

*The Limits of Heroism*

# The Limits of Heroism

*Homer and the Ethics  
of Reading*



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*To my parents*



## *Acknowledgments*

This book on the *Odyssey* has been long in the making and has accompanied me on my own voyage through four universities. Because of this, it bears the intellectual imprint of many friends, colleagues, and students who have had the energy and patience to read over parts or all of it in its various forms, as well as of the even more numerous who have argued with me in person over its central tenets. It is a book about the complicated process of desiring, about the way the Homeric poems complicate our everyday notions of what it means to want something, and about the strange way in which an individual's desire is inevitably and inextricably bound up in the desires of others. It is therefore a pleasure to be able to thank at least some of the fellow travelers who, by wanting me to write this book, have helped me to want to write it.

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The book tries to revisit the central questions of the Homeric poems—the problems of human identity, the value of human life, the logic of heroic ideