

If the hero is, in Charlotte Higgins' words 'an extreme and disturbing figure, closely connected to the gods', what relevance do stories of classical heroes have for modern readers?

There is no such thing as *'the'* hero, as different authors have different views on heroism. A modern hero is not like an ancient one. As Higgins states: "A complication for the reader (and reteller) is that the *'heros'* of ancient Greek literature was not at all the kind of person meant when the word 'hero' is used in modern English".¹ As shown below, modern audiences may perceive classical heroes differently from ancient audiences. But first we must consider some of the perceptions that they might share, and whether Higgins' definition of a hero is right.

When thinking of classical heroes, Homeric heroes come to mind first. Heroes in Homeric literature live by the heroic code, a list of character traits and behaviours which make a classical hero. Achilles' behaviour showing the heroic code is described by William Sale: "He behaved like the individualistic hero...he spoke like one when he sent Patroclus back into battle; and he no doubt...fought like one."² Because Homer is the foundation for all Greek and Roman literature, he is also the starting point for heroes in literature, and many later depictions of heroes have been influenced by his works.

In the Homeric epics, the heroes were the elite warriors who had contact with the gods and whose decisions shaped history. In this way, Higgins' assertion that they were closely connected to the gods is correct. Achilles' mother was the immortal Thetis, Poseidon took an interest in the actions of Odysseus, and Diomedes managed to wound Aphrodite.

But their connection to the gods was not all that made a hero. Other characteristics come up repeatedly in ancient literature, drama, and art. These include their oratorical skills – just look at Nestor, of whom Homer says, "eloquent Nestor, the clear-voiced orator from Pylos whose speech flowed sweeter than honey off his tongue."³ Although Nestor might not fit the typical physical aspects of a hero, his oratorical skills still set him out as an important commander in the war, and therefore a hero.

¹ Higgins (2021) pg.7

² Sale (1963) pg.90

³Homer (Jones) (2003) pg.10

Fighting skills were important too, and Homer's use of repeated epithets also reflects this, as seen when describing Achilles as "swift-footed Achilles".⁴ Physicality was also important, and often showed in the visual arts. A fine example of this is the Farnese Hercules,⁵ a Roman interpretation of the Greek hero. Here, his muscles are displayed, emphasising his strength. The lion's pelt next to him also reminds the viewer of his strength, both through the fact that he killed it with his bare hands, and through animal imagery. Many heroes are also described in the Homeric epics in terms of their looks and strength: e.g. "godlike Agamemnon"⁶ and "swift-footed Ajax".⁷

A hero has to be famous. For them to be famous, stories have to be told about them. As Achilles says in the *Iliad*, "If I stay here and fight it out round Ilium, there is no homecoming for me, but there will be eternal glory instead. If I go back...my heroic glory will be forfeit".⁸ So, to be talked about after their death, a hero must perform extreme acts – sometimes, like Achilles, acts of extreme violence – so that they can achieve glory and be remembered in stories. But heroes are not just extreme in terms of violence and fighting, but also in terms of other qualities, like emotions.

Their emotions are more intense than a non-heroic person's. For example, Achilles' passionate grief at the death of Patroclus far exceeded even typical contemporary funerary rites. There are examples of less 'heroic' characters' emotions in the *Iliad*, such as Dolon's. When he cried he "burst into tears"⁹, while when Achilles cried he "was sobbing out his noble heart".¹⁰ This contrast in language shows how heroes had emotions that were deeper and more acute. They are also extreme in other senses: e.g. extremely clever, like Odysseus, or extremely large, like Ajax.

A hero's link to the gods can also be extreme or make them do extreme things. For example, Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia to the gods, in exchange for a good wind. In

⁴ Homer (Jones) (2003) pg.6

⁵ <https://www.classics.cam.ac.uk/museum/collections/museum-highlights/farnese-hercules>

⁶ Homer (Jones) (2003) pg.48

⁷ Homer (Jones) (2003) pg.169

⁸ Homer (Jones) (2003) pg.155

⁹ Homer (Jones) (2003) pg.174

¹⁰ Homer (Jones) (2003) pg.320

his case, his close connection to the gods has created a situation where committing an extremely disturbing act will gain him an advantage in war.

