

The Hero Reborn? Representations of Achilles in Early Modern Greek Verse Literature

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Historical and mythological figures from different periods and backgrounds, together with biblical ones, make their appearance in a significant number of medieval works as *exempla* – a common feature in Byzantine as well as early modern Greek literature. Their names are often used by writers in similes and other figures of speech to highlight the deeds, accomplishments, reactions or personality traits of a character, and it is assumed that the audience/readers are familiar with what they signify. In this paper I will focus solely on the Homeric hero Achilles, investigating what he represents to the medieval Greek world in works that use him as an *exemplum* or in a similar manner.²

¹ This study is tiny part of a very large project entitled “Medieval Worlds: Reference and Allusion in Early Modern Greek Literature (1100-1700)?”, which commenced in 2003 at the University of New South Wales, with the assistance of two grants by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Its principal aims are: a) to create an electronic encyclopaedic dictionary of all proper names that appear in the corpus of vernacular verse literature of this period, including their variants and synonyms, and b) to produce a series of studies on the topic of proper names, which will draw upon the project’s rich database, with the collaboration of other international scholars. The project’s other chief investigator is Alfred Vincent, whose interest in the topic is manifested in recent publications, including those on Stavrinos, Palamidis and Matthew of Myra. I would like to thank him for his valuable comments on various aspects of this paper.

² Achilles also appears as a main character in several works that are translations, paraphrases or adaptations of the Homeric epics or derive from other sources on the Trojan War from the classical and post-classical tradition, both Greek and Latin, as well as the Western medieval vernacular tradition (e.g. in K. Ermoniakos, *Iliad (24 books)*, the anonymous *War of Troy*, a translation/adaptation of the twelfth-century French novel by Benoît de Sainte-Maure (ed. by M. Papatomopoulos & E. Jeffreys, Athens Cultural Foundation of the National Bank of Greece 1996); in the also anonymous *Byzantine Iliad* (ed. by L. Nørgaard and O. L. Smith, Copenhagen: Opuscula graecolatina 5, 1975); in Nikolaos Loukanis’ *Homer’s Iliad and The Fall of Troy* published in 1529 in Venice (a photostat reprint of this edition with an introduction by Frances Walton published by the Gennadeios Library, Athens 1979). Achilles is also the protagonist in a love romance, the *Achilleid*, in which his connection with the classical hero is

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The almost immortal son of Thetis and Peleus was extolled in the Homeric epics for his prowess and bravery, strength, speediness in battle and in general for his heroic deeds during the Trojan War. He was also noted for his highly demonstrative character, which is seen in his brooding anger from the very beginning in the *Iliad*, and his extreme reaction to the death of his dear companion Patroklos. As the Homeric myths evolved through the ages, so did the story of Achilles; among other things he came to be known as a tragic “lover” of Polyxeni. These are some of the principal aspects of Achilles’ life and personality used by writers of the period we are examining, who allude to them according to the needs of their story.

I. The brave warrior

Achilles’ prowess and bravery is alluded to mostly in works dealing with historical or quasi-historical figures, for he stands as an ideal example or rather as an archetype of male achievement in warfare. Thus we notice that any reference made to his name enhances simultaneously a character’s actions. In the mid-fifteenth century version of the story of general Belisarius (*r*), comparison to the ancient hero is reserved for three young men.³ The first occurrence is during Belisarius’ expedition to the island of Englitera.⁴ The Byzantine army has successfully taken over all of the island, but they find it difficult to conquer its capital. Everyone is disheartened, except for two young soldiers of humble background, the brothers Alexios and Petraliphis. They save the day by leading a renewed attack and entering the castle. The poet honours them by describing their action as that of a “second Achilles” (ll. 373-4). More importantly, the poet seizes the opportunity to attest to the cowardice of members of the aristocracy, on whom all versions of the *Belisariad* make negative comments.

superficial. The romance survives in three versions (N, L, O), and presents the hero as a medieval knight whose life is consumed by his passion for an enemy king’s daughter, whom he later marries. The work ends with Achilles’ death due to sadness after his beloved wife’s premature death. In version N, however, the story continues with Achilles’ participation in the Trojan War, where he is treacherously killed by Paris. See: O. L. Smith, *The Byzantine Achilleid The Naples version*, edited and prepared for publication by P. A. Agapitos and Karen Hult, Vienna: Wiener Byzantinistische Studien 22, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1999.)

³ A critical edition of all four versions was published by W. F. Bakker & A. F. van Gemert, *Ιστορία του Βελισσαρίου*. Cultural Foundation of the National Bank of Greece, Athens 1988.

