

Heroism: A Question of Epic Proportions

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Part One: Introduction

I am confident that most of us here, if not all, have some familiarity with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer. Even in grade school many of us were told, or we read, some of the stories about Achilles and the fall of ancient Troy, about the subsequent long adventurous homeward journey of Odysseus (or ‘Ulysses’-- as we were taught to call him by the English version of his Latinized name). In the following school years my knowledge of these stories was gradually expanded, and when I entered the second year of Greek, our class spent a semester translating selected passages from the *Iliad*. Nothing can equal the experience of reading an ancient text in its own language, rather than reading it through the eyes of someone else, no matter how learned that translator may be. Now, years later, looking back on my academic career as a historian and classicist, I feel somewhat regretful that I never had the occasion to teach Homer in Greek. Homer, however, was not my “specialty”. Of course anyone working in Greek and Roman antiquities is constantly made aware of the impact that the Homeric epic had on subsequent literature and art. It became almost immediately a rich mine of material for poets, dramatists and other artists. It was the beginning of a tradition that continues to inspire the creative imagination of writers and artists even to the present day, to say nothing of the immense body of scholarly publications that added to our knowledge of these seminal works over the past several centuries. As an illustration of the Homeric epic’s

inspirational power, I need only to mention a landmark literary masterpiece of the 20th century--James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the title of which could not be any more explicit about its primary source of inspiration. (Happy Bloomsday, June 16, all you Joyceans!)

So many questions and topics could have been chosen as the subject of this paper. As a matter of fact, the decision was made after reading two recent novels based entirely on each of the two Homeric epics and just published within the last three years. These two novels, as we shall see, have inspired both the theme of this paper and its structure.

Before we begin with these novels, something must be said about the kind of world that is reflected in the Homeric epic. Stated briefly, it was a "proto-state" society, an anthropological way of saying that elements of state institutions, such as they were, existed only in a primitive or embryonic form. For example, there was a loose form of community and community leadership, but not yet rooted in a formal definition of constitution and law. Leadership was exercised within a relatively small region by a "strong man", whose tenure of rule prevailed only so long as he was able to enforce his will. The title in Greek of this leader is *basileus*, which is often translated as 'king', and in many instances it could just as easily have been translated as 'chief' or 'chieftain'. The *basileus* and those who fought at his side were men of varying economic capacity but who had the means to furnish themselves with arms and equipment, manpower and supplies; in addition they had the time to train themselves in the use of such equipment—these men were called 'warriors'. These warriors were the peacekeepers in their own regions. The word 'warrior' in Homeric Greek, incidentally, is synonymous with the word 'hero', but the word

'warrior' is not to be confused with the word 'soldier'. The distinction between warrior and soldier is very important. In the Homeric Age a soldier was a common man in the entourage of a warrior as a kind of retainer, and if he was elevated to combatant's status he might serve as an archer, slinger or a charioteer. The soldier comes into his own recognition, freed of servility to a warrior, with the rise of the state. Warriors, for example, fight by their own choice and on their own behalf and that of neighbors, friends and family; soldiers, on the other hand, fight on behalf of their state and not by choice necessarily but whenever and wherever the state commands them to do so. Warriors are compensated by booty, pillage, and piracy; soldiers generally receive compensation from the state and sometimes are allowed to receive designated shares of booty—unapproved cases of pillage by soldiers are commonly regarded as punishable offenses. The key factor underlying this distinction is summed up in the word 'citizenship'. A citizen is a formal member of an organized community, i. e. a state, in which he has a share of responsibilities and privileges all of which come under the provisions of the state's system of law. The concept of citizenship was not yet known to the warrior society of the Homeric epic. We have only touched the tip of the Iceberg on the nature of this society, but enough has been said to illustrate the difference between a 'state' society and a proto- or pre-state society and to provide a better understanding of the behavior and practices of peoples in the Homeric age.

