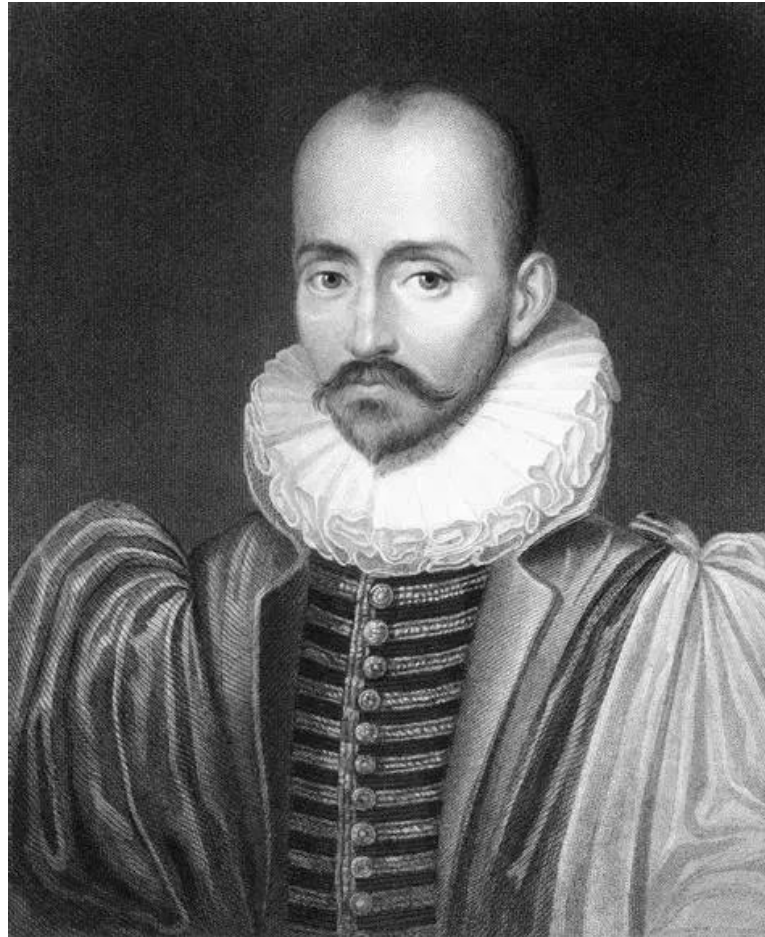


The Death of the Hero in Montaigne's *Essais*



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Introduction

The hero has long been defined as a figure embodying ideals of courage, strength and public renown – qualities exemplified by ancient Greek and Roman heroes such as Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*. Rooted in Homeric epic, the hero is often recognised by his public deeds and enduring memory after death. Achilles exemplifies this ideal through a crucial choice: to stay and fight at Troy, forfeiting a safe return but securing eternal glory as a hero, or to return home safely and lose his fame.¹ In Samuel Butler's translation of the *Iliad*, he puts this as "If I stay here and fight, I will not return alive but my name will live forever".² For Achilles, glory (or 'kleos' - the Greek word for glory as conveyed by epic poetry) was worth dying for due to its immortalising power. Gregory Nagy writes, "He achieves the major goal of the hero: to have his identity put permanently on record through *kleos*".³

Classical heroes are celebrated for their embodiment of culturally valorised virtues, serving as vehicles for reflection on the ideals upheld by ancient societies. Within Greco-Roman thought, heroism is fundamentally linked to death: to become a hero is to transcend mortality through enduring remembrance and reputation. This classical heroic model retained its authority into the Renaissance, a period deeply engaged with classical learning, especially through the scholarly practices of exemplarity and 'imitatio', which encouraged the emulation of classical models as moral and civic guides.⁴ Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), a French essayist writing in the turbulent context of the Wars of Religion, inherited this tradition of admiration for ancient exemplars, yet his *Essais* largely resist the idealization of such figures. In his *Essais*, he questions the performative nature of heroism and the notion of a heroic death. For Montaigne, death is not exclusively the culmination of a heroic life or a moment of transcendence into glory, but a test of consistency and inner morality. His reflections foreground the ordinariness of human experience and challenge the hierarchies of worth imposed by heroic narratives.

This essay explores how Montaigne both celebrates and deconstructs the classical hero, especially through his reflections on the hero's death. It considers his engagement with Greco-Roman heroic models, and his confrontation with other identity spaces, particularly the colonial "other" and women, which further destabilize the concept of the classical hero. By questioning who is made into a hero and why, Montaigne exposes heroism as a cultural construct, opening space for a more nuanced understanding of human value. He replaces the heroic with the human: complex and contradictory, not grounded in glory but in reflective self-understanding and living well.

¹ Homer, *Iliad IX*, 410-416.

² Samuel Butler, *The Iliad of Homer* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1898).