⁴ According to the editors, the expedition presented here is really associated with Belisarius’ war against the Vandals; see Bakker & van Gemert, *Ιστορία του Βελισσαρίου*, pp. 25-28. For the choice of the name Alexios there have been various suggestions, Bakker and van Gemert suggest that for Belisarius’ son the adaptor was inspired by general Alexios Strategopoulos, who in 1261 recovered Constantinople from Western rule (see: D. Nicol, *The last centuries of Byzantium 1261-1453*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 34-35). For the other young man the editors conjecture that he was named after Alexios Komnenos (*Ιστορία του Βελισσαρίου*, p. 43).

The other occurrence is when the son of Belisarius, also called Alexios, is about to take a leading military role in an expedition to Persia.⁵ The general, incapacitated by his blindness, instructs his son on how to carry out a successful operation. He points out the importance of the expedition, and charges him:

and to bring honour to the emperor, my son, and to become as famous as Achilles; to bring back renown to the city of Constantine, joy and great glory to your fatherland, and some small comfort too to me, your father, and some degree of respite to your mother. (Il. 789-94)

We notice here that Belisarius, despite his unjust punishment, has not lost his integrity as a soldier and faithful subject to Justinian. As a father, his words bring to our mind how Achilles' father had charged his son when departing for Troy: "always to be bravest and preeminent above all".⁶ A political message underlies Belisarius' advice, echoing the period in which this version was written: when Constantinople is no longer a great city. Later on the poet will attribute this to the lack of people like Belisarius (Il. 964-5). Two other versions (c, L) merely note that Belisarius advised his son, while the third (N²) does not even have this information.

Alexios' war against the Persians is a successful one; we are told that his conduct in the battlefield is that of a skilled and fearless warrior (Il. 819-21). Hence a triumphal reception awaits him on his return to Constantinople. His father's wishes come true: the emperor receives Alexios as a "new Achilles" (l. 842) – a description also used for Michael the Brave, as we will see – and, ironically, further honours him with the title of "new Belisarius" (l. 844). The message is clear: the general's attributes were passed on to his son, who, it is assumed, will continue his legacy – though one might wonder whether the son's fate is going to be the same as his father's.

The comparison of a medieval hero to Achilles is not restricted to Greeks; if not an enemy, any brave man could be measured up to the Homeric hero. In 1600, the Wallachian voivode Mihai Viteazul (best known as Michael the Brave) united the Romanian-speaking provinces of Wallachia, Moldavia and Transylvania; he showed himself able to defeat Turkish armies, and was seen by the Greeks as their possible liberator, but was assassinated by a fellow general in 1601. Michael is compared to Achilles in two works: the seventeenth-century verse chronicles by

⁵ In version *r* (as well as in *Limenitis*), the expedition to Persia has been recognised as a "copy" of the previous one; since Belisarius is blinded, the redactor brings in his son Alexios. The son, in other words, is Belisarius' double. See Bakker & van Gemert, *Ιστορία του Βελισσαρίου*, pp. 42-43.

⁶ *Iliad*, Book 11.784.

Georgios Palamidis and the vestiarist Stavrinos. As Vincent's recent study has shown, Michael had already become a folk hero, a "legend", a few years after his death.⁷ In his prologue "To the readers", Palamidis, a writer with a broad knowledge of classical literature, places Michael amongst the greatest heroes of all times, seeing him as summing up all their distinguishing traits.⁸ These are all men who fought for their people and/or fatherland. Michael, to be precise, risked his life for the Christians as Moses did for the Israelites (Il. 33-4); in exploits he was like Alexander (Il. 35-6); he was as patriotic as Hector (Il. 39-40)⁹ and brave as Achilles. But, according to Palamidis, Michael outdid the Homeric hero in bravery, because, if Achilles was feared for his bravery by the people of Troy, Michael was feared by many more:

just like Achilles, whose prowess terrified the Trojans and made them blanch with fear. But Michael terrified not just one kingdom, but Turks, Hungarians, Poles and Germans too. (Il. 41-44)

In Stavrinos' chronicle, written soon after the death of Michael (1602),¹⁰ the hero, after a decisive victory against the Ottomans at the Giurgiu bridge on the Danube, gains great fame and is presented as a "new Achilles", as the son of Belisarius was.¹¹ In this episode, the presentation of Michael as a "new Achilles" is not intended solely to praise him. The name is incorporated into a passage referring to the Turks' predicament, namely their fear of confronting Michael openly, and to the Sultan's idea of how to entice him into a trap. I do not believe that this is a mere coincidence: Stavrinos in this passage suggests that there are significant similarities between the two men. First alluding to the effects of their anger and then to their death by treachery. The relevant passage is as follows:

and the Turks were terrified to quarrel with him and did not say anything so as not to make him angry, but the sultan pondered long and bitterly how the new Achilles could be defeated. (Il. 425-8)