Part Two: The Heroism of Achilles

Of the books mentioned a moment ago the first one to be considered is David Malouf's 2009 publication entitled *Ransom*. *Ransom* is a piece of novelistic fiction based on the idea that the hero Achilles experienced a

pivotal life-change when he met Priam, the Trojan king, who had come to ransom the body of his son Hector. In the epic this episode is the main subject of Book 24, the final book of the *Iliad* and the final appearance of Achilles. The body of the novel is constructed around the character development of the two protagonists: the first is Priam, the man who has grown old in all the ways that it means to grow old for a former warrior who has survived those frenetic days of training, posturing and fighting, a hero from the past, a status therefore commanding respect; the second protagonist is Achilles, the younger man, a warrior in his prime, the Greek champion and the slayer of Priam's son Hector. The plot of the novel then unfolds by reaching into the respective pasts of both men and bringing them up to the present moment when the Trojan king finds himself alone (except for his "driver") unprotected, in the Greek camp, in the tent of Achilles, face-to-face with his arch-enemy who not only killed his son but also abused his son's body by dragging it behind his chariot around the tomb of Patroclus, a sacrilegious act of in the eyes of all, including the gods. For Priam it is a terrifying moment. He is aware that one false move, one wrong choice of word from him, and the volatile anger of Achilles could explode and crush him like a bug under foot, but his intuition also tells him that Achilles will likely regard him, Priam, with respect for his age and for having once been a warrior who has survived and has lived on to acquire the wisdom of a paternal elder. Priam also knows that there would be no glory for Achilles in killing an unarmed old man, indeed quite the opposite.

As our attention moves to Achilles, we are reminded that the name 'Achilles' is nearly synonymous with the word 'hero'. The hero of early epic

is always a warrior in one way or another. It would seem that he is the human paradigm of the epic *mythos*. So may it be, but the novelist appears driven to dispel some of the mists that surround the myth of epic heroism and instead infuse the world of the warrior with a healthy dose of reality. He makes the following observation of Achilles upon entering manhood:

“He had entered the rough world of men, where a man’s acts follow him wherever he goes in the form of story. A world of pain, loss, dependency, bursts of violence and elation; of fatality and fatal contradictions, breathless leaps into the unknown; at last of death—a hero’s death out there in full sunlight under the gaze of gods and men, for which the hardened self, the hardened body, had duly to be exercised and prepared. . .

“Days, years, season after season; an endless interim of keeping your weapons in good trim and your keener self taut as a bowstring through long stretches of idleness, of restless, patient waiting, and shameful quarrels and unmanly bragging and talk. . . Such a life is death to the warrior spirit. Which if it is to endure at the high point needs action—the clash of arms that settles a quarrel quickly, then sends a man back [home], refreshed in spirit, to being a farmer again.”

Malouf is saying that war is best handled if it is carried out quickly and decisively. It has in effect its own season—that part of the year between spring planting and fall harvest. The point being made here is that the warrior spirit cannot be maintained at the expense of other necessities for human existence-- production of food, the provision of clothing and housing, the raising of a family. These ideas of quick and decisive warfare and the realistic needs of the warrior and his family stand in stark contrast to the conditions of the Trojan War, that terrible, tedious, ten-year campaign, a very long time for an individual warrior to be away from home,

family, and farm. The effect that it must have had on the warrior spirit was to generate feelings of cynical disaffection, anger and ultimately despair.

We have reached a point where we need to be reminded about some key elements in the epic. First of all, the *Iliad* begins in the tenth year of the war. The poem narrates neither the beginning years nor the final episode of the war, the destruction of Troy. The title might lead one to expect that the poem is a chronicle of the war. It is not. Instead the war is the inevitable background to the narrative, the context within which and against which each character must struggle. Let me underscore for you the theme of the *Iliad*. It is the wrath of Achilles as highlighted in the opening verse of that poem: “O Goddess, sing of the wrath of Peleus’ son Achilles.” That is what the poem is about, and within the first ten lines of verse you learn that this raging hero is a doomed soul, a murderous warrior responsible in one way or another for the countless deaths of so many Greeks as well as Trojans, so much of which is the consequence of the deadly clash between Achilles and Agamemnon the Greek commander-in-chief, as recorded in Book I. It is the first of the great, dramatic ironies within this story: that the wrath of Achilles is directed at Agamemnon with far more vehemence and hatred than is felt against the common enemy the Trojans. Because of this quarrel, Achilles withdraws himself and his men from the field of battle, and the pendulum of fortune-in-war then swings in favor of the Trojans. His refusal to fight is more than a display of pique or disaffection, it is an outright act of defiance against the will of the commander. Keep in mind that he does not take his men and sail for home—although he threatens to do so—which would have been a breach of the bond of guest-friendship in this pre-state society, curiously a less

