (as incompatible with Christian humility) alongside their combative denunciation of secular genres and topics. In the fourth century, Juvenius rewrites the Gospels in hexameter verse—a project that he hopes will grant him eternal glory and save his soul from the flames at the Last Judgment (*Evangeliorum Libri Quattuor* Preface 17–18 and 21–24). While this Christian poet imagines his own fame and consequent mortality as truly everlasting, he only concedes an “almost eternal” glory to Homer and Virgil (*aeternae similis*, 12). In the same century, Gregory of Nazianzus rejects a veritable catalogue of classical genres, beginning with mythological epic as exemplified by Trojan subjects (“I sing not of Troy”; μέλω δ’ οὐ Τροίην, *Carm.* 2.1.34a.71), but then goes on to say that he does sing of “the imperishable glory of Christ’s sufferings” (Χριστοῦ παθέων κλέος ἄφθιτον, *Carm.* 2.1.34a.83).<sup>16</sup>

Gregory’s ascription of epic *kleos* to Christ on account of the violence he suffered (as opposed to the violence he inflicted) is part of a complicated process of heroizing the Christian martyr, which will gradually encompass the martyrs’ “descendants”: ascetics, Saints, and possibly all the Christian righteous.<sup>17</sup> The fourth-century Latin poet Prudentius (on whose *Peristephanon*, a collection of hymns for martyrs, see Tsartsidis, below, 243–257) applies to the martyr Romanus the title of “hero” (*heros*, 10.52 and 457). At around the same time, in the

<sup>15</sup> See Hadjittofi 2021.

<sup>16</sup> For Gregory’s awareness of and combative engagement with classical genres, see Kuhn-Treichel 2020: especially 95–97 on this particular poem.

<sup>17</sup> See Bremmer 2017: 38 on the martyrs as “the heroic defenders against the attacks of the Devil on the Church; they were the *militia Dei*” and *passim* on the similarities between Saints and heroes (both had a clear local position associated with their graves which became the focus of worship; both could have healing capacities; military saints derive their iconography from heroes such as Bellerophon, etc.), although, as he acknowledges (66), “there is no straight line from heroes to saints.”

fragmentary Greek poems preserved in the so-called *Codex Visonum*, the word “hero” is amply used for various Christian characters. In the first poem of this hexametric collection, the *Vision of Dorotheus*, the term ἥρωας refers to martyrs or other blessed men who are in heaven (ἀνδρῶν ἡρώων, 30); to Dorotheus after his repentance and baptism (“renowned among heroes and sung of for generations to come”; κῦδιμον ἡρώων καὶ ἀοίδιμον ἐσσομένοισιν, 272); again to Dorotheus after receiving divine grace (“but now your grace has made me a hero”; νῦ[ν δ]έ μέ γ’ ἥρωα θῆκε τεῖ χάρις, 308); and finally to missionaries sent out to preach the Lord’s word (“Send me out to foreign men as a *veredus*; / let someone of the others who is weak stand at the gate, / for that is the place for weaker mortals, / but send the heroes [ἥρωας] out to where there is need for it far away,” 310–313).<sup>18</sup> In another poem in the same collection, titled *Address to the Righteous*, the just man who will receive his due compensation in heaven is termed a “famous hero” (ἀγλαδὺς ἥρωας, 75).

If such uses of the word “hero” give the impression that late antique epic heroism had been severed from its traditional associations with violence, anger, and physical force, much of the literature (and in particular the poetry) of late antiquity suggests otherwise.<sup>19</sup> This is, after all, a literature that often speaks in the voice of the classics. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the case of centonic poems, entirely constituted out of Homeric or Virgilian lines. The Christian *Virgilian Cento* of Proba, written in the fourth century, presents a Jesus who is no stranger to epic wrath, whether against the moneychangers at the Temple, the devilish snake at the Temptation, or the persecutors about to crucify him, whom he warns, “one day you’ll pay for this misfortune, with a different punishment” (*post mihi non simili poena commissa luetis*, 623 = *Aen.* 1.136). As Elizabeth Clark and Diane Hatch (1981: 34) have noted, this is not exactly “the Gospels’ sacrificial lamb of God,” but rather a conventional epic hero threatening vengeance.<sup>20</sup> At about the same point in the narrative of Jesus’ life, the Greek *Homero-centones* (on which see the articles by Lefteratou and

<sup>18</sup>Text and translation from Kessels and Van Der Horst 1987.

