

Four Conceptions of the Heroic by Vera Norman

Adapted from a presentation given at the February 2003 FORum.

The characteristics of the hero have changed over time: today's hero doesn't much resemble the Homeric heroes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* like Achilles, or of Sophocle's *Antigone*, or even the later Roman heroes of Virgil's *Aeneid* whose protagonist, Aeneas, manipulates the beautiful Queen Dido to take advantage of her in such a way we moderns would find reprehensible and totally unprincipled.

The Classical Hero

Here are the main characteristics of the epic classical hero of Greek and Roman literature:

- He is of royal birth or even, like the Titan Prometheus, half mortal, half god.
- He must perform extraordinary feats.
- His is a noble character which is close to perfectly ideal but for a fatal flaw.
- The suffering of the character is physical.
- Death must occur in an unusual way.
- The hero fights for his own honor; his deeds belong to the community only after his death.



The notion of virtue implicit in these characteristics is implicit in the philosophy of the time. Reading Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Ethics*, and the meditations of Marcus Aurelius, for instance, what comes through is that only the well born can be thought to be virtuous—heroism is only for the few—slaves, artisans, and ordinary plebes have no business studying ethics and cannot be successful at turning themselves into heroic types. The virtues include courage, pride, honor, justice, magnificence—things to watch out for are shame, cowardice, intemperance, foolishness...

A consideration of the hero, Achilles, serves as an illustration of how different the Greek notion of heroism is from the later Christian notion which immediately succeeded it. On the eve of the big battle between the Greeks and the

Trojans, Achilles sulks in his tent because the woman he thought he was owed as a prize has been taken from him. He finally decides to join the battle because pride won't allow him to have his fellow soldiers earn all the battle glory for themselves. He fights savagely and single-handedly kills more Trojans than the rest of his troop. He shows no mercy to any of the enemy. When Priam, the king of the Trojans begs for the body of his son Hector, Achilles, in a deranged fit of excess, drags it around in the dirt behind a chariot and gives it over for burial only when he is moved by the old man's tears. In Hollywood, a man of Achilles characteristics would be cast as a Mafioso.

The Medieval Hero



The classical hero is succeeded by the medieval knight in the heroic literature. The knight, a post-biblical construction, differs from the Greco/Roman hero by operating within a different set of virtues than his earlier counterpart. In reading the stories of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table, although this is a romantic reconstruction of the ancient stories, there is enough reference to the description of Teutonic Knighthood to get a picture of what the values were that made a man a hero. In addition to the Aristotelian list of justice, courage, honor, and the rest, are added new Christian ideas of the sacred. Now, virtue is open to anybody. Even the commoner can be heroic if he adopts the knightly code of ethics.

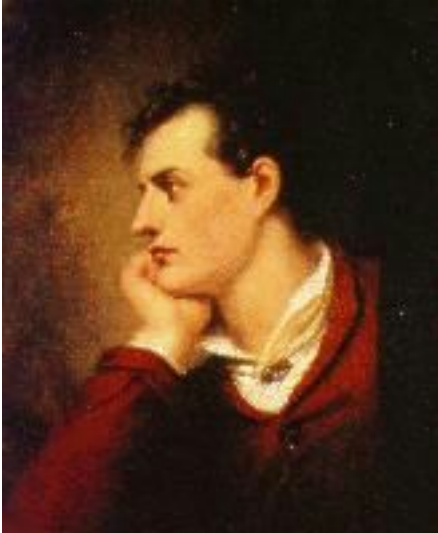
Here are the main characteristics of the Teutonic Knightly code as exemplified by Roland, Parsifal, and Don Quixote.

- A hero can be of common birth.
- Battle is an ongoing test of manhood and loyalty to the liege lord.
- A man has to be seen as having a good moral character including chastity and obedience (doesn't actually need to be of such a character, perception more important than actuality).
- Must demonstrate obedience to hierarchy Must follow elaborate rules of chivalry, dress, courtesy, and codes of conduct.
- Wages war on behalf of liege lord's principles—war is no longer a land grab or to avenge honor.