serious offense than what he was actually doing. No, he stays at the site, less for reasons having to do with his engagement in the war against the Trojans—after all, if the war is being waged to regain the beautiful Helen, the runaway wife of Menelaos, Agamemnon's brother, then one might ask who is he to Helen or Helen to him? Rather his presence is a daily reminder that he is standing by to watch the dismal failure of Agamemnon's command. Also remember that Achilles is a warrior, not a soldier. Had he been a soldier, he could have been forced to appear before some form of martial court on the charge of desertion in the face of the enemy, a charge that carries in most societies the penalty of capital punishment.

Thus in the tenth year of this war something is badly askew. These warriors are all caught up in a conflict that is beginning to make less and less sense. The war has gone on far too long, and it appears as if the war at Troy was merely a pretext for bands of warriors to do what they were trained to do and what they do best—fight and kill others who are just like themselves. To the victor go the spoils, and the most prized of all are the captured women! The powerful role of the captive woman is mystifying in this epic drama that is so focused on a man's world. It gives a whole new meaning to the old French adage *cherchez la femme!* (“Look to the woman at the bottom of it all!”). I wish I had an answer to this question of an underlying feminine power, but I do not.

An earlier moment of revelation for Achilles—one not mentioned by the novelist Malouf—appears in Book IX of the *Iliad* when an embassy of warriors is sent to the camp of Achilles to urge him to return to the battle which is not going well for the Greeks. Nestor, the eldest of the Greek

warriors and most respected for his experience and wisdom selected the three principal members of the embassy. The first was Phoenix, a dear old friend of Achilles' father Peleus by whom he had been entrusted to exercise in his stead a kind of paternal authority toward his son; the second was Odysseus, the cleverest of the campaigners and renowned for his tactical abilities and powers of persuasion; the third was Ajax, a great warrior, second only to Achilles as a champion of the Greeks. Their appeals are what one might expect in the circumstances. A summary will suffice: if Achilles returns to the war, Agamemnon promises through his spokesman Odysseus to give back his prizes that were taken, most especially the girl Briseis. In the eyes of all warriors and for countless generations thereafter he will be accorded honors tantamount to deification.

In response, Achilles derides Agamemnon and his promises. Of him he says, "hateful in my eyes, even as the gates of hell, is that man who hides one thing in his mind and says something else." As for the war, "why," he asks in unfeigned disbelief, "why are we fighting the Trojans? For the fair-haired Helen? Why then did that arrogant man deprive me of my girl-prize? Are the women loved by the sons of Atreus the only ones to be prized?" However, when Achilles addresses the question of his honor, his voice takes on a quiet but emphatic authority as he tells them that he has no need for the honor accorded by mortals; his honor is measured and allotted by the decree of Zeus. Achilles asserts an idea that was apparently incomprehensible, if not meaningless, to his listeners, including Odysseus who never made any such claim as that for himself. After what must have been a bout of deep introspection, Achilles not only came to conceive honor as an abstract notion but also as a transcendental quality

that cannot be measured by human gifts and accolades whether received or taken away. The unspoken premise obvious in the arguments of the persuaders, on the other hand, is that Achilles had suffered a serious loss of honor when he had to endure the humiliating take-back of his prizes at the hands of Agamemnon. Odysseus, Phoenix, and Ajax are there, as they see it, to help him redress that loss of honor by getting him to accept Agamemnon's "repentant" offer to return all prizes "untouched and untarnished" along with promises of new magnanimous favors—all his, if he returns to the war. These meretricious sentiments might easily pass for the political correctness of the Homeric Age. We could have expected better from Odysseus, but then cleverness ought not to be equated with wisdom, and Odysseus still has miles to go before reaching the fulfillment of his destiny.

