

Introduction: Languages and Functions of the Heroic

This special issue assembles articles derived from one of the annual symposia for doctoral students and academic staff held by Queen Mary, University of London and the Humanities Graduate School of the University of Freiburg. The symposium held in April 2013 was dedicated to “Languages and Functions of the Heroic” and so brought together the special research interest of the Freiburg collaborative research centre on heroes, heroisation and heroism with current work from our London colleagues in history and literary and cultural studies.

The modern and postmodern world has been described as a “disenchanted” one, and in this context the heroic has been declared outdated and even obsolete. There is also evidence, however, that heroic templates have never been completely devaluated as a means of cultural imagination, orientation and identification. While provoking mockery and resentment, the heroic evidently caters to basic desires and needs of individuals as well as communities. Indeed, the heroic appears to be experiencing a conspicuous renaissance in the post-9/11 world, while not being restricted to the military or other openly heroic communities such as firefighters. Discourses of the heroic permeate an impressively wide array of situations and emotional regimes that require cultural negotiation. Heroic figures and figurations of heroic action also have a remarkable longevity, being continually transformed and (re-)invented within and across cultural borders.

The 2013 Queen Mary-Freiburg symposium therefore focused on various “languages” (textual, visual, performative) in which the heroic has manifested itself in Europe from the Middle Ages to the present. Apart from the discursive potential of the heroic, its affective quality and emotional impact were of special interest. The articles in this issue cover a wide thematic ground and raise essential questions pertaining

to the heroic, its functions and its various modes of representation: How and why have images of the heroic changed over time, and where can we locate continuities and ruptures? How does the heroic function in different societal fields, and how does it intersect with gender and social status? What appeal does the heroic have for the arts and popular culture? The articles collected here take different approaches to these wider issues.

Following **Ronald Asch**’s critical survey of key research questions and the agenda of the Freiburg centre, **David Harrap**’s article addresses a special case of the relationship between heroes and saints: that between Saint Ninian and the late-medieval English monarch who, in Shakespeare’s play about him, declares himself to be determined to prove a villain. Harrap shows that the historical Richard III was pious and cites the collect of Saint Ninian in Richard’s Book of Hours as evidence that Saint Ninian, a famous deliverer, provided Richard with spiritual comfort. **Andreas Schlüter** explores changing modes in the heroisation of (English) noblemen and reveals an unexpected connection between military heroism and melancholy that became fashionable among English nobles around 1580: As Elizabethan and early Stuart noblemen found their autonomous political space endangered by the growth of the monarchical state, they extended their patterns for heroisation from the physical immediacy of aggressive action to the refined heroics of ascetic endurance for the sake of spiritual values. **Jakob Willis** discusses Pierre Corneille’s drama *Nicomède* (1651) in terms of the emotional regimes of heroic communities, claiming that literature both illustrates and produces emotional regimes. The protagonist of Corneille’s play, inspired by the Prince of Condé, a historical hero of the Fronde rebellion, stands at the centre of a heterogeneous heroic community and is admired by the people, adored by a woman, feared

by his enemies and envied by an ageing king. In this way, the play contains the full range of the emotions of the heroic. **Christiane Hansen's** contribution is dedicated to the same period and asks how admiration is staged in an example of English "heroic" drama by the Restoration playwright John Dryden. As outlined in Dryden's preface to *The Indian Emperour* (1667), the effect of heroic drama on its audience depends on its success in exciting emotions and raising admiration for the hero or heroine. The *Indian Emperour* does not only put on stage an "admirable" figure but explores the complex dynamics of admiration which organises the entire plot and interrelation of the play's characters. In particular, Dryden draws attention to the instability of admiration and its intrinsic proximity to dread, rejection and even disgust.

The second group of articles engages with forms of heroic discourse in contemporary culture. **Craig Griffiths** investigates gay heroes and a "schwule Erfolgsgeschichte" (gay success story) in Western societies such as Germany: Ever since its gradual emergence, gay and lesbian historical scholarship has been driven by a desire to reclaim the "hidden" history of homosexuality, to give a voice to those denied one, to celebrate same-sex attraction and identity, and to challenge the overwhelming heteronormativity of popular and academic history. Griffiths argues, however, that the heroising constructions that have subsequently developed in this regard elide as much as they reveal, and that we need to counter the teleological drive implicit in the success story as well as be alert to attempts by hegemonic forces to appropriate this history for their own ends. **Kathrin Göb** discusses the contemporary image of the war correspondent and how the traditionally heroic (self-)image of this kind of journalist has been deconstructed in the wake of the war in Iraq. Göb focuses on *War Reporting for Cowards* (2005), the memoirs of the young British reporter Chris Ayres, and shows how the author employs literary devices such as parody and irony in order to deconstruct heroic depictions of the war reporter. In the final article, **Barbara Korte** discusses an instance of popular entertainment culture, pointing out that *Skyfall*, the latest James Bond film to date, has a pronounced meta-heroic discourse. The film does not turn a blind eye to the more debatable sides of hyper-masculine action heroism but at the same time re-constructs Bond as a patriotic hero for contemporary Britain.