

HOMERIC VALUES

For it is honorable and glorious for a man to fight
for his country and children and wedded wife
against the enemy. And death will come whenever
the Fates decree. But let him march forward
holding his spear high and keeping his brave heart
behind his shield, first to mingle in war.
For there is no way for a man to escape death
which is ordained, not even if his race is descended from the gods.

—Callinus, seventh-century Greek poet

HEROISM AND SHAME CULTURE

Heroism was essential to the ancient Greeks, for heroes and heroines offered models for living one's life. Think of the role Jesus plays for many today who wear bracelets with the letters WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?). Yet Greek heroes did not always act in accordance with what we consider moral values; rather, they demonstrated their heroism by action and success.

Let's begin with a definition of the hero (or female heroine). The word "hero" is a Greek word with three meanings, linked to lineage, era, and behavior. First, in a narrow sense, a hero is a mortal with one human and one divine parent. Achilles' father is a man, Peleus, but his mother, Thetis, is a sea goddess. Achilles

is a hero in this technical sense; other examples include Aeneas (whose mother is Aphrodite) and Heracles ("Hercules" in Latin—Zeus is his father).

Second, the label of hero may have to do with a particular time period. The Greeks refer to the time when heroes lived as the "heroic age." In a looser sense, anyone who lived in the heroic age was a hero. Both Odysseus' mother and father were human, not divine, yet he is considered a hero by virtue of the fact that he lived in the age of heroes.

Third, someone may be heroic by his or her actions, consisting of great deeds, personal sacrifice, or a transcendent vision. This is a sense familiar to us today. We still speak of heroes in war, politics, and—with amazing frequency—sports and music.

For the Greeks, heroes were stronger and greater than men in later times (that is, in Homer's own day). As Homer puts it:

Tydeus' son, Diomedes, took up a stone in his hand,
a great accomplishment, a stone which two men, such as exist today,
could not carry. (*Iliad* 5.302–304)

Heroes were also physically handsome, in part because—even without a divine parent—they were descended from the gods. Nausicaa's great-great-grandfather was the god Poseidon; Agamemnon's great-great-grandfather was Zeus. All this contributes to what is called "epic distance," the realization that heroes lived in a different time and were distinctively more impressive than Homer's contemporaries. Still, the essence of heroism is action: heroes need to accomplish something.

The deeds performed by heroes are varied. Journeying to the "underworld"—and returning—is considered heroic; it symbolizes a triumph over death (once Heracles literally defeats Death in a wrestling match). Jason went off to the ends of the world to retrieve the golden fleece. Many of Homer's heroes demonstrate their heroism in battle. We may speak of "the heroic code," a set of rules by which warriors become famous and demonstrate their heroism. In the *Iliad*, Hector, leader of the Trojans, articulates the heroic code:

"I've learned to be brave
always, and to fight in the front ranks of the Trojans,
winning my father great glory and glory for myself." (*Iliad* 6.444–446)

The essence of heroic action is risking one's life. Hector has learned to fight in front where it is most dangerous. Yet that's also where one wins great glory (see also the speech of Sarpedon, Zeus' son, at *Iliad* 12.310–328). The premise of heroism then is mortality—even with one divine parent, heroes and heroines will die. Risking one's life in battle is a defining feature of heroism. (There are exceptions such as Heracles, Aeneas, and in the *Odyssey*, apparently Menelaus and Helen, who will live forever as gods.)

So we have a definition of the hero and a code of conduct. In addition, there are rewards and what might be called "enforcement" of the heroic code. The rewards in part are tangible: many material goods are given to those who risk their lives in

battle (tripods, gold, captive women, and more). In addition, heroes are honored by their people and may even achieve what Homer calls “imperishable glory,” the distinction of having singers recall great feats of heroes long after their deaths.

The heroic code is enforced by public pressure. Indeed, an essential part of warrior society is public esteem or, alternatively, public disgrace. Those who risk their lives are honored in society; those who are cowards and run away from battle are disgraced in the eyes of society. Hector speaks of this:

“But I would be terribly ashamed
before the men of Troy and the Trojan women trailing their long robes
if I would skulk away from battle like a coward.” (*Iliad* 6.441–443)

This sort of society where public pressure plays such a dominant role often goes under the name of “shame culture.” While no people on earth operate wholly under a shame culture (or wholly under its contrast, a “guilt culture”), this concept offers insight into the motivation of heroes.

The central idea that distinguishes shame culture from guilt culture is that in a guilt culture, if you do something wrong—even if nobody knows—you would feel bad or “guilty.” Your conscience would trouble you. **In a shame culture, what matters is the public perception.** If you do well in battle—a public display of valor—you are honored and rewarded. If you are about to avoid danger, you feel public pressure to conform to society’s ideals.