Heroism cannot exist without honor, and honor cannot endure for long any blemish. Achilles too had still not made it to the fulfillment of his destiny. Achilles may have perceived his honor as apportioned by the god's decree, but that is not to say it was without blemish. How could it be? His loathing of Agamemnon had morphed into something far more destructive, even repulsive. It became a raging, pathological fury that could be directed at anyone or anything that stood in his path. Witness the way he re-channels his anger after his close friend Patroclus had been slain by Hector. He then directs his wrath against Hector, even to the point of making an accommodation with Agamemnon in order to concentrate on avenging his slain companion. The senselessness of his wrath is finally expressed in the degrading and ugly abuse of Hector's corpse.

Returning now to that meeting of Priam with Achilles, Achilles sees standing before him an old man who has retired from the ranks of the warriors, a man who now spends his time puttering in the garden and entertaining his grandchildren, one knowing that people around him now regard him as a doddering caricature of his former self. In other words, Achilles sees in him a replication of his own father, pathetic yet dignified and most deserving the piety of respect, a man whom he will never see again. In that revelatory moment a symbiosis is effected between the two men that changes everything. Memories of his own father that identify him with Priam, the knowledge that his own destiny is foredoomed and death is only a few days away force him to face the reality that his anger no longer has any meaning, no justification, and probably never did, at least not to the dismal extent that it had become. This is the climactic point of the epic, as well as the culmination of Achilles' heroic career because it is the ultimate catharsis by which he is rid of the rage that had demonized him from the beginning of the epic. His act of humanity toward Priam is the signal of the cathartic transformation. Priam more than anyone else has touched the very soul of Achilles. The last set of ironies in this tragic tale now have their final run. The grand finale of the epic does not end with the dramatic death of the hero Achilles but rather with the quiet funereal rites for Hector. Nor does the *Iliad* tell of the death of Achilles. We learn elsewhere that Achilles does not fall in battle in a glorious hand to hand skirmish with a Trojan hero, for there is no Trojan hero who can prevail against him. Instead he is felled by that humble missile, an arrow hitting him in his unsanctified heel, an arrow shot by the least heroic person of all, Paris, Helen's Trojan sex-toy.

Part Three: the Heroism of Odysseus

Earlier in the paper I had employed the recent literary work of David Malouf as a way of introducing the discussion of Achilles. In like fashion, I will employ that other recent literary work, also a novel, to introduce the discussion of Odysseus. The author is Zachary Mason, and the title of his novel is *The Lost Books of the Odyssey*, first published in 2008 and then a “slightly different” edition appeared in 2010 by a different publisher. It is a novel consisting of 44 so-called “fragments”, some as short as a paragraph and one as long as 18 pages. The tales told in these fragments are quite inventive and are meant to serve, at least in the make-believe world of fiction, as parts of a “catalogue” that a practicing bard would consult in preparing an evening’s entertainment in the hall of a notable *basileus*, or they may have served as suggestions considered but deleted from the versions contained in what we are told had become in the 6th century BC the canonical text of the epics. Many of the stories he weaves are not only entertaining but also achieve something that was even more difficult to do—a kind of credibility that would allow the reader to think of them as possibly belonging to that long oral tradition leading up to the ingenious efforts of Homer who selected from that much larger body of material those stories and elements that he remolded to make of each epic an artistically cohesive entity.

The unique feature in Zachary Mason’s work, in my opinion, is his recasting of Odysseus’ character. In his longest fragment entitled “The Iliad of Odysseus” the novel reaches a turning point within this artfully

ambiguous collection of well-contrived inconsistencies, anachronisms, even patent contradictions. In this one, in which the title is a cleverly designed oxymoron, he pulls the mask off our hero Odysseus, revealing a most canny (in every sense of that word) fellow who has perpetrated a hoax of some magnitude. In the opening paragraph of Fragment 18 Odysseus Speaks: “I have often wondered whether all men are cowards like I am. Achaia’s flower, the chosen of Ares, disciplined, hard-muscled men who do not know what fear is—all a fraud, a conceit for bards and braggarts that has nothing to do with the vapid squalor of war.” No warrior spirit is expressed in that sentiment. There was nothing about this war, about life in the camp that appealed to Odysseus. The war dragged on year after miserable year because of the obvious ineptitude of Agamemnon and his staff. From the moment he first met the man, Odysseus detested Agamemnon. In him he saw a willfulness and arrogance he had seen in no other man. If his father Laertes had not enjoined him to lead the Ithacan contingent under Agamemnon’s command, he would never have entrusted his life and the lives of his men to a commander of his ilk. There was a striking similarity, and probably the only one, between Odysseus’ dislike of Agamemnon and Achilles’ intense loathing of him, but for somewhat different reasons which therefore produced different results. Both heroes were undoubtedly in agreement about the incompetence and arrogance of the man, but it was Achilles who had suffered an affront to his dignity (not his honor) by losing Briseis, his girl-prize, at the hands of Agamemnon, whereas the crafty Odysseus found other ways of avoiding the disasters resulting from Agamemnon’s ill-conceived decisions.

