

LE RANE

Collana di studi e testi

70

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LE RANE

La collana si richiama nel titolo alla celebre commedia di Aristofane e sollecita il recupero critico di capitoli dimenticati delle letterature e delle civiltà antiche. Elaborata nel dicembre 1988, in occasione dell'uscita del primo volume, la motivazione è rimasta tuttora valida, come mostrano alcuni volumi emblematici quali *Lo spettacolo delle voci* e *Studi sull'eufemismo* a cura di F. De Martino e A.H. Sommerstein (1995 e 1999). Molti dei 68 volumi pubblicati nei primi 30 anni sono di prestigiosi e riconosciuti studiosi europei, fra i quali Konrad Ziegler, Manfred Fuhrmann, Alan H. Sommerstein, John Dewar Denniston, Bernhard Zimmerman e Carmen Morenilla. Ma alla vitalità della collana hanno contribuito anche numerosi e promettenti giovani, da Massimo Pizzocaro a Filippo Argentieri, Pierre Voelke, M. Laura Gemelli Marciano, Simona Bettinetti, Damiano Ferri, di università italiane e straniere. Ad atti di importanti convegni internazionali, a Nottingham (1993 e 2003), Tolosa (1997), Foggia (2008) e Valencia (dal 1999 al 2017), si sono alternati classici della saggistica da *La mia scuola* di Manara Valgimigli con Premessa di Norberto Bobbio (1991) a *Lo stile della prosa greca* di John Dewar Denniston, con Premessa di Marcello Gigante (1993), a *Testo & palcoscenico* e *A tu per tu con gli antichi* di Umberto Albini (1998 e 2006). Di spicco anche i tre volumi della *Lirica greca* (1996), a cura di F. De Martino e O. Vox. Dopo la lunga esperienza con Levante editori, oggi in meritata quiescenza, la collana prosegue con Aracne, con inalterato impegno e con l'indipendenza critica di sempre.



HEROES AND ANTI-HEROES

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INTRODUCTION

MARIA DE FÁTIMA SILVA*

Heroes and anti-heroes: merit and shame in the ancient world

The antinomy ‘Heroes and anti-heroes’ contains a diverse range of behaviours related to the supporting ethical values of the ancient cultural tradition. The concept of ‘hero’ is archaic, and corresponds to the image of a Greece populated by superior men and women, stronger, braver and more beautiful than those who followed. They were members of a glorious race which preceded an inevitable decadence. First identified as warrior courage, their superiority placed them between a divine and a human level, even if, among modern critics and already in the poems themselves, their acts might sometimes seem savage. Under an archaic concept, the best of warriors is not without an animal instinct, compatible however, by its results, with excellence at the level of the divine. This fundamental merit of theirs came to evolve to moral growth and ethical perfection. The Homeric

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hero lives and dies to incarnate a certain ideal, a certain quality of existence. Courage, wisdom, moderation, beauty – or their opposite – as personal characteristics of collective effect have known, by the very flexibility of their content, an evolution of meaning over time. Glory – that is, fame – or shame – that is, reproach – are, on the part of the community, the reaction to these patterns of behaviour.

No literary expression has escaped this line of evolution. Epic and lyric poetry, theatre (tragic and comic), novel, or even historical narrative or philosophical reflection, in their evaluation of human affirmation before all the forces that condition it, constitute multiple models of ‘heroes’; while the comic or satirical caricature was in charge of their negative, the ‘anti-heroes’.

Each era, absorbing the tradition that preceded it, imprinted on it a new sensitivity in consonance with the flow of time and historical context. From the hero configured by warlike virtues, the same epithet assumed a ‘political’ and ‘social’ outline, and, later, an increasingly personalised mark. Hesiod represents a decisive step in what we can consider an ethic-mythic-poetic process, in his concern for the historical reality in which he was inserted. The sovereign as Hesiod conceives him, in his civic mission and responsibility for the collective he leads, starts to demand the revision of what can be considered heroic *arete*, progressively replacing bravery for ethical excellence.

As a direct heir of the epic, theatre subjected the heroes of tradition to a new reading. While retaining their names – Agamemnon, Menelaus, Achilles, Odysseus – these figures, now converted into dramatic types offered by the scene to the city, came to embody the demagogues, in their virtues and defects. The ethical and social degeneration foreseen by Hesiod was confirmed in these dramatical ‘heroes’ subjected to a new interpretation. In the characters created by the theatre of the 5th century BC, little remains of what the epic version had assumed as paradigms of human behaviour. An

interesting comparison is also that resulting from the confrontation between the old heroes of the past and those representing a second generation, Orestes, Neoptolemus or Telemachus. This other perspective constitutes another argument of decadence, which accompanies a new mentality and the contingencies of another era.