A consideration of Machiavelli's *The Prince* serves as an illustration of the philosophy of realism behind the notion of the heroic in the Middle Ages through the Renaissance. Machiavelli advises the Prince that chaos is the enemy of civility. He tells him there is a hierarchy of order which must be maintained in order for all men to live well in a strong society they can rely on. The prince must be strong, he must sometimes behave unethically although he can never appear to break the moral code of the land. He must sometimes sacrifice the innocent in order to preserve the greater

good for the greater number. Individuality gives way to the concerns of the state, and the hero becomes a good soldier on behalf of the ruling dynasty. The search for glory extant in the deeds of the Greco/Roman heroes is transmuted into the search for future glory in the kingdom of God. In this age of the crusades, the holy grail is the spiritual substitute for the hubristic adventure.

The Romantic Hero



The hero as rebel is an invention of romanticism. Think of the Byronic poets, Wagner's operas, Goethe's Faust and Young Werther to get a view of the heroic man as a brooding iconoclast who has discounted all the old conceptions of a formal moral code to be loyal to a particular code shared by only a few other souls of great magnitude or at least of those sensitive fellow sufferers from a society which is restrictive and petty in its insistence of social rule-making.

This is the time in history which sees particular notions elevated to a sacrosanct status. This can be as broad-based as the notions of the rights of man spurring on the revolutions the Americas and in France. Or, it can be as particular as a rebellion against a classical style of painting, writing, music making. This is a time of fervor in the service of an idea. The hero can be devoted to his country--nationalism-- or could just as easily be devoted to the notion that there should be no nations at all.

Here are the characteristics of the romantic hero.

- Birth and class are unimportant: the individual transcends society
- The battle is internal: it is a psychological war won by the "courage to be me".
- Moral codes are eccentric--heroes make their own rules
- Passions are outside of individual control
- Self knowledge is valued more than physical strength or endurance (physical courage is de-valued)
- The hero is moody, isolated, and introspective
- Loyalty is to a particular project and to a community of like-minded others

This romanticism is a lead in to today's conception of the heroic which may best be characterize by the idea of the anti-hero. The world, which even in the recently passed romantic age was knowable and whose ills could be repaired by men of knowledge and courage, is no longer a familiar place. The world is hostile, unsafe, and if not deliberately cruel and unjust, is at least discovered to be without meaning, cold, uncaring, and joyless.

The Modern Hero



Film noir illustrates what kind of modern heroic qualities are appreciated by people cast adrift in a world which has no known reason for existing, which could disappear at any moment, and where language, math, history, and all objects, created by humans or “discovered” by them are thought to be merely symbols of a despairing mankind in a world where neither form nor matter is known to have reality or permanence.

What are the characteristics of the modern hero?

- He seeks merely to survive—to create a pool of light in a world of dark shadows.
- The war is against meaninglessness: the battle is to create meaning and value.
- The heroes, like Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, have a code of behavior rather than a code of ethics - they portray men who are impassive, hard-boiled, never surprised by events.
- The world is seen as having no internal order: anything goes—the hero is as likely to be debauched and depraved as the enemy.
- The internal struggle is with addiction to drugs, liquor, sex, money.
- The external struggle is with corruption in government, the military, schools - formal organizations.
- There is no sense of community. The hero lives for a small, select circle which can be merely one woman or a few trusted friends.

Although the latest notions of the heroic in our society most closely resemble the anti-hero as exemplified in the noir genre, FOR members are more likely to define themselves in a combination of classic/romantic hero modes. Most members express admiration for an ethical position which most closely approximates the classic Aristotelian model of virtue as an expression of good habits developed purposively over time and maintained by thoughtful practice. This is coupled with an unabashed enthusiasm for the kind of individualism advocated first by the Enlightenment and put into practice by the romantic post rationalists of the Industrial Revolution.