However, the word “disturbing” seems more likely to describe an antagonist than a hero. This is where the disparity in perceptions of heroes between modern and ancient readers comes in again. Cambridge Dictionary defines a hero as “a person who is admired for having done something very brave or having achieved something”.¹¹ To the ancient world, however, a hero was someone who bridged the gap between mortals and gods. They were admired but feared too. Diomedes, for example, was both admired for his fighting and feared for it. A modern reader may see many heroes as unheroic in modern terms. As Higgins’ says, “Achilles is...a war criminal who violates his enemy’ corpse; Heracles murders his own wife and children; Theseus is a rapist.”¹² But despite the fact that we may be uncomfortable with them, by all ancient standards these “extreme and disturbing figures” are heroes – the key figures in the stories that guaranteed their fame.

We can safely say that stories of classical heroes still have relevance because they are still consumed in a variety of forms, from films to audiobooks. A popular way to experience these classic stories is through prose retellings, and over the years many authors have retold these stories in a fairly straightforward manner, include Charles Kingsley (*Heroes of Greek Mythology*), Robert Graves (*The Greek Myths*) and Roger Lancelyn Green (*Tales of the Greek Heroes*).

One of the most recent additions to this category is Stephen Fry, whose retellings have been wildly successful. (As of May 2020, *Mythos*, published in 2017, had sold over 400,000 copies, and *Heroes*, published in 2018, nearly 200,000.¹³) Fry sums up their appeal, accurately if too simply, as stories of “men and women who...vanquish terrible monsters and establish great cultures and lineages that change the world”.¹⁴

Although this differs from Higgins’ darker and less idealistic view of a hero, it shows one reason why stories of classical heroes are still relevant – that they are exciting tales. And although the original Greek stories are definitely not children’s stories, it is easy to see why

¹¹ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hero>

¹² Higgins (2021) pg.7

¹³ <https://www.thebookseller.com/rights/rights/michael-joseph-release-stephen-frys-troy-october-1203797>

¹⁴ Fry (2018) pg.1

children throughout the ages have been fascinated by them: the tales of fantastic deeds and terrible monsters have captured young imaginations, because an important aspect of much fiction is escapism, and many classical myths can provide that through their (to us) unbelievable and extraordinary events.

All Greek and the Roman authors knew the power of these stories. It was rare for Greek tragic playwrights to make up new stories, although they did change the old ones somewhat. Instead, they invented new ways of looking at them. When a playwright wanted to write a new, topical play they often went back to Homer and traditional myth and made them relevant to their audience by looking at current affairs through a mythological prism.

An example of this is Euripides' *Bacchae*, which has as its chorus women from Persia and beyond. Shortly preceding this play was the Persian War, so Euripides explored the ideas of foreignness and the treatment of foreigners through a traditional story. It is clear that although he adapted the story, he knew that the characters and themes would still resonate with the audience. Many of the most successful plays drew on the works of Homer – as Roderick Beaton states, “the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were... the nearest thing to a sacred scripture that the Greeks ever had”¹⁵ – but other by-then-ancient and familiar sources, such as Hesiod, were also used.

Just as these classical playwrights retold stories for their times, so do modern authors. Each generation brings relevant retellings. Previously, there has been authors like Mary Renault, now we have Madeline Miller's *Song of Achilles* and *Circe*, Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* and *Women of Troy* and Natalie Haynes' *Pandora's Jar*. These new versions of the classical stories put heroes to one side and bring previously sidelined characters centre stage. It might be argued that, if these stories still captivate readers when the heroes are peripheral to the action, or even absent entirely, they may not be the aspect of the stories that makes them so relevant or essential. This might be seen as revisionism. However, even if the focus is on different characters, the hero remains the extreme figure whose choices and actions originate and drive the story. Metaphorically, the hero – driven by a need for validation through eternal fame and glory – is the author of their own story, even in modern versions where they are absent from it.

¹⁵ Beaton (2021) pg. 55

Stories of classical heroes still have relevance because we can see our emotions magnified in them. As shown before, having intense emotions is a key aspect of being a hero and can be seen throughout classical stories. This speaks across the ages to people who have experienced the same emotions, even though on a lesser scale. The extreme emotions, such as the extreme grief in *Oedipus Rex* – “Oh how she wept, mourning the marriage-bed where she let loose that double brood – monsters – husband by her husband, children by her child.”¹⁶ – can act as form of catharsis. As Oliver Taplin says, “They *wanted* to be distressed by things that would be utterly horrific outside the theatre.”¹⁷ Through catharsis, heroes can be extreme and disturbing on our behalf, without us having to be so ourselves.