Along with the virile hero – military or political – female figures replicated parallel or conflicting values. With determination and wisdom, Penelope competed with Ulysses, Antigone challenged Creon, or even Iphigeneia opposed Agamemnon. In addition to the inevitable confrontation with the male model, the concept of feminine *arete* is always influenced by historical-cultural reasons and the evolution of dominant thought. But no less important in the evaluation of the female *time* is the consideration of women's particular sensitivity, which allows for an interesting (dis)proportion between fragility and determination.

Not all the so-called 'heroes' belonged to the heroic age or were descendants of gods and mortals. Ordinary men also, who managed to distinguish themselves from their peers, received this honour after death and came to enlarge the gallery consecrated by tradition. It is, therefore, about paradigms that we speak of. The Homeric hero, as well as that following his example – those that stand out from the generality of the Greek men –, is not truly happy if he doesn't assert himself as the first in his group; soon, the warrior was followed by the citizen who expressed, as the main mark of *arete*, the search for personal and collective stability, translatable into the supreme value of *eudaimonia*. As a proof of merit, heroization has become a practice expressed by rituals that have developed over the centuries. This was the privilege of great mythical heroes, but also of founders or saviours of cities, or, in general, of those who, by their excellence and ethical values, surpassed human ephemerality.

In the Roman world, where the Greek tradition left deep marks, ethics continued, within renewed criteria, to constitute a support for

what could be read as heroism or its opposite. The preference for the heroization of concrete personalities marked the account of Latin historians and biographers, while the convention in the portrayal of mythical heroes retained its relevance. Like myth, historiography demonstrated its plasticity; the same episode could be interpreted differently and express various values or meanings. Historical rigour – as it had already happened in the best Greek tradition – coexisted harmoniously with imagination and lent itself to a creativity subjected to the norms of different literary genres.

It is, therefore, the criterion of excellence that underlies ‘heroism’ – or its opposite – and the polymorphism to which the flow of centuries has subjected it in Antiquity, which we propose as a topic of discussion.

This volume

Following a chronological order in the evaluation of heroes and anti-heroes and the concepts involved in these designations, this volume includes three initial chapters dedicated to their reading by Homer – Christian Werner, “Achilles moral outlook in *Iliad* 18 and 19”, Ronald Blankenborg, “The lying king: A role model for anti-heroic leadership in Homer’s *Odyssey*”, and Graciela Zecchin de Fasano, “Who is an anti-hero in Homeric Poetry?”. The focus adopted in these chapters is plural, ambiguous and antithetical. Achilles is taken as a hero, despite the uncertainty of his profile. It is true that he bears responsibility for the death of many comrades and enemies and may seem savage and ferocious, but the ethical behaviours that make him a paradigm of *arete* are also unequivocal. Friendship and piety are central traits in Achilles’ character. It is why Christian Werner’s starting point in his assessment of the Peleid is significant: “And so the *Iliad* suggests that war may be seen as a particularly acute arena in which to observe the

ethical conundrums faced by moral agents”. Odysseus, for his part, is the hero who makes of lying a virtue and a weapon of survival. Although at first sight anti-heroic, this stratagem proves useful as an instrument of success and return. Blankenborg acknowledges that “Whereas ancient reception of the *Odyssey* focused on the dark side of Odysseus’ dissembling, more recent reception works once again celebrate the merits of the art of lying”, affirming the controversy in the interpretation of the figure and underlining the traditional polymorphism of the king of Ithaca. In contrast, the display of anti-heroism by some Homeric figures is also worthy of attention. The very ambiguity of Achilles’ or Odysseus’ excellence prevents the basic reading that an anti-hero may be simply the inverse of a hero. In any case, the episodes of the book 2 of *Iliad*, between Odysseus and Thersites, and another of the book 18 of *Odyssey*, between Odysseus and Irus, can be expressive of distinct patterns of behavior or of a competitive disadvantage. Inability to interact with the collective and lack of beauty and physical superiority are some of the traits of the anti-hero.

Hesiod represents a significant evolution in the way he evaluates the figure of the sovereign in his philosophical and political performance. This is the focus of M. Cecilia Colombani’s chapter, “Protective figures: Kings and *daimones*. The heroic marks of custody in Hesiod”. The Myth of the Ages represents, in *Works and Days*, the permanent and inevitable decadence, which leads from the excellence of heroes to the ‘fragility’ of (common) men. An evident tension settles between the concepts of *hybris-sophrosyne*, calling into question the principles that the preservation of the *cosmos*, protection and care, must obey. The *dorophagoi* as a negative lineage, representing the corruption that is taking root in the city, play the role of a dangerous anti-hero for the safety of the community.

Jan Skarbek-Kazanecki’s text draws inspiration from an ancient reception of Homer in Theognis’ elegy, which evokes Odysseus as