³ Gregory Nagy, *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), p72.

⁴ Timothy Hampton, *Writing from History: The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p3-8.

The Classical Hero

This section examines Montaigne's engagement with classical models of heroism, particularly their association with death and glory. Montaigne reflects on how heroic virtue is tested and revealed through death, examining very different figures such as Cato, Homer, Alexander and Epaminondas. In Book I of the *Essais*, Montaigne explores the exemplarity of ancient (and some modern) deaths, while across Books II and III, Montaigne subtly re-evaluates the classical ideals that foreground glory and success, ultimately proposing a quieter, more human conception of what it means to live and die well.

Cato is a key figure through whom Montaigne explores philosophical questions about virtue, death and pain. Cato, a supporter of Pompey during the civil war of 49-45 BC, chose to kill himself rather than accept what he saw as Caesar's tyrannical pardon. In this act, he embodied the Stoic belief that a truly free man would never become a slave. Montaigne philosophises over his death and heroism throughout the *Essais*. Montaigne questions whether Cato's suicide is an act of pure heroic virtue, or something more ambiguous. In II.11, Montaigne imagines Cato as not just stoically indifferent to pain, but as experiencing 'pleasure' in his death: "Je croy sans doute qu'il sentit du plaisir et de la volupté en une si noble action, et qu'il s'y agreea plus qu'en autre de celles de sa vie." (II.11.424). He contrasts this with Socrates' gentler death, suggesting that while both deaths were consistent with their lives (as Montaigne thinks they ought to be – "toute mort doit ester de mesmes sa vie" II.11.425) and Cato's was "plus tragique et plus tendu", Socrates' death was "encore, je ne sçay comment, plus belle" (II.11.425). Judith Shklar also notes that a defining feature of a hero to Montaigne is "how bravely one endures defeat".⁵ She goes on to posit that "Socrates, as the dignified suicide, was Montaigne's ideal figure. Cato's showy act seemed to him very inferior."⁶ Montaigne is clearly interested in the spectacular quality of Cato's death - its public dimensions and theatricality. But this is what renders it suspect. As Hampton argues, Montaigne maintains a persistent distrust of historical models and heroic exemplars.⁷ He points out that Montaigne's scepticism is underpinned by the tension between name and thing, discussed in the opening lines of *De la gloire*: "Il y a le nom et la chose; le nom, c'est une voix qui remarque et signifie la chose; le nom, ce n'est pas une partie de la chose ny de la substance, c'est une piece estrangere jointe à la chose, et hors d'elle" (II.16.618). The name (Cato's renown) is merely an external label, while the thing (his virtuous soul) resists full representation. The heroic act is a signifier, but one that may not reliably express the soul's interior truth.

This concern with exemplarity, rooted in questions of interpretation, leads him to favour a model of virtue that is private and interior. In *De l'experience*, he writes that "Les plus belles vies sont, à mon gré, celles qui se rangent au modelle commun et humain, avec ordre, mais sans miracle et sans extravagance" (III.13.1116). In contrast to being "commun", "human", "sans miracle" and "sans extravagance", Cato's death is spectacular and extraordinary. While Montaigne acknowledges in II.11 that it is in keeping with Cato's life, he nonetheless questions whether such a spectacular death can serve as a moral guide. Hampton notes that Montaigne ultimately "locates the expression of true virtue in struggle"⁸, not in showy acts. Thus, Cato's death is at once admirable and problematic for Montaigne. It

⁵ Judith Shklar, *Putting Cruelty First* (Daedalus, Vol. 111, No. 3, Representations and Realities, 1982), p22.

⁶ *Ibid.* p22.

⁷ Timothy Hampton, *Writing from History: The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p156-157.

⁸ Hampton, *Writing from History: The Rhetoric of Exemplarity in Renaissance Literature*, p160.

is consistent with his character, yet Montaigne reads Cato's death as exceptional, only a fitting heroic death for Cato, and he takes cautions against using it as a universal moral model. This turn away from an extravagant death of the hero becomes a clearer, more consistent theme in book II and book III of the *Essais*, where Montaigne foregrounds internal qualities over reputation and renown.

Montaigne continues to examine the role of glory in forming heroic identity, which is central in the classical tradition, in the later books of the *Essais*. As Pache observes, the classical hero transcends death through enduring fame: "all [heroes] are alike in transcending death by becoming immortalized"⁹. This immortalisation occurs when the hero's glory is marked in history through narrative. Death is symbolic of the immortal fame that a hero earns. Montaigne engages with this heroic ideal in *Des plus excellens hommes* (II.36), in which he discusses three exemplary heroes: Homer, Alexander and Epaminondas. These are very different types of heroes: Homer is a figure who creates other heroes by writing of their excellent lives in his poetry; Alexander is a hero for his martial valour and military achievements; Epaminondas is a hero for his deep-rooted morality and goodness.