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Greek shores and islands had suffered immensely from Muslim and Christian pirate raids. This is the topic of a historical poem from the early sixteenth century

⁷ A. Vincent, "From life to legend: the chronicles of Stavrinos and Palamidis on Michael the Brave", *Thesaurismata*, no. 25 (1995), pp. 165-238. This excellent study offers also a detailed comparison of Palamedis' and Stavrinos' works and their mythologising of Michael.

⁸ See: Émile Legrand (ed.), *Bibliothèque Grecque Vulgaire* 2 (Paris, 1881), pp. 183-230.

⁹ Hector's love for his people is shown in his response to the seer Polydamas' attempts to stop him from going into battle, because of a bad omen in a sacrifice (*Iliad*, Book 12.243).

¹⁰ See: Émile Legrand (ed.), *Recueil de poèmes historiques en grec vulgaire* (Paris 1877), pp. 16-127.

¹¹ For an outline of events during Michael's reign see: Vincent, "From life to legend", Appendix B, pp. 218-219.

(1528), the *Story of Tagiapiera* by the Corfiot poet Iakovos Trivolis. Trivolis describes the heroic deeds of a Venetian captain, Count Giovanni Antonio Tagliapietra, who in 1520 saved Kerkyra from disaster at the hands of Turkish and Moorish pirates. Like Palamidis, Trivolis in his introductory lines praises the captain who saved his homeland by presenting him as outstanding both in physical appearance and in prowess (ll. 1-44). In the following passage the poet suggests that Tagiapiera had already become a legend in Kerkyra when he, Trivolis, undertook to record his accomplishments. The choice of exempla is indeed interesting, as it combines Trojan and Western medieval epic heroes:

I swear by the Virgin, the Christians' mediator, and by Saint Nicholas, our helper in all things, and by the Great Spyridon too, that I have heard people saying: "He is better than Achilles and the valiant Ajax! What is Troy's Hector or that Rinaldo [compared with him]? Or the famous Orlando, distinguished among them all?" (ll. 31-42)¹²

Achilles as an *exemplum* of bravery and warlike skills is repeatedly exploited in another lengthy historical poem from the sixteenth century, "The exploits of Merkourios Bouas" by the Zantian Tzanes Koronaioi.¹³ Bouas was born in Nafplion in 1478 (?), perhaps of Albanian background; he began his career as a *stradioto* (mercenary), following his father's footsteps, and later as a commander of a *stradioti* unit.¹⁴ He offered his services to the Venetians and other Western leaders during all phases of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century "international" war in Italy. He was a fine soldier and enjoyed many great honours and riches. He died in 1542 in Italy where he lived almost all his life, and was buried in the church of Santa Maria Maggiore in the city of Treviso.

Throughout this poem Koronaioi demonstrates a good knowledge of Homer and other literature from antiquity, making brief references to distinct details of the Homeric heroes and the Trojan War. In the first lines the writer explains that he sees it as his obligation to record the deeds of the man and save him from oblivion, just as writers in the past have

¹² Rinaldo and Orlando are related to the epic cycle of Charlemagne. Trivolis must have read works by Boiardo or other earlier writers

¹³ The poem was written in 1519 and consists of 5000 lines. The only modern edition is that by Konstantinos Sathas in 1867 (*Ελληνικά ανέκδοτα*, vol. 1, Athens). A photostatic reprint of this edition with an introductory study and an index by Fani Mavroidi was published in 1982 by Karavias. In regards to the poet's identity, there is no substantiated information, apart from that he was from Zante (see Mavroidi's introduction, pp. 12-14).