The brutality and randomness of life is another aspect of ancient myth, and this also makes heroes relevant to the modern reader. Higgins states “In the 21st century, we have long left behind the political and religious framework in which these stories first circulated – but their power endures. Greek myths remain true for us because they excavate the very extremes of human experience: sudden, inexplicable catastrophe; radical reversals of fortune; seemingly arbitrary events that transform lives. They deal, in short, in the hard basic facts of the human condition.”¹⁸ Her explanation of why the classical heroes still have relevance today shows why these stories have echoed down the centuries – the human emotions do not change, even if the society we live in does. We cannot appreciate these stories in the same way the ancient Greeks or Romans would have done, as we do not live in their world and don’t see them in the way they may have done, but their stories can help us reflect on our lives. Sometimes they may gain fresh relevance. Some of the themes and moral dilemmas in stories of the Trojan War, for example, suddenly seem very topical.

Jeffrey Beneker argues that if we look past the surface of the myths, we can see more relevance than we might initially have noticed. He believes students assume that “mythology, and ancient literature in general, might be entertaining but ... has little relevance for the modern world. As the students are drawn into the investigation, and not simply the reading, of myth, they come to understand that the enduring value of the stories

¹⁶ Fagles (1982) pg.236

¹⁷ Taplin (Russel Brown) (1995) pg.23

¹⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/sep/03/fruits-of-the-loom-why-greek-myths-are-relevant-for-all-time>

is more complex and more relevant to their own lives than they might initially have assumed.”¹⁹ He argues that many issues presented in myth are similar to issues present in the modern world. An example he gives is how Neoptolemus’ dilemma in *Philoctetes* has many similarities, in terms of morality conflicting with a desire to reach an end goal, to America’s debate about using torture to combat terrorism.

These moral dilemmas still have relevance in that people are still conflicted by them. Kae Tempest’s 2021 play *Paradise*, a modern, violent and brutal retelling of *Philoctetes*, revisits themes from Sophocles’ original, but also explores themes which subvert modern views of heroism. By having an all-female cast, in contrast to the original which has no female characters, “It effectively undermines the notion of heroic masculinity”.²⁰ This shows that stories of classical heroes can have relevance for a modern audience by exploring the differences in perception of heroes between modern and contemporary audiences.

One reason *Philoctetes* could be so fascinating to a modern audience is its surprisingly complex writing. Taplin writes “The techniques through which the play explores various angles, or example by testing out several endings, seem extraordinarily agile”²¹. In addition to this, *Paradise*, despite being based on *Philoctetes*, is very different – Odysseus is left behind on the island, and the original play tightly focused on a small cast, while Tempest’s version takes a wider perspective – yet Tempest still felt that they wanted to go back to it, showing that even of new versions of old stories are different, they are still important for the development of new art, drama, and literature.

Charlotte Higgins too believes that the relevance of stories about classical heroes comes from their retelling. She asserts that Greek myths have the power to “produce resonance for every new reader and writer, and for every generation. Once activated by a fresh imagination, the stories burst into fresh life. The Greek myths are the opposite of timeless: they are timely.”²²

¹⁹ Beneker (2013) pg.122

²⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2021/aug/12/paradise-review-kae-tempest-sophocles-national-theatre>

²¹ Taplin (Russell Brown) (1995) pg.29

²² Higgins (2021) pg.7

Madeline Miller's 2011 *Song of Achilles* is an example of this. She retold the story of the Trojan war, while making it more relevant to modern readers by emphasising the sexual relationship between Achilles and Patroclus that many readers of the Iliad believed to be there, but was not explicit, and is often not mentioned in other retellings, such as the 2004 film *Troy*.

As we have seen, Higgins' definition posed in the question, although incomplete, is accurate. The stories of classical heroes still have relevance for modern readers because you can explore them through various lenses, feel your emotions magnified in them and see them retold to comment on modern issues. As such, they will always have relevance, because they are eternally changing. In the words of the poet Edwin Muir:

Into thirty centuries born,
At home in them all but the very last,
We meet ourselves at every turn
In the long country of the past ...
And we walk the streets of Troy
And breathe in the air its fabulous name.
The king, the courtier and the rout
Shall never perish in that flame;
Old Priam shall become a boy
For ever changed, for ever the same.²³

²³ Muir (1963) pg.250

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