Both Homer and Alexander are defined by their "gloire" - a quality which has ensured their reputation even today. In admiration for the great epic poet, Montaigne claims no glory compares to Homer's: "quelle gloire se peut comparer à la sienne?" (II.36.753). Alexander's ambition is framed in similar terms, as Montaigne refers to his "si glorieux dessein" (II.36.754). In both cases, it is both the singularity of their achievements that elevates them to heroic status and the fact that they have become immortal in memory (since Montaigne is writing about them in the sixteenth century, they have de facto survived posthumously to this point). Montaigne lists Alexander's unique excellence: "en une demye vie avoir atteint tout l'effort de l'humaine nature, si que vous ne pouvez imaginer sa durée legitime et la continuation de son accroissance en vertu et en fortune jusques à un juste terme d'age, que vous n'imaginez quelque chose au dessus de l'homme" (II.36.754). Likewise, Montaigne expresses how Homer's literary achievements are inimitable, "n'ayant eu nul qu'il peut imiter avant luy, il n'a eu nul apres luy qui le peut imiter." (II.36.753). This quote not only expresses Homer's unparalleled skill but the deliberate use of the term "imiter" is somewhat ironic. In a Renaissance culture where the practice of "imitatio" was fundamental to scholarship and education, where scholars sought to emulate the practices of the ancients before them, Montaigne suggests that this is not possible to do with Homer. Therefore, Montaigne may be questioning the rhetoric of exemplarity that was so important in the Renaissance, putting to death the idea that we can equal the heroes of the past.

In contrast, Montaigne turns to Epaminondas as a more complex and perhaps more morally admirable exemplar. For Montaigne, Epaminondas was a greater example of how to live and die well: "Le tiers et le plus excellent, à mon gré, c'est Epaminondas" (II.36.756). Unlike Homer and Alexander, Epaminondas's greatness lies not in fame, unique achievements or glory, but in interior virtue: "De gloire, il n'en a pas à beaucoup pres tant que d'autres (aussi n'est-ce pas une piece de la substance de la chose); de resolution et de vaillance, non pas de celle qui est esguisée par l'ambition, mais de celle que la sapience et la raison peuvent planter en une ame bien réglée, il en avoit tout ce qui s'en peut imaginer" (II.36.756). Montaigne thus distinguishes between a courage driven by ambition (and glory-seeking) and one cultivated by the qualities of wisdom and reason. Epaminondas exemplifies the latter.

⁹ Corinne Pache, *The Hero Beyond Himself: Heroic Death in Ancient Greek Poetry and Art*. In S. Albersmeier (ED), *Heroes: Mortals and myths in ancient Greece* (p88-107). (Baltimore, MD: Walters Art Museum, 2009), p90.

Montaigne does not deny Epaminondas's political and rhetorical excellence (II.36.756) but what distinguishes him is his exceptional morality: "En cettuy-cy seul, c'est une vertu et suffisance pleine par tout et pareille; qui, en tous les offices de la vie humaine, ne laisse rien à desirer de soy, soit en occupation publique ou privée, ou paisible ou guerriere, soit à vivre, soit à mourir grandement et glorieusement." Here, Epaminondas's virtue is consistent, expressed in both public and private life, in peace and war, in living and dying. Though Montaigne still employs the terms "grandement" and "glorieusement" in relation to death, these adjectives do not function solely in the register of classical spectacle but are reorientated towards a model of heroism that is grounded in morality and living life 'well'. Epaminondas, then, may be read as a precursor to the 'softer' hero that Montaigne favours, one whose heroism lies less in outward magnificence and more in inner qualities of morality and consistency, embodying elements of Christian virtue. Montaigne praises his compassion towards enemies, aversion to killing without cause, and desire to honour his father and mother: "son humanité à l'endroit des ennemis" (II.36.757), "Le plus doux contentement qu'il eust en toute sa vie, il tesmoigna que c'estoit le plaisir qu'il avoit donné à son pere et à sa mere de sa victoire de Leuctres: il couche de beaucoup, preferant leur plaisir au sien si juste et si plein d'une tant glorieuse action." (II.36.757) and "Il ne pensoit pas qu'il fut loisible, pour recouvrer mesmes la liberté de son pays, de tuer un homme sans connoissance de cause" (II.36.757)". These three examples of virtue unmistakably resonate with Christian commandments (Matthew 5:44; Exodus 20:12; Exodus 20:13), revealing Montaigne's emphasis on these values in a Christian (though religiously unstable) society. Montaigne's praise of Epaminondas' moral goodness reflects what Ann Hartle says about Montaigne's reformation of heroic values: while "[p]urity of heart, or judgement, certainly looks like a lesser, lower, and weaker condition than that of heroic virtue [...], this is precisely Montaigne's reformation".¹⁰ This might reveal Montaigne's exploration of a different kind of heroic exemplar: while the classical heroes, known for their achievements and martial valour, may be remembered in posterity (as Homer and Alexander have been), the quieter hero of Epaminondas, who foregrounds virtues of moral consistency, compassion and justice is praised by Montaigne.