¹⁴ The *stradioti* were a special body of Greek and Greek-speaking professional soldiers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, employed especially by the Venetians. They formed companies under their own commander (*capo*). For an account of their role as well as relevant bibliography see Chryssa Maltezou, "Stradioti": *Οι προσώτες των συνόρων*, Athens, 2003.

preserved the memory of their heroes.¹⁵ The writers Koronaioi alludes to are from antiquity, implying that his contemporaries are no longer interested in the writing of epic history:

In olden times, on every holiday, people would write at length of wars and exploits. Now we can find these deeds that they recorded, and so we know what each of them achieved. We know about Hector and Achilles too, the wondrous Alexander, the great king, about the sack of Troy, the Paladins; and all the valiant men of East and West. (p. 3.15-22)¹⁶

Koroneos, in the same manner as other writers, presents Bouas' bravery and warlike skills as equal to those of Achilles or even surpassing Achilles.¹⁷ In a work, however, where battle scenes are central and the hero is a warrior, references to Achilles are not surprising and not restricted to Bouas.¹⁸ For example, Koroneos dedicates a chapter (12) to events that took place in Bavaria in 1509. This is when the Emperor Maximilian, whom Bouas was serving, marched against the recently elected duke of Bavaria in order to place his own nephew on the ducal throne. The emperor gathers men whose conduct in the battlefield was like that of Achilles and Hector.¹⁹ But it is Bouas who once again brings the operation to a successful end. The most interesting passage, however, is the account of a battle that took place in 1499 at Alessandria della Paglia (in the Piedmont region). This is when King Louis XII (1462-1515) came with Venetian assistance to fight the Duke of Milan Ludovico Sforza (1452-1508) in order to gain control of the duchy. Although Sforza was defeated due to one of his garrison commanders' cowardice, and was forced to seek refuge at Maximilian's court, Bouas, who was serving Sforza, caused many casualties to the opposite side. A river near Alessandria (perhaps the river Tanaro) is filled up with dead bodies to a point where the writer has the river complaining:

Oh glorious Merkourios, halt your sword, because for your honour you have turned me all to blood, you have changed my nature, everyone detests me. Even dumb beasts refuse to drink my water. Not even Skamander suffered thus, I think, from Achilles, and no other river shall. (p. 38.5-10)

¹⁵ It has been suggested that Koronaioi was either himself a *stradioto* or that he had been in Bouas' service (Mavroidi, p. 14).

¹⁶ Cf. R. M. Dawkins (ed.), *Leontios Machairas, Recital concerning the Sweet Land of Cyprus entitled 'Chronicle'*, vol. 1 (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1932), §2

¹⁷ "Merkourios Bouas", p. 21.25, p. 40.6, p. 96.17, p. 109.2, p. 149.15, for example.

¹⁸ Bouas himself on one occasion tells the Emperor Maximilian that his plan to capture the city of Padova could not succeed even if "all of his army was like Achilles" ("Merkourios Bouas", p. 98.24).

¹⁹ "Merkourios Bouas", p. 89.12

The river's complaint is almost identical to that of Skamander in the *Iliad's* Book 21; Achilles, after Patroklos' death, is out of control and commits all kind of brutalities, including the dragging of Hektor's corpse around the walls of Troy and the killing of Asteropaios, the son of a river god. Skamander is very upset with the Greek warrior and complains that he is choking with the Trojans' and their allies' dead bodies.²⁰ Unlike Homer's hero, who pays no attention to Skamander, Koronaios' is saddened by these words and ceases fighting.²¹

Achilles as an *exemplum* of bravery became a stereotype and is in common use, even by writers with limited education. For example, in his lengthy poem on the Cretan war between Venice and the Turks (1645-1669), Marinus Tzanes Bounialis makes two general references to Achilles in order to praise the high-ranking Venetians Lazzaro Mocenigo²² and Caterin Cornaro, general of Dalmatia, who was killed during the war, in 1668.²³ The poet compares the latter's valour to Achilles, Samson and the Roman god of war.²⁴ There is nothing unusual in the mentioning of Achilles and Samson together – they mostly appear in moralising poetry – but, as far as I am aware, the presence of the god Mars as well is not typical.

Characters in Cretan plays also refer to Achilles' bravery to describe someone's heroic deeds. Karpoforos does this in Georgios Chortatsis' tragedy *Erofilis*, referring to his friend Panaretos' heroism during an invasion by the Persians.²⁵ In Markantonios Foskolos' comedy *Fortounatos*, the cowardly captain Tzavarlas, who constantly talks about his imaginary escapades, compares himself on two occasions to legendary heroes, including Achilles,²⁶ and boasts that if Virgil and Homer and other great "teachers" who wrote about Achilles' bravery were alive, they would have been incapable of writing about his achievements.²⁷ Obviously, in this case Tzavarlas' boastings contribute to the work's verbal humour.

²⁰ *Iliad* Book 21, 214-221.

²¹ For other references to Achilles see "Merkourios Bouas", p. 131.25-8, p. 135.14.

²² §371.24.