<sup>19</sup>Indeed, in one striking scene in the *Vision of Dorotheus* Jesus is infuriated by Dorotheus’ dereliction of duty, and his wrath is described with two verses which, exceptionally, are taken almost verbatim from the Homeric epics: “he was afflicted and his heart, darkened on either side, was filled with great passion / and his two eyes showed like blazing fire” (ἀ[χ]νυμένοισι, μένος δὲ μέγα φρένες ἀμφιμέλαινοι / π[ι]μπλ[α]γγ[ι], ὅσ]σε δὲ οἱ πυρὶ λαμπετόωντι εἴκτην, 138–139, which corresponds to Agamemnon’s wrath in *Il.* 1.103–104 and *Od.* 4.661–662). The poem goes on, in the immediately following verses (140–141), to compare Jesus’ wrath to that of a lion which rages, whetting its white fangs.

<sup>20</sup>As one of the reviewers for *Phoenix* pointed out, however, the memory of the God of the Old Testament and the Christian’s knowledge that the New Testament does not dispense with vengeance entirely but reserves it for God, must also be present here. See Romans 12:19: μὴ ἐαυτοὺς ἐκδικοῦντες, ἀγαπητοί, ἀλλὰ δότε τόπον τῇ ὀργῇ, γέγραπται γάρ· ἐμοὶ ἐκδίκησις, ἐγὼ ἀνταποδώσω, λέγει κύριος (“Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’”), alluding to Deuteronomy 32:35.

Verhelst below, 350–373 and 374–397) stages Jesus’ Passion as an epic battle. On the one side we have Jesus proclaiming that he is unafraid of death but keen to pursue his own *kleos* (νῦν δὲ κλέος ἐσθλὸν ἀροίμην, 1601)—a line which in the *Iliad* belongs to Achilles (18.121).<sup>21</sup> On the other stands a personified Hades, who is commanded to “withdraw into the crowd” and not offer resistance (ἀλλὰ σ’ ἔγωγ’ ἀναχωρήσαντα κελεύω / ἐς πλῆθὺν ἰέναι, μηδ’ ἀντίος ἵστασ’ ἐμεῖο, 2153–54 = *Il.* 17.30–31 and 20.196–197). This is one of the first literary portrayals of the Harrowing of Hell, and it is rendered here as an epic clash of physical prowess.<sup>22</sup> In one of the most crucial moments of his earthly life, the centonic Jesus is construed as a traditional epic hero, vanquishing his enemy, concerned not about death but about his own renown and glory.<sup>23</sup>

The articles in this special issue consider to what extent Homeric, Hellenistic, and Virgilian models of heroism were still relevant in late antiquity; what it meant to be a hero in this period; and how different authors and genres appropriated and adapted the heroics encoded in earlier epics in accordance with the moral and metaphysical principles prevalent in their own culture. Not all genres nor all sub-cultures of late antiquity could be included. For example, the relevance of epic heroism for prose genres such as historiography, hagiography, and philosophical writings has yet to be evaluated, both in this collection and in scholarship more broadly, though Jan Stenger (206–223) provides here a useful case study from Libanius’ rhetorical writings. This collection, thus, begins with Libanius’ ingenious and unabashed championing of Thersites as a hero—a paradoxical and entertaining encomium, which, however, has something serious to say about the nature of heroism, as it paints the heroic Thersites, and by extension Libanius himself, as a man notable for *parrhesia*, that is, as a man brave enough to censure powerful men and rulers without consideration for his own safety.

The following article turns precisely to the heroism of such powerful men and rulers. Catherine Ware’s study (224–242) illustrates not only how the function

<sup>21</sup>The Achillean associations of Jesus in the scenes preceding the Passion are further analyzed below in the article by Lefteratou (350–373).

<sup>22</sup>For both the Iliadic and Odyssean intertexts of Eudocia’s rendition of the Crucifixion and the Harrowing of Hell, see Sandnes 2016; Lefteratou 2023: 137–183.