In the final chapter of his *Essais*, Montaigne reflects further on classical archetypes of heroism, examining the lives of Alexander and Caesar. He repositions their legendary feats that live on in our memory within a radically different moral framework. He writes:

"Quand je vois et Caesar et Alexandre, au plus espais de sa grande besongne, jouyr si plainement des plaisirs naturels et par consequent necessaires et justes, je ne dicts pas que ce soit relascher son ame, je dicts que c'est la roidir, sousmetant par vigueur de courage à l'usage de la vie ordinaire ces violentes occupations et laborieuses pensées. Sages, s'ils eussent creu que c'estoit là leur ordinaire vacation, cette-cy l'extraordinaire. Nous sommes de grands fols: Il a passé sa vie en oisiveté, disons nous; je n'ay rien faict d'aujourd'huy.--Quoy, avez vous pas vescu? C'est non seulement la fondamentale mais la plus illustre de vos occupations. Si on m'eust mis au propre des grands maniements, j'eusse montré ce que je sçavoy faire. Avez vous sceu mediter et manier vostre vie? vous avez faict la plus grande besoigne de toutes. Pour se montrer et exploicter nature n'a que faire de fortune: elle se montre egallement en tous estages et derriere, comme sans rideau. Composer nos meurs est nostre office, non pas composer des livres, et gagner, non pas des batailles et provinces, mais l'ordre et tranquillité à nostre conduite. Nostre grand et glorieux chef-d'oeuvre c'est vivre à propos. Toutes autres choses, regner, thesauriser, bastir, n'en sont qu'appendicules et adminicules pour le plus." (III.13.1108)

¹⁰ Ann Hartle, Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher (Atlanta: Emory University, 2007).

In this passage, Montaigne inverts the values of classical heroism. What had once been the “grandes besongnes” are replaced by “la vie ordinaire”. The rhetorical reversal is a key moment in Montaigne’s dismantling of the classical heroic ideal, whereby he asserts that the highest human calling is the art of simply living well. Montaigne undercuts the classical heroic tradition, which emphasises glory and achievements, by the simple question: “Quoy, avez vous pas vescu?” - Have you not lived? In the context of sixteenth-century France, marked by the wars of religion, plague and political uncertainty, mere survival was indeed an achievement. Thus, “Montaigne’s mere existence was heroic”.¹¹ Montaigne applies the term “illustre”, typically reserved for celebrated public deeds, to an ordinary life - which he also describes as “nostre grand et glorieux chef-d’oeuvre”. Montaigne makes this deliberate juxtaposition to show that while Caesar and Alexander may have been remembered for their grand victories, their greatest strength would have been the capacity to return to and honour the mundane, the embodied and the present.

Thus, Montaigne’s reflections bring the heroic ideal closer to the everyday individual. The rhetorical question, “avez vous pas vescu?” also serves to provoke reflection on the reader’s own potential heroism in being alive and reading this text. Thus, as Alison Calhoun notes, “by choosing to continue living with pain [...] Montaigne proposed a new form of beautiful death for the ill, the lame, the elderly, and so forth, in his everyday struggle to live and die “quietly””.¹² Montaigne’s arresting declaration, “Nostre grand et glorieux chef-d’oeuvre c’est vivre à propos” conveys the *art* in living itself, and elevates a simple life to the same heights as glorious deeds. In contrasting his asyndetic list of actions, “toutes autres choses, regner, thesauriser, bastir”, with the diminutive “appendicules” and “adminicules”, Montaigne diminishes the supposed grandeur of the achievements of classical heroes. These are now merely auxiliary to the real work: living *à propos*. Montaigne’s hero is not the one who dies gloriously in battle or is immortalised in epic verse, but the one who composes their *moeurs* in accordance with nature and reason. This shift signals a metaphorical death of the hero, the quiet dismantling of the classical heroic archetype. In its place, Montaigne offers a less spectacular but more enduring vision of virtue: a life lived with measure, attuned to mortality and grounded in the ordinary.

The Colonial Hero

Building on Montaigne’s critique of classical heroic ideals, this section examines how he relocates heroism beyond Greco-Roman and European frameworks. In *Des Cannibales* (I.31) and *Des Coches* (III.6), Montaigne explores the moral and physical virtues of indigenous peoples, suggesting that courage, endurance and integrity can exist independently of classical or Christian traditions. While he continues to value Stoic ideals, he questions the exclusivity of European exemplarity. This section considers how Montaigne both challenges and partially retains classical models, examines the imposition of heroic frameworks onto new cultural contexts, and reflects on gendered dimensions of heroism in the New World.