²³ S. Alexiou and M. Aposkiti (eds.), *Μαρίνου Τζάνε Μπουνιαλή του Ρεθυμναίου, Ο Κρητικός*

Πόλεμος (1645-1669) (Athens: Stigma, 1995).

²⁴ §475.8.

²⁵ A 355-8. See S. Alexiou & M. Aposkiti (eds.), *Ερωφίλη, τραγωδία Γεωργίου Χορτάτση*, Stigma, Athens 2001.

²⁶ B 56-8

²⁷ D 253-5. See A. Vincent (ed.), *Μάρκου Αντώνιου Φόσκολου, Φορτουνάτος*, Εταιρεία Κρητικών Ιστορικών Μελετών. Ιράκλιο 1980).

II. The ephemeral nature of human life

In the epilogue of a seventeenth century anonymous lament for Michael the Brave, a distorted short version of Stavrinou's chronicle, Achilles is no longer an object of admiration.²⁸ The writer presents a folkloric description of Michael's death as a direct combat with Charos (i.e. Death personified) in a broad meadow, and then, in a direct address to the possessors of worldly power, the writer concludes with the moral message that nobody can escape death (a common motif in this literature). He states that even heroes like Alexander and Achilles are now locked in the world of bitter Hades. Thus their superhuman prowess and reputation were only of ephemeral worth. This kind of epilogue functions as an anti-climax; turning the heroic spirit of the work into a moralizing one:

*Oh emperors, valiant kings, do not be boastful, for many are now imprisoned in bitter Hades. Alexander is there and even great Achilles, whom all the world and every emperor feared. (ll. 625-8)*²⁹

III. Exemplum of friendship

Achilles' relationship with Patroklos acquired special importance after the latter's death at the hands of Hector, and became a symbol of friendship. Out of all of Achilles' uncontrollable reactions to the loss of his companion, the one which seems to be remembered by one writer is that of deep grief. This is in the late seventeenth-century historical poem on the death of the Athenian Michael Limbonas by the Cretan Antonios Boumboulis.³⁰ Limbonas was a descendant of an old noble Athenian family; he lived most of his life in Venice, where he had studied commerce. He was a prominent figure in Venice's strong Greek community and in 1661 was elected by its members as a guardian in its brotherhood.³¹ On his return to Athens he was seriously involved in civil affairs. In particular, he had persistently complained to the authorities in Constantinople that the Turks in Athens were discriminating against the Greeks, and he managed to get some of their old privileges restored.³² The

²⁸ See: V. Doulaveras, "Ανώνυμος θρήνος για τον θάνατο του Μιχαήλ του Γενναίου" *Thesaurismata* 28 (1998), pp. 255-274.

²⁹ The same message appears also in Stavrinou's chronicle (ll 1269-76), although there Achilles' name is not mentioned; instead we find those of Alexander, Belisarius, Solomon and Samson.

³⁰ See Legrand, *Bibliothèque Grecque Vulgaire* 2, pp. 123-147.

³¹ Legrand, *Bibliothèque Grecque Vulgaire* 2, p. lxix.

³² From 1610 the citizens of Athens, in comparison to the other Greeks in Turkish occupied regions, enjoyed some liberties thanks to the beautiful Athenian Vasiliki, who was married to the sultan Ahmed I; see W. Miller, "Greece under the Turks, 1571-1684", *The English Historical Review*, 19 (1904), pp 657-668. Miller mentions these events, and considers Limbonas as a martyr (p. 660).

enraged Athenian Turks had Limbonas murdered on 23 December 1678, tearing him into pieces. Limbonas' murder shocked the Athenians, but it would probably have not been recorded if Michael Peroulis, a friend and compatriot of the victim, had not provided details to the author. Boumboulis, who was serving as a priest in the church of Saint George in Venice, must have known Limbonas and hence took a personal interest. The main text is written in the manner of a lament by the city of Athens. Before and after this, the printed edition contains two other shorter poems addressed to Peroulis and to the people of Athens respectively. In the first poem the writer consoles Peroulis on the loss of his friend; the topic leads Boumboulis to incorporate *exempla* of famous friends, such as the legendary Damon and Phintias and the mythical Nisos and Euryalos. His best *exemplum* for this situation, which he develops in two lines, is kept till last: Peroulis laments Limbonas as Achilles wept for Patroklos. Although the two ancient warriors and the two Athenian civilians are worlds apart, assassination and grief bring them close:

I find you confused and bitter, as if lost, because you have lost your dearest Limbonas. Your friendship was like Nisos and Euryalos, or Phintias and Damon, his great friend. Hence you have reason to be deeply saddened, to grieve for him, to be inconsolable, just as Achilles did with great lament above the corpse of the wretched Patroklos. (Il. 33-40)