The distinction between shame and guilt culture may be demonstrated by contrasting the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. People have often connected the Ten Commandments (“Thou shalt not kill,” etc.) with shame culture, because these prohibitions concern public acts that are condemned by society. The Sermon on the Mount, by contrast, speaks of what you may feel in your heart: “I say that he who looks at another woman with a desire to commit adultery has already committed adultery in his heart” (Matt. 5.28). Note that the person “who looks at another woman with a desire to commit adultery” has *done* nothing; no public action has taken place. And no one could know about these private desires. Still Jesus condemns such feelings in one’s heart. It’s truly a revolutionary moment when inner feelings and convictions became as significant as public actions. In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, however, public actions weigh more heavily than inner feelings. It’s not how you feel, it’s what you do.

So much for the conventions of society. If Homer were your everyday poet, that might be as far as it goes. But Homer perceives the limitations and contradictions in such a world. He is fascinated by “violations” of the heroic code. In fact, both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* present major figures, Achilles and Odysseus, who are not typical heroes submitting to the rules of society. In the *Iliad*, there is no greater hero than Achilles—he’s the best fighter at Troy. Yet Homer tells the story of Achilles “dropping out.” The valiant warrior leaves battle, threatens to go home, and watches as the Greeks—his own allies—begin to lose in battle. When the desperate Greeks come to his camp and beg for his help by offering gifts, Achilles asserts that no gifts are equal to the value of his life. He will no longer risk his life for reward and honor. He sees two choices:

"If I remain here and fight around the Trojans' city,
my journey home is gone, but there will be undying glory.
If I go back home to my dear fatherland,
my noble glory is gone, but there'll be a long life
for me, and the stroke of death will not find me quickly." (*Iliad* 9.412–416)

Although later changing his mind, at this point Achilles appears inclined to go home, see his father once again, marry, and settle down to a relatively obscure life. Yet how can the greatest hero leave what he does best? Is Achilles still a hero if he abandons his allies and the goal of sacking Troy? Well, yes—in a technical sense—he's the son of a goddess, so he's a hero. Yet clearly what matters more is how Achilles acts and whether he proves himself to be heroic. As the heroic code fails to answer life's problems, Achilles pursues a personal quest for meaning. Homer's brilliant masterpiece explores Achilles' doubt, withdrawal, and return.

Odysseus is also a puzzle. He, too, is a warrior; he fights and wins many riches. In the *Odyssey*, however, he learns that to succeed—for success is also a heroic goal—he must at times be cautious and even endure insults in his own home. While proving his valor by fighting, Odysseus proves his superiority and genius by a different mode of operation. Some have seen the early adventures—such as the sacking of the Cicones and his insistence on shouting out his name to the blinded Polyphemus in book 9—as “Iliadic” heroism, the sort of behavior that works on the plain of battle, but not in the strange world Odysseus journeys through on his way home. To survive in the wild and woolly world of Circe, Calypso, Scylla and Charybdis, and the Sirens, Odysseus must adopt a new attitude. Charging bravely ahead with a battle cry is not the way to go (see *Odyssey* 12.116–119). Odysseus must discover a new way of dealing with the unusual challenges facing him. We note that even the Trojan War is won not by Achilles' prowess in battle, but by a trick (thought up by Athena and Odysseus): the deception of the large wooden horse that the Trojans mistakenly assume will protect their city. And trickery—not always associated with heroism—is one of Odysseus' great strengths.

Odysseus therefore may be seen as a different kind of hero. While he's no coward, has a healthy appreciation for material goods, and wants the respect of his peers, Odysseus achieves glory in part by underhandedness, by stealth, and by deception. Here, too, Homer offers his audience something of a paradox: a tricky hero.

The cliché even in antiquity was that the *Iliad* was for men, while the *Odyssey* was for women. I certainly reject this—it suggests that women are unlikely to appreciate the *Iliad*—yet there *is* a truly wonderful set of female characters in the *Odyssey*: Nausicaa, Circe, Calypso, Athena, and Penelope. One reason so many wonderful female characters appear in the *Odyssey*, I think, is that in Homer's patriarchal, macho world, women can more easily mirror the “tricky” heroism Odysseus demonstrates than the military heroism of the *Iliad* (in general, women do not fight in battle, though again there's an exception: the Amazons)—and Homer loves to explore similarities between characters. Penelope in

particular shows how endurance and craftiness lead to success—she is no less heroic than her husband (see Dodds and Williams in “Further Reading” and Diotima in “Homer On-Line”).

MORALITY, HOSPITALITY, AND THE GODS

In addition to the heroic code, there was a code of hospitality (or guest-friendship) that has its own set of rules. Hospitality may better reflect a society at peace, while the heroic code stipulates rules for wartime. In addition, hospitality provides an intersection between etiquette, morality, and the gods.