We now need to consider the nature of Odysseus' heroism, to attempt an answer to the question why that seminal poet of early antiquity had chosen Odysseus as his only other example of epic heroism. Achilles, as we have just seen, was distinguished as the champion warrior, thus making him the obvious first choice, but curiously enough it was not his prowess in battle that set the theme of the poem. The poet, as we have already seen, clearly announces the theme—Achilles' wrath—at the very beginning of the *Iliad*. In similar, but not exact, fashion does the *Odyssey* begin; an adjective instead of a noun sets the theme by signifying the essential attribute of the epic protagonist. The qualifying adjective in Greek is *polutropos*, a compound made up of two words which means literally 'much turned' or 'turning many ways'; as such it is a metaphorical description of someone who is 'shifty', 'wily', 'versatile'. Murray in the Loeb Series translates *andra polutropon* as "a man of many devices"; Cook in the Norton Edition renders the same phrase, "a man of many turns". At any rate, the poet makes clear from the start that we are dealing with a man who is clever, versatile, and highly adaptive to new situations.

Many instances exhibiting the ingenuity of Odysseus could be cited, but one example will suffice, the one achievement that in my estimation is the exemplar of Odysseus' adaptive, tactical genius. I am of course alluding to the Trojan Horse. In those dismal years of futile warfare, Odysseus quietly honed his skills as a tactician. He was moved mostly by the desire to save his life and the lives of his men. He soon learned when and how it was best to fight and when it was best not to fight. Thus we do hear some details about his skills and bravery in hand-to-hand combat; but he was not in the same class as Achilles, Ajax, or Diomedes. Choosing his

engagements carefully proved to him to be the better part of valor. When he could not stand the war any longer, he turned his attention to finding a way of ending this terrible conflict. Mason envisions our hero reflecting on the apparent notion that since Helen was the cause of this war, as we have already noted several times, then the end of Helen should end the war: “Kill the whore, end the war!” To carry out that scheme a way had to be found to get inside the walls. With this thought in mind did Odysseus devise the scheme by which a huge effigy of a horse—the animal dear to the Trojans—would be built, and inside its body would be hidden a small select band of commando-warriors. One might have expected that the Trojan holocaust would have been the grand finale of the *Iliad* or at least be a splashy beginning for the *Odyssey*. Homer, as I remarked earlier, did not include it in the epics, even though he made passing reference to it, most notably in Book XI of the *Odyssey*. (The Roman poet Virgil, writing some seven centuries later, in Book Two of the *Aeneid* tells the story of the horse and the destruction of Troy.) Odysseus, the man who literally engineered the destruction of Troy and thus brought this terrible, bloody business to an end, treated his role in that affair with an air of diffidence so remarkably unbecoming for a warrior. No one of the others, including Achilles, would have lost any opportunity to boast of such an achievement. It appears that Odysseus as well as the poet share a similar antipathy for re-enacting the slaughter and conflagration of Troy’s final hour. There was no glamor or glory here; the only satisfaction was that the whole dreadful affair was over at last.

In that long fragment of his novel, already mentioned earlier, Mason has Odysseus confessing his ultimate life’s desire, and, from what has