IV. The hero as a victim of his love for a woman

In the life of such a passionate man as Achilles there must have been room for a passionate love for a woman, so the theme of his ghost demanding the sacrifice of Priam's daughter Polyxeni was eventually developed into a fully-fledged uncontrollable love, providing a more satisfactory explanation for her sacrifice. Briefly, the story that circulates during the period we are examining is: Achilles sees the beautiful Trojan princess on the anniversary of Hector's death and immediately falls in love with her. He suffers, knowing that Polyxeni would not reciprocate the feelings of her brother's killer. In a message to Hecuba, Achilles discloses his intentions to stop fighting the Trojans and to marry her daughter. Priam replies that unless all the Greeks cease hostilities and leave Troy, he will not consent to this. Achilles fails to convince the other Greek leaders, but he keeps his word and, with the Myrmidons, stays away from the battlefield. This results in serious losses and almost in total defeat for the Greeks. Eventually, Achilles can no longer bear the shame the Trojans caused to

the Greeks and resumes his part in the war, knowing that he has lost every chance of marrying Polyxeni. Hecuba conspires with Paris and sends Achilles a message to meet Polyxeni at Apollo's temple. The lovesick warrior without much thought goes to the meeting with his friend Archilochos, where they are both killed by Paris.

Stavrinos' chronicle, as already mentioned, appears to allude to Achilles' death by treachery. Death by treachery is a popular topic in medieval literature – it is the only possible way for a great man to die. It is the type of topic that feeds the misogynistic views of writers and their conception of the destructive force of love, and is alluded to mostly in works with moralising content. In an anonymous poem (written in the style of an alphabet), found in a sixteenth-century manuscript, the subject is the evil nature of women, the cause of men's destruction.³³ The poem is a catalogue of *exempla* of names of infamous women, mainly from the Old Testament and the Trojan saga,³⁴ beginning with the very obvious one: Eve.³⁵ The poet dedicates a few lines to each couple, summarising each time how the male's life was ruined by the female. Achilles' death is attributed to Hecuba's seeking revenge for the death of Hector. She is the woman who masterminded "the admirable man Achilles'" murder³⁶, using Polyxeni as bait and Paris and Deiphobos as her executioners. The ancient hero is presented in the position of the victim. We note that, on Paris and Deiphobos, who were directly involved in Achilles' death, the writer makes no judgement:

Hecuba seeks to avenge Hector through her sons, the fine archers Paris and Deiphobos, and planned his death by means of Polyxeni, she killed that admirable man Achilles. (Il. 21-4)

A slight variation of the story in the previous *exemplum* appears in the early fifteenth-century autobiographical work *Questions and answers between Stranger and Truth* by the Cretan Leonardos Dellaportas.³⁷ Referring to his imprisonment (ca. 1403) for an illicit involvement with a woman, the poet denies any wrongdoing and attributes it to slander. The poem is written as a dialogue between a character called Stranger (that is, the Poet) and a female figure, the personified Truth. In one episode, Truth

³³ The poem was edited by Eleni Kakoulidi (*Νεοελληνικά θρησκευτικά αλφαβητάρια*, Επιστημονική Επιτηρίδα Φιλοσοφικής Σχολής Πανεπιστημίου Θεσσαλονίκης, Παράρτημα 9 (1964), pp. 110-112).

³⁴ One other *exemplum* refers to the ill fate of Constantine's son Crispus, murdered by Constantine's wife Fausta (Il. 37-40).

³⁵ Il. 1-4.

³⁶ I. 24.

³⁷ A recent critical edition of all Dellaportas' works by M. I. Manousakas (*Λεονάρδου Ντελλαπόρτα ποιήματα (1403/1411)*) (Athens: Academy of Athens, 1995), pp. 205-328. Manousakas states (p. 61) that the source for this episode is the *Synopsis Istorion* by Georgios Kedrinios.

has been telling the Stranger how women's cunning and love brought about the destruction of famous men, including men of great wisdom such as philosophers. The Stranger asks her for a more precise example and Truth provides two. One is the popular medieval comic story of how Virgil was made an object of public ridicule by the woman he loved when she lured him into a basket she had let down from her window.³⁸ The other is Achilles' death through treachery by Alexander (Paris), who used Polyxeni as bait (Il. 1452-7).³⁹ Although Polyxeni is not directly accused, it is implied that she is to blame, because it was with her that Achilles fell in love. Truth concludes her advice to the Stranger with the following:

Learn this: there is no worse evil in this world than love and a cunning woman. (Il. 1460-1)

A reference to Achilles is made in another anonymous misogynistic satirical text from the late fourteenth century, ironically entitled *Account of noble women and honoured ladies*.⁴⁰ The subject is again the evil nature of women and their destructive force, and like the two previous works it contains a catalogue of *exempla*, beginning with Eve, presented openly as the cause for man's mortality. The reader is guided through a series of partial facts, which s/he is expected to accept unquestioningly as authoritative information. After presenting Samson's destruction by the deceitful Delilah, in two lines the writer invokes the names of Achilles, Hector, Orlando and Rinaldo:

You too, most valiant Samson, come, you too, Delilah whom you loved, how she deceived you! She stole your strength together with your life, the wicked woman, she blinded you, it's written. Come, fierce Orlando, valiant Hector too, come, terrible Achilles, famed Rinaldo. (Il. 165-70)

The subject of the seventeenth-century tragedy *Rodolinos* by Ioannis Andreas Troilos is also about love for a woman, friendship and disaster. King Rodolinos is confessing to his elder counsellor Erminos that he is in serious trouble, because he feels that he has betrayed his friend Trosilos' trust by falling in love and making love to Aretousa – the woman he was

³⁸ See Manousakas, pp. 90-91

³⁹ Similarly, in Loukanis' summary of the events after the death of Hector, it is Priam who uses Polyxeni as a bait; he sends her onto the walls to sing, to be seen by Achilles, who will fall in love with her. See Nikolaos Loukanis, *The Iliad of Homer, Venice, 1526*, with introduction by F. R. Walton (Athens: Gennadius Library-American School of Classical Studies, 1979).

⁴⁰ The title in Greek is: *Συναζήριον των ευγενικῶν γυναικῶν και τιμωπάτων αρχοντισσῶν*, see K. Krumbacher, "Ein vulgärgriechische Weiberspiegel", *Sitzungsberichte der phil.-philol. und histor. Klasse der Königl. (Munich: Bayer Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1905)*, pp. 335-433. See also: N. Panagiotakis, "Le fonti italiane di un poema misogino cretese del tardo Quattrocento", *Thesaurismata* 25 (1995), pp. 124-142.

supposed to marry and then hand over to Trosilos.⁴¹ Erminos advises Rodolinos that what is happening to him is not extraordinary, pointing out that love and wrath are two passions that nobody has ever managed to overcome.⁴² He then rapidly alludes to well-known *exempla* of male victims of love, including Achilles.⁴³ There is no further information on how each of these males was trapped by love, and hence it is assumed that the seventeenth-century Cretan audience was aware of their stories. The death (suicide) of all main characters in the end confirms how love robs people of life.

V. *Exemplum* of swiftness

In a seventeenth-century moralising poem by Georgios Rhetor of Ainos, the poet offers an entirely new way of alluding to the hero. He makes a rather peculiar connection between Homer's "swift-footed" Achilles and the person who rushes after sinful pleasures.⁴⁴ The popular Homeric expression of one of Achilles' physical traits has been turned into a metaphor. Blumenfeld-Kosinski defines this type of reference as a "redistribution of the function", which in this case, I believe, only educated readers could interpret:⁴⁵

How long, you rogue, will you be pursuing pleasure, and running into sin like swift Achilles? (Il. 9-10)

VI. Demythologising the hero

In the following three works, the reference to Achilles differs significantly from those presented so far. The emphasis is on Homer and his epic world, of which Achilles is a part. For different reasons the seventeenth-century religious drama writer Michael Vestarchis, a Chiot cleric, and the anonymous poet of *Digenis Akritas* G, try to move away from the ancient writer's influence and the shadow he casts over their intellectual world.

Vestarchis, in the prologue of the *Resurrection of Christ*, takes an ironic stance towards Homer, appealing to God to send him the Muse Kalliopi from Mount Helicon to inspire him as she did Homer, who boasts

⁴¹ S. Alexiou & M. Aposkiti (ed.), *Ροδολίνος τραγωδία Ιωάννη Ανδέα Τριπλου (17^{ου} αιώνα)*, Stigmi, Athens 1987.

⁴² Dellaportas also expresses the idea that humans cannot escape from love (l. 1430).

⁴³ (A 341-50). The other heroes mentioned are: Alexander, Alkeides (=Herakles), Salamon (=king Solomon) and once more Samson.