¹¹ Alison Calhoun, *Montaigne and the Lives of the Philosophers: Life Writing and Transversality in the Essais* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2016), p171.

¹² *Ibid.*, p171.

In *Des Coches* and *Des Cannibales*, Montaigne further reframes the idea of heroism by locating it not only in the triumphs of Greco-Roman antiquity or European conquest, but in the quiet endurance and moral integrity of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. Yet these peoples are also sometimes framed as heroic precisely because of their resemblance to the ancient Greeks and Romans. In particular, he lauds their values of endurance and hardiness: “Quant à la hardiesse et courage, quant à la fermeté, constance, resolution contre les douleurs et la faim et la mort, je ne craindrois pas d'opposer les exemples que je trouverois parmy eux aux plus fameux exemples anciens que nous ayons aus memoires de nostre monde par deçà” (III.6.909). Montaigne goes so far as to say that they surpass the “plus fameux exemples anciens”. This claim challenges Eurocentric assumptions about virtue by drawing direct comparisons between Amerindian endurance and ancient exemplarity. Montaigne highlights how these Stoic virtues of courage and fortitude are rooted in the culture of the New World people from birth, noting the Mexicans’ first lesson to their children: “Enfant, tu és venu au monde pour endurer; endure, souffre, et tais toy.” (III.13.1089). This idea of overcoming suffering, which producing perseverance, is also exemplified by the King of Mexico who “montré en ce siege tout ce que peut et la souffrance et la perseverance”. His people, “trouvant des courages plus forts que leurs torments”(III.6.912). Such depictions, emphasising physical suffering, suggest that virtue lies in confrontation with bodily pain, potentially linking Stoic and possibly also Christian motifs of redemptive suffering. Thus, Montaigne does not radically shift away from all classical notions of heroism, but does show that certain values, especially Stoicism, are still important to his conception of heroism and are exemplified by the Amerindian people rather than Europeans.

Beyond physical fortitude, Montaigne also emphasises the indigenous peoples’ moral goodness and innocence. Montaigne describes the King of Peru’s excellent moral character, who faithfully pays a ransom (“celle là fidèlement payée”) and displayed “un courage franc, liberal et constant, et d'un entendement net et bien composé” (III.6.911). By emphasising both the physical strength and moral goodness, Montaigne portrays the indigenous people as exemplifying virtues that both the classical and Christian moral frameworks prize. This breaks down European ideas that the ‘other’ was unlikely to exhibit the qualities they themselves admired in their heroes. In the context of exemplarity, where virtues and positive qualities were often seen to have been learned from ancient heroic examples, the New World people pose a problem to this model. They exist outside of the classical and contemporary Christian moral framework, yet display many of the virtues (especially Stoicism) emphasised by them. Montaigne is thus showing that heroic values can exist outside of exemplarity, perhaps signalling the death of heroic ‘imitatio’.

If the New World natives represent a kind of moral heroism rooted in integrity and endurance, Montaigne’s depiction of European colonisers complicates the heroic model as he reveals the corruption of both classical and Christian ideals. In counterfactual reflection, Montaigne imagines a “noble conquest” made by the Greeks and Romans, bringing their virtues to the New World (“les vertus Grecques et Romaines aux originelles du pays”, III.6.910), which could have inspired “ces peuples à l'admiration et imitation de la vertu” (III.6.910) and created “une fraternelle société et intelligence” (III.6.910) between peoples. This shows how complex Montaigne’s views of virtue in the New World was - while he sees them as virtuous (and perhaps more virtuous than contemporary Europeans) he still envisions the classical world as morally instructive, something which the people of the New World could have “imitated”. Yet, this idealistic vision is undermined by the reality of European conquest: “Au

rebours, nous nous sommes servis de leur ignorance et inexpérience à les plier plus facilement vers la trahison, luxure, avarice et vers toute sorte d'inhumanité et de cruauté, à l'exemple et patron de nos meurs" (III.6.910). Here, Montaigne emphasises Europe's moral failure, not only in action but in example. Rather than inspiring imitation of virtue, the Europeans serve as models of inhumanity, setting a precedent of "inhumanité" and "cruauté", in contrast to the ancient Greek and Roman virtue that was to be "imitated". The idea of the virtuous conqueror as a 'hero' collapses under the weight of colonial cruelty. Montaigne thus breaks down the heroic model as a stable construct, as while he describes the New World people as exemplifying certain classical values (such as Stoicism, endurance, moral courage), he simultaneously reveals the failure of the classical value system itself. Although the ancient Greeks and Romans provided models of virtue, Montaigne's contemporary Europeans (who had access to these examples) failed to follow them. Thus, Montaigne reveals a failing of heroic exemplarity: even if the models exist, they may not lead to virtuous action if people do not learn from. Thus, Montaigne deconstructs any stable model for heroism.