been said so far, you can rest assured that his first choice was not the career of a warrior. It was not his choice to accompany Agamemnon to Troy; his father made him do it, as we have already noted. What he really desired most of all was to become a story-teller, a traveling minstrel. In Mason's re-creation of his confession, Odysseus knew from an early age that he was best suited for a life of song, poetry, and story-telling. He could recite many of the epics after hearing them "just four times", and he excelled in composing his own stories. As a matter of fact, Mason has him say that some of his fictional compositions "became, with minor variations, the *Odyssey* of Homer." Catching my breath after reading that remark, I thought about it and concluded it would not be all that incredible, actually more believable than the various fantastic episodes that appeared in his tale of wandering, such as having a contest with a one-eyed giant, or the seven years spent bedding down the luscious goddess Calypso—not difficult to understand what might have inspired that fantasy or the lascivious delight of an audience held in thrall by the pictures he wove of that hot little number. Indeed, all the stories of the wandering hero's adventures were more pleasant than the blood, gore, and flame of Troy's destruction, and more tasteful—even more civilizing than the pap of serial soaps interspersed with crass commercials commonly viewed on the American family's TV. We could go on in this vein, but enough has been said, and the point has been made that our hero was an outstanding tactician and combat engineer, not by natural bent a warrior, but a brilliant story-teller. The proof is in the *Odyssey*, in the hall of the Phaeacian basileus Alcinoos, Odysseus narrates the ten-year tale of his wanderings, adventures and struggles with the gods Poseidon and Helios. This recitation is covered in Books IX through XII, the four books out of twenty-

four that record for us the years of the wanderings, and it needs to be emphasized that these stories were recited in the epic by Odysseus himself. At the beginning of Book XIII, we are told that his audience was “held in rapture” throughout the hero's performance—it had to have taken several hours! In a recent re-reading of those books it dawned on me that except for a brief, ill-fated raiding expedition against the Thracian Cicones at the very beginning of the homeward journey and the episode with the Cyclops following shortly after, there are no other instances of violence initiated by Odysseus and his men throughout the rest of their wandering. Odysseus does not kill again until he reaches his homeland of Ithaca and kills the suitors who had been pursuing his wife Penelope in his absence, and that was done mostly by stratagem and the use of the lowly bow and arrow, the weapon of the common man, the same weapon that had brought down Achilles at Troy.

Part 4: Conclusion

The heroism of Odysseus is quite different from that of Achilles; in some ways it is even antithetical to that of Achilles. I am reminded what Richmond Lattimore of Bryn Mawr said some years ago, something to the effect that both heroes were men of passion: for Achilles his passionate wrath dominated his actions and controlled his thinking; whereas for Odysseus his intelligence kept his passions in check. Odysseus is pragmatic. He never perceives a transcendental fulfillment of his honor as decreed by the will of Zeus. Unlike Achilles he seems not to have given much if any reflection to his sense of honor. A large part of this dissimilarity can be explained by the very different destinies of these two heroes. Achilles knew well the prophecy that if he remained in the war at Troy he

would be killed fighting before its walls. Odysseus, on the other hand, had not been saddled with that sort of prophetic baggage. As a matter of poetic fact, his career as a warrior in the *Iliad* and as a homeward-bound wanderer in the *Odyssey* emerges as the paradigm of the hero-as-survivor, the winner who “beats the odds”. As another matter of poetic fact, nowhere does the classical literary tradition reveal anything about the end of his life nor the end of life for the other prominent survivors of the Trojan War—Nestor, Menelaus and his wife Helen whose beauty was of course the considered cause of it all (in all fairness to poor Helen, perhaps we should say that she was the pretext rather than the cause--'cause' makes her sound diabolical. I think she deserves to be the subject of another paper.) We could also mention in passing the prominent Trojan survivor, Aeneas, but that too is a story for another time. In these instances of survivors we are left with the assumption that after riding off into the sunset, they all met the unspectacular end of simply succumbing to old age.

Finally let me underscore those factors attendant upon the life of a Homeric hero that we have seen magnified beyond normal expectation, including such things as human rage, a warrior's honor, the intriguing power of a woman's beauty, even the literary devices of fantasy and poetic irony—things such as these in their magnification create the epic proportions of the poet's art. The obsessive wrath of Achilles enlarged to such proportions was his tragic flaw, and his literary destiny of magnificent human imperfection became a model for those dramatists staging tragedies centuries later. Odysseus, on the other hand, who displays no tragic flaw and never becomes an outsized hero like Achilles, was instead a man for all seasons who succeeded magnificently in his struggles to invent ways

of overcoming the dangers that beset him and by doing so survived to ride off into the sunset and thus serve as the prototype of the romantic hero whom Hollywood turned into a success of epic proportions.