⁴⁴ C. Nikas, Στίχοι Γεωργίου ρήτορος Αίνου και εκδίνου της Μεγάλης Εκκλησία, in: ταλαρίσκος *Studia graeca Antonio Garzya*, Napoli 1987, 447, (415-56).

⁴⁵ R. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Reading myth: classical mythology and its interpretation in medieval French literature*, Stanford University Press, California 1997, 10.

about it in the first line of his two epics. He then incorporates these lines in their archaic linguistic form.⁴⁶ There is no doubt that he sees Homer's epics as an important literary model. Unfortunately, the rest of the prologue is missing, so we do not know how Vestarchis ends it. The same writer, in the prologue of another religious drama on the *Seven sons of Maccabaeus*, requests Apollo to send the Muses.⁴⁷ The structure of this play is based on a conflict between two religious systems and traditions: the "new" pagan Greek and the "old" monotheistic Israelite. Both sides use a vast array of *exempla* to defend their religions. The Judeans, under the old priest Eleazar and the seven sons of Maccabaeus, assert the importance of their faith, drawing their strength from examples from the Old Testament. On the other side, King Antiochos IV and his supporters are trying to enforce their idolatrous ways. A character, presented as the King's Teacher, advocates for the Olympian gods and attributes the creation of the World to Zeus' offspring with mortal women.⁴⁸ Within this context, Achilles is mentioned as an example of a great hero who is nonetheless inferior to Herakles, the son of Akkmene and Zeus.⁴⁹ The third Maccabaeian son offers a completely opposite interpretation to that of the Teacher.⁵⁰ There is no direct mention of Achilles in his speech, only to the hero's mother, who is presented as a whore,⁵¹ and to the killings and pains of Troy due to the goddess Athena's "love for murders".⁵²

Finally, the poet of *Digenis Akritas* G, rather like Vestarchis in his *Resurrection of Christ*, claims in his prologue that Digenis' father's deeds are superior to Achilles' and Hector's. The area of conflict, however, is not religion, but history and mythology, to which Homer's epics belong. According to the poet, his own work is superior, as it presents real people and facts, whereas Homer's is about false ones (*ψευδέα*⁵³). Thus, in an open challenge to Byzantine scholars, he almost instructs them to stop being involved with the ancient writer's works, for them to look instead at stories taken from their own history.⁵⁴

⁴⁶ (ll. 16-7) See the critical edition by M. I. Manousakas and W. Puchner (Ανέκδοτα στιχογραφήματα θρησκευτικού θεάτρου του ΙΖ' αιώνα. Academy of Athens, Athens 2000).

⁴⁷ (ll. 65-6) See Manousakas & Puchner, *ibid.*, 137-199.

⁴⁸ ll. 976-93

⁴⁹ ll. 992-3

⁵⁰ ll. 1078-1119

⁵¹ l. 1115-6

⁵² ll. 1108-9

⁵³ see ll. 978-9

⁵⁴ The passage has been thoroughly examined in a recent study by Michel Lassithiotakis in relation to other learned Byzantine writers, who deal with the same issue, as well as western medieval romances (see: S. Kaklamanis - M. Paschalis (eds.), *Η πρόσληψη της αρχαιότητας στο Βυζαντινό και νεοελληνικό μυθιστόρημα*, Stigmi, Athens 2005, 49-72.)

Conclusion

Though I have not exhausted the entire corpus of early modern Greek verse literature, in the sample of works used here the Homeric hero is mostly represented as an ideal of martial prowess, bravery, valour and friendship. In works with moralising, misogynistic content, he is seen as a victim of love. But this does not diminish the hero, instead it cautions the reader about the dangers of women and love, demonstrating that even great men were defeated by them. In the anonymous lament on Michael the Brave, it is merely his mortality which brought him down. Vestarchis and the poet of *Digenis* G, however, display a different disposition towards the Homeric hero's world. The former protests against the values the Homeric epics represent; the latter is almost asking for their banning as a subject for study. We also notice that it is quite normal for Achilles to be mentioned alongside his most hated opponent Hector. The writers have no interest in the "politics" of the hero's life. Achilles and Hector, just like other mythological or historical figures used in the same manner, are stereotypes of specific traits, and together they belong to the rich catalog of *exempla* of appropriate ideals from all times.⁵⁵ There is also a close association between Achilles and Samson, as they are both seen as tragic lovers of enemy women.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Achilles begins to lose his complexity from as early as the seventh century BCE, see K. Callen King's ch. 2, "Classical visions of the Homeric warrior", *Achilles Paradigms of the war hero from Homer to the Middle Ages*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1987, 50-109.

⁵⁶ See Callen King, *ibid.*, 203.