Hospitality is a reciprocal relationship: a host is expected to welcome a traveler (even a stranger!) into his home, offer a bath, food, and drink, and—only then—ask who this person might be. It’s fascinating that one of the questions is: “Are you a pirate?” The guest is expected to treat his host courteously and with respect (unlike Paris, who stole Helen, his host’s wife!). Of course, not everyone is a good host or guest, but it becomes clear that everyone pretty much knows the rules—even the Cyclops Polyphemus. It’s important for us to learn the obligations on both sides of the equation, for in the *Odyssey* Homer uses hospitality as a means of revealing character—and helping us to judge people.

The first scene at Ithaca shows a goddess in disguise arriving at Odysseus’ home. There was a proverb that travelers may be the gods in disguise (*Odyssey* 17.485–487)—Athena plays this role several times. The suitors ignore her, but Telemachus rushes up and invites her into his home. This is the first instance where Homer asks us to apply the code of hospitality to the various characters in the epic in order to distinguish good from bad. Homer never comments on someone’s hospitable behavior—he expects his readers to recognize appropriate behavior in accordance with the code of hospitality.

The Amazing Greek Language

Interestingly, the Greeks have just one word for both “host” and “guest”—*xenos*. When Odysseus asks the Cyclops for a guest gift, a derivative of this word is used: *xenion*, or “gift-that-a-host-gives-a-guest.” In Greek, *xenos* can comprise a wide range of meanings: “host,” “guest,” “traveler” (that is, potential guest), and “stranger,” for out-of-town travelers are generally unknown. There is the town of Xenia, Ohio, but the most common appearance of this word in English is xenophobia. Literally this means “fear of strangers or fear of foreigners,” yet it generally contains a sense of hostility rather than fear—and it doesn’t mean “fear of Xena, the warrior princess.”

Given the code of hospitality, we need to examine the issues of right and wrong and human relations with the gods. There was no set of commandments or laws that governed all Greeks in Homer’s time, but moral principles certainly existed. We see this most easily by considering Zeus’ roles. Zeus, the chief god associated with the sky and weather (he wields a thunderbolt), is described as Zeus Xenios, Zeus Horkios, and Zeus Hikesios: Zeus who watches over hospitality

(*xenios*), over oaths (*horkios*), and over suppliants (*hikesios*). While all Greeks are expected to abide by the code of hospitality, if violations occur, kings or those in power would be expected to punish such violators. If no such enforcement takes place at the human level, Zeus would bring retribution upon bad guests and hosts. In similar fashion, Zeus is the final judge on those who break their oaths and those who show no mercy to suppliants (those who beg for help).

In the *Odyssey*, Homer tells the story of Odysseus' journey home. Odysseus' goal is blocked by the hostility of Poseidon, yet he is helped by the goddess Athena. True, it's hard to say that Odysseus deserves Poseidon's enmity or Athena's concern. Odysseus is not always a saintly guy, but Homeric morality is quite distinct from the ideals of Christianity: humility is no virtue and Odysseus' adulteries are not explicitly condemned (the old double standard?). As mentioned above, success is the goal of Greek heroes—not virtue or goodness. Heroes sack cities and are honored with tripods and captive women for doing so. These aren't Boy Scouts!

All moral questions in the *Odyssey* are complicated for several reasons. Part of the problem derives from the fact that in Homeric epics there is only an implicit morality—Homer does not praise or condemn in his own voice. This leaves the audience (and readers) to play the role of judge. Also, particular actions are not always condemned. The suitors lie and plot against the lives of their foes, but so does Odysseus (and he's unfaithful to his wife). Why should we consider Odysseus the good guy and the suitors the bad guys? Or—to put it another way—how does Homer influence our reactions in such a way that we root for Odysseus and against the suitors? Is it simply that the suitors are bad guests and that Athena is Odysseus' ally (and that we sympathize with Penelope and Telemachus)? Is it because the story is told to a great extent from Odysseus' perspective?

Homer's epics are open-ended to this extent. During the fifth century, tragedians treated Odysseus as an amoral opportunist who would do or say anything to get what he wanted. Often he was cowardly as well. We might say that's a later version of the figure of Odysseus, but all Odysseus' traits in tragedy are found one way or another in the *Odyssey*. Not only is he tricky, but he lies to and manipulates even those who care about him. His goal is success, not virtue. And yet Homer is delighted with these skills, which are mirrored in Athena—a formidable goddess who also uses deception yet certainly is deserving of respect.

There are moral lessons in the *Odyssey* against excessive behavior (the suitors) and against disobedience to divine prohibitions (Odysseus' crew). A Christian, Jew, or Muslim may say it's wrong to disobey god; in Homer, it's not so much immoral as stupid. Odysseus' men swore not to eat the cattle of the Sun; the suitors should wise up and not abuse Penelope's hospitality. The toughest nut to crack concerns vengeance. Poseidon persecutes Odysseus for the blinding of his son, Polyphemus; Odysseus slays the suitors for their actions. There's a sort of justice in vengeance, but without divine resolution, where does it end? Violence begets violence. Homer explores this problem and provides a solution only in the final scene of the epic.

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