Montaigne's portrayal of indigenous societies takes on explicitly theological dimensions in *Des Cannibales*. He presents the indigenous people as existing in a state of "en telle pureté", "un nayfveté si pure et simple" (I.31.206) untouched by the Fall. This image is bolstered by a rhetorical list of negations: "il n'y a aucune espece de trafique; nulle cognoissance de lettres; nulle science de nombres; nul nom de magistrat, ny de superiorité politique; nul usage de service, de richesse ou de pauvreté [...]" Les paroles mesmes qui signifient le mensonge, la trahison, la dissimulation, l'avarice, l'envie, la detraction, le pardon, inouies" (I.31.206). The conspicuous absence of words for concepts like deceit, envy, or even forgiveness ("le pardon, inouies") suggests a society untouched by sin and therefore, perhaps, unburdened by the need for redemption. This utopian description of 'pure' virtue raises deep theological questions. As George Hoffman notes, early modern Europeans struggled to integrate the Amerindians into a biblical framework of human history.¹³ The discovery of the New World posed theological problems as most people struggled to learn of a new people who were racially distinct from the three known groups (African, Asian, European) who were believed to have been descended from Noah's three sons. Thus, it seemed improbable that these people were descended from Adam and Eve, a view which "would hold enormous implications for the doctrine of original sin",¹⁴ and make their relation to Christian salvation profoundly ambiguous. The Amerindians exist in a temporality distinct from both antiquity and Christian eschatology. As Montaigne implies, the New World people, read as a prelapsarian society, only begin to "fall" through European contact, corrupted by European influence. Thus, *Des Cannibales* not only dismantles the 'heroism' of the European colonisers by exposing their cruelty and corruption, but also by destabilising Christian views of sin, morality, virtue, and their relationship with their saviour (if the cannibals were untouched by sin, they had no need for a redemptive eschatology). Moreover, since the New World people operate in a different cultural and ethical framework to the contemporary Europeans and the ancient Greeks and Romans, Montaigne challenges the value of a universalising moral ideal (embodied by the traditional hero) across different cultures.

Montaigne further explores heroism amidst corruption and suffering, brought upon the New World by colonial conquest. At the end of *Des Coches*, Montaigne describes the King of Peru's tragic end. He was

¹³ George Hoffman, *Anatomy of the Mass: Montaigne's "Cannibals"* (PMLA, vol.117, no.2, 2002). p210-211.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p212.

carried by his loyal army on a golden chair; every time the Spaniards tried to topple him, they killed his bearers, yet more moved in to take the place of those who had been killed: “Autant qu’on tuoit de ces porteurs pour le faire choir à bas, car on le vouloit prendre vif, autant d’autres, et à l’envy, prenoient la place des morts” (III.6.915). In the end, the King is finally pulled down, surrounded by the dead soldiers who had lost their lives trying to save him. It is only then that he dies his hero’s death and is remembered in Montaigne’s narrative. This final scene of *Des Coches* provides a fundamental metaphor: a fall (here, literal as the King falls off his chair, as well as metaphorical) is necessary in order to rise up again as a hero. The New World people are only seen as heroes once they have encountered the corruption and brutality of colonialism. There is no place for a hero in a perfect Utopian world, yet the environment of suffering gives room for heroic action. This brings us back to the ethos of stoic endurance in the face of suffering that the Mexicans taught their children from a young age: suffering is what produces strength, courage and heroic ideals. A fallen society allows heroes to rise.

Montaigne also explores how heroism is constructed within everyday society structures, notably through examining the role of women in upholding the ‘heroism’ of their husbands in *Des Cannibales*. In their society, Montaigne describes, the more wives the husband has, the greater their reputation of valour: “Les hommes y ont plusieurs femmes, et en ont d’autant plus grand nombre qu’ils son ten meilleure reputation de vaillance” (I.31.212). He notes, with admiration for this “beauté remarquable” in their marriages, that the women ensure that their husbands have as many wives as possible in order to increase their husband’s valour: “Estans plus soigneuses de l’honneur de leurs maris que de toute autre chose, elles cherchent et mettent leur sollicitude à avoir le plus de compaignes qu’elles peuvent, d’autant que c’est un tesmoignage de la vertu du mary.” Thus, the women’s role is seen as increasing the heroic virtues of their husbands, rather than being heroines in their own right, upholding certain gender norms.

The Gendered Hero

Much as the women in *Des Cannibales* are praised for how they enable their husbands to be heroes, this question of whether women can be heroes in their own right continues to be explored in *Des Trois Bonnes Femmes* (II.35). Montaigne acknowledges a ‘softer’ form of heroism exemplified by three ‘good’ women and presents notable gender reversals. However, this does not signal a complete putting to death of the male hero, but an exploration of other forms of heroism through these women.

Virtue, the hallmark of a hero, is by very definition gendered. The Latin term “virtus” (moral strength, excellence, or goodness) is derived from the Latin root, “vir”, meaning “man”. “Virtus” traditionally described strength, martial courage or heroic qualities - qualities essential to Roman conceptions of what it meant to be a man. To possess “virtus” was to fulfil the expectations of manhood: to fight, to lead and to conquer. While the term has since extended to include a larger range of meanings to include moral qualities like justice, self-control, or ‘goodness’, its etymological link to masculine identity remains significant. Montaigne describes women whose actions challenge the entrenched gendered expectations within this framework of heroism. These women actively contribute to the virtuous actions and public valorisation of their husbands, thus engaging in a form of moral agency that supports heroic ideals, but they are nonetheless largely excluded from being recognised as heroes themselves.

This raises a key question: within a value system of virtue that is deeply rooted in gendered expectations, can a woman ever be recognised as a hero?

Montaigne describes three women, who exhibit values of courage and self-sacrifice, and uphold the virtue of their husbands. Montaigne praises these women who exemplify a genuine courage, that is grounded in devotion to others rather than self-glorification. He applauds Arria, who calmly kills herself to show her husband Paetus that it is painless, committing “cette haute entreprinse pour la seule commodité de son mary” (II.31.747). Similarly, Paulina’s willingness to die beside Seneca suggests that moral worth lies not in the dramatic act itself but in the intention and love behind it. Virtue here is not theatrical but centred on sincerity, sacrifice and love. These women thus embody a form of heroism that differs from the classical ideals of masculine virtue. Their virtue is not self-aggrandizing or spectacular, but quiet and relational. Each of the women chooses to face death not for glory but out of loyalty to their husbands - a self-sacrificial heroism in which bravery manifests as concern for the other rather than assertion of the self. Nonetheless, the fact that the women act self-sacrificially for their husbands may complicate the question of whether they are heroines themselves or are merely supporting their husbands’ glory.

In this chapter, however, Montaigne shows that the women’s noble acts can in fact have the opposite effect of making their husbands heroic. In the tale of Arria and Paetus, Arria’s suicide ends up making Paetus look weak and cowardly. Montaigne contrasts Arria’s “haute et courageuse entreprinse pour la seule commodité de son mary” (II.35.747) with Paetus’ lack of courage. On his own he could not find it in himself to commit suicide, before she showed him how: “son mary Paetus n’ayant pas le Coeur assez ferme de soy-mesme pour se donner la mort” (II.35.746). Here, at the point of death, it is the husband who follows in the example of his wife’s suicide, expressing a reversal in gendered expectations. Montaigne sees Arria’s example as a cause of shame for Paetus, “honteux, à mon advis, d’avoir eu besoin d’un si cher et pretieux enseignement.” (II.35.747). This scene challenges the sixteenth-century expectations surrounding “imitatio” as the man is taught courage by his wife (in a very costly “enseignement”), showing that a woman can be a moral exemplar. However, the shame Paetus felt (he was “honteux”) suggests that exemplarity still has gendered expectations - a woman can, as an exception it seems, teach a man heroic qualities, but in doing so his own status as a hero is destabilised. Thus, Montaigne explores woman displaying heroic virtue in their own right, which does not always uphold the heroic status of their husbands, yet there is nonetheless the expectation that a heroic moral exemplar ought to be male.

Montaigne further explores our expectations of heroism through the example of Paulina and Seneca. Paulina tells her husband she wants to die alongside him and acknowledges the virtue she has learned from him: “je ne veux pas que vous pensiez que les vertueux exemples de vostre vie ne m’ayent encore appris à sçavoir bien mourir” (II.31.748). Paulina positions herself as the student of a male exemplar, reinforcing the expectation of male heroism serving as a moral guide. However, her fate complicates the narrative. Although she attempts to inflict fatal injuries on herself, Nero orders that she be kept alive, and her wounds are bound. Prevented from dying, Paulina lives on in suffering while her husband dies. She continued to show great virtue for the rest of her life through enduring pain, “elle vesquit depuis, ce fut tres-honorablement et comme il appartenoit à sa vertu” (II.35.749). Paulina’s continued “vertu” complicates the very idea of imitation and exemplarity. She cannot imitate Seneca in his stoic death, yet she still displays virtue in her own mode. Her example shows that we are not all able to

imitate the acts of great heroes, yet that does not prevent us from living with virtue within our own circumstances. Her example points towards a form of heroism that challenges the singularity of traditional heroic models, that ordinary people can hardly imitate. Paulina's failure to die "like a hero" signals a move from heroic death to ethical endurance, a kind of moral survival.

The rethinking of gendered heroism and exploration of 'softer' virtues is reflected in Montaigne's own self-examination. In *De la cruauté*, he reveals his personal aversion to cruelty and violence and instead emphasises compassion and gentleness, qualities traditionally coded as feminine. Rejecting cruelty not only in war or punishment but even in domestic life, he writes "je ne voy pas égorger un poulet sans déplaisir" (II.11.429). He declares cruelty "l'extreme de tous les vices" (II.11.429), challenging both stoic indifference and the valorisation of ancient exemplars of martial violence. The refusal to endorse cruelty, even under the guise of justice, marks a significant shift in the conception of virtue. Montaigne offers a moral subject who is vulnerable and 'softer'; he himself confesses, "je me compassionne fort tendrement des afflictions d'autrui" (II.11.430). This 'softness' functions not as weakness but as a new kind of moral strength, founded in empathy and concern for others. In this sense, Montaigne's essay participates in a broader redefinition (or rebirth) of heroism, that integrates the traditionally feminised affective virtues of pity, softness and aversion to suffering into an ethical worldview. Perhaps, then, we can imagine that Montaigne does not seek to provide a single, stable form of the hero, but instead wishes to destabilise a preconceived notion of the hero that the reader may hold. In typical Montaigne fashion, he seeks to find answers to what a hero may be, precisely by putting old, untested visions of the hero to death.

Conclusion

Montaigne's *Essais* stages not a simple *death* of the hero but rather a profound transformation - a complex negotiation between the classical ideal of heroic glory and a more nuanced, introspective conception of heroism rooted in human vulnerability and ethical reflection. The heroic paradigm of ancient epic, epitomized by Achilles' choice of immortal *kleos* over life itself, is challenged throughout Montaigne's reflections on heroic death and life, as he favours a more 'ordinary' form of heroism. This does not amount to a total rejection of heroism; rather, Montaigne envisions a *rebirth* of the hero - one that sheds the rigid public spectacle and replaces it with inward endurance, moral integrity, and the courage to face mortality. This rebirth parallels the broader Renaissance revaluation of classical values, not to be entirely copied but as a tradition to be critically engaged with and reimagined. Montaigne's hero is no longer only a conqueror inscribed in history by epic poets but an ordinary human who finds heroism in the everyday struggles of living well amid uncertainty, pain, and inevitable death.

Montaigne's engagement with the colonial "other" and gender further complicates the notion of heroism as singular, masculine, and rooted exclusively in Greco-Roman virtues. By valorising the endurance and moral courage of indigenous peoples, as well as exploring "softer," feminine forms of heroism, Montaigne fractures the classical heroic archetype and gestures toward a pluralistic and contextual understanding of virtue. This disrupts Eurocentric and patriarchal assumptions, putting to death the idea of a single form of heroism.

What, then, do Montaigne's conceptions of the death and rebirth of the hero mean for us today? In a contemporary world saturated with mythologized heroes, from decontextualized celebrities to political figures, Montaigne's reflections favour humility and a more nuanced perspective on human value. We may not need heroes in the classical sense, defined by their great achievements and glory, but rather a heroism grounded in humanity: a more internal ethical stance marked by self-awareness, resilience, and compassion. Montaigne's hero teaches us that true valour lies not only in grandiose acts recorded by history, but in the persistent, courageous act of simply living thoughtfully and ethically. Yet this model of internalised heroism may have limitations in the face of contemporary global challenges. Is Montaigne's commitment to an ordinary life, founded on quiet endurance and ethical self-reflection, sufficient in a world that requires decisive moral leadership in times of political injustice, conflict, and human suffering? Ethical leadership demands not only personal integrity but also a willingness to act. While Montaigne's emphasis on "ordinary" virtue democratizes the heroic ideal, allowing individuals to embody courage in their everyday lives, and challenges performative models of heroism oriented towards personal glory, it may fall short in motivating moral action-driven leadership.

Montaigne's exploration of the value of heroic models provokes critical reflections on what constitutes a hero and what type of hero we should aspire to be. This research is profoundly relevant for understanding our roles when working towards sustainable development goals abroad. In international and humanitarian aid contexts, there is a risk of framing ourselves as moral heroes, where we impose our own values on another culture and are in danger of perpetuating the 'white saviour complex' that is often present in philanthropic work. Through his reflections on the New World, Montaigne questions the validity of universal heroic ideals and exposes the dangers of projecting one culture's values onto another. He reveals how heroic exemplarity can be flawed, teaching us instead to approach global engagement with greater humility and cultural sensitivity.

In this light, Montaigne's essayistic journey becomes a metaphorical "death and rebirth" not only of the hero but of our very understanding of human greatness. The classical hero may be dead, but Montaigne opens the possibility of a new form of heroism - one that ordinary people can embody in their day to day lives. This reimagined heroism offers a vital resource for our own age, challenging us to find dignity and meaning beyond the cult of glory and to embrace the everyday courage of living well.

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