

# IS THE HERO DEAD?

Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) wrote at a time that was deeply engaged with classical learning and encouraged the emulation of Classical models as moral guides. I explore how Montaigne both celebrates and deconstructs the Classical hero, especially through his reflections on the hero's death. His engagement with other identity spaces, the colonial "other" and women, further destabilizes the concept of the hero.

## The Classical Hero



- The hero has traditionally been seen as someone who embodies courage, strength and public recognition - qualities exemplified by many ancient Greek and Roman figures. The Classical hero sought to overcome mortality through lasting fame and glory.
- Montaigne instead highlights the value of the ordinary human experience, challenging the hierarchies of worth imposed by heroic narratives.
- He suggests we don't need to achieve greatness or die a spectacular hero's death to live meaningfully. For Montaigne, "living well" is a "great and glorious masterpiece".



## The Colonial Hero

- Montaigne explores the moral and physical virtues of indigenous peoples, suggesting that endurance and integrity can exist independently of classical or Christian traditions.
- He challenges the idea that heroism must follow ancient models, suggesting that heroic values can emerge without relying on the imitation (*imitatio*) of classical heroic examples.
- In his reflections on the New World, Montaigne suggests that suffering is what produces strength, courage and heroic ideals.



## Female heroes



- Montaigne explores whether women can be heroes themselves, or if their virtuous actions merely serve to support their husband's glory.
- He questions whether women must always be followers, never moral exemplars themselves, asking whether heroism must always follow a male model.
- In his reflections on virtuous women, Montaigne suggests that while not everyone can perform grand heroic deeds, we can still live virtuously in our own lives. He proposes a more inclusive form of heroism that embraces the moral strength found in ordinary lives, challenging the singularity of traditional heroic ideals.

## What can Montaigne's view of heroism teach us about moral leadership today?

- **What does it mean to be a hero today?** If Montaigne values "living well" over grand heroic acts, does this challenge the idea that moral leaders ought to be agents of bold, public action?
- **Do great leaders act, or can they lead by reflecting?** Is Montaigne's ideal of living an ordinary, thoughtful life too passive for today's world? Does real leadership require taking action?
- **Are we really helping - or just trying to be heroes?** In International aid contexts, do we risk framing ourselves as moral heroes? How can we challenge the "white saviour" complex in global leadership?
- **Is the heroic model still valid as a moral guide?** Should we look to traditional heroes for their morals?



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