<sup>23</sup>Even in Nonnus’ *Paraphrase of John’s Gospel*, a non-centonic biblical poem which sticks closer to the Gospel’s portrayal of Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb of God, such touches of epic heroism are seemingly unavoidable. For example, Nonnus’ rendition of John 18:3 (“When Jesus said, ‘I am he,’ they drew back and fell to the ground”) revels in the paradox of unarmed Christ defeating his armed persecutors: “And when the Lord, wearing no armor and bearing no sword, / said to that multitude with voice that broke the ranks of men: / ‘I am Jesus of Galilee, the inhabitant of Nazareth,’ / all those soldiers armed for war fell one on top of the other / of their own accord, and lay strewn on the dust / face down, driven mad by the furious storm of His unarmed voice” (*Par.* 18.34–38). In v. 35 Jesus’ voice is qualified by the Homeric epithet of the supreme warrior, Achilles ῥηξήνωρ, “breaking through armed ranks.” Accorinti (2020: 229), however, is right to note that overall “Nonnus, unlike Juvenius and Sedulius, does not look upon Christ as an epic hero.”

of a panegyric, specifically in the prose corpus of the *Panegyrici Latini*, can detract from the presentation of the emperor in epic terms, but also how the influence of panegyric becomes manifest in the transformed nature of the hero in late Latin epic poetry. Next, Thomas Tsartsidis (243–257) analyses three non-Roman martyrs from Prudentius' *Peristephanon*, showing that recurrent allusions to Virgil's *Aeneid* both reinforce the epic heroic status of Prudentius' martyrs and help to construe their Romanness. Prudentius' vision of the Roman empire as immortal, however, is no longer associated with its expansion or preservation in the present world but is rather linked with the everlasting kingdom of God, and the main task of emperors must be to prepare their citizens to access this kingdom. Vicente Flores Militello (258–277) brings us back to the theme of panegyric and shows how the epic poet Claudian heroizes the general Stilicho by dignifying him with the resources of the Greek and Latin literary tradition, in particular learned Callimacheanism, and by, astonishingly, having his hero directly interact with the divine apparatus of the poem. Sophia Papaioannou (278–292) in turn continues the Callimachean thread by exploring Dracontius' Hylas as a hero who embodies not Homeric/Virgilian but Hellenistic heroics and aesthetics with a long reception in Latin poetry.

Dealing with the longest surviving Greek epic poem, Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*, Laura Miguélez-Cavero (293–308) focuses on the *synkrisis* between Dionysus and three other sons of Zeus, namely Perseus, Minos, and Heracles in Book 25. She demonstrates how the poet manipulates epic and imperial paradigms of heroic masculinity and claims for Dionysus the label of the decisive leader, largely by special pleading (e.g., relying on visibly mendacious, ridiculous arguments or by gross inconsistencies between the actual behavior of Dionysus in the narrative and his praise in the *synkrisis*). William Dominik's contribution (309–334) on Achilles as an ambivalent hero in late antique Latin poetry provides a broad overview of how the Iliadic hero can be viewed both as a positive role model and as an inferior foil; this is the first of three articles in this collection to engage late antique receptions of the quintessential epic hero, Achilles. The second such article is my contribution on Quintus' *Posthomerica* (335–349), a third-century epic poem that attempts to moralize Homer's heroic ethos. As the Achillean nature of Oenone's anger and resentment strongly suggests, however, the Homeric ideal of heroism cannot be entirely absent from an epic poem in the traditional mold. A third article on late antique receptions of Achilles, by Anna Lefteratou (350–373), takes on Eudocia's *Homerocentones* and offers a fascinating case study of how Achilles' "problematic" heroism can be adapted to an entirely different kind of hero: the weeping Christ at his Agony on the Mount of Olives.

Finally, in the last article of the collection, Berenice Verhelst (374–397) takes a novel, computational approach to the same poem, the *Homerocentones*, by analysing the speech data from the DICES database to detect passages in which the cento meaningfully engages with the Homeric intertext. One of the



most relevant conclusions of her study is that speeches in the *Homero-centones* rely predominantly on the voices of female and elderly Homeric characters, which seems to fit within a wider model of transforming and adapting the Homeric heroic universe by minimizing the themes of war and adventure and maximizing introspection and the moral or theological content.

This diverse set of articles aims to broaden our view of heroism and the reception of classical, epic heroic models in late antiquity. It is hoped that, taken together, these contributions will provide if not a complete then a fuller picture of what epic heroism meant in this pivotal period, showcasing both the continuities with the past and also the spirit of innovation that animates much of the literature of late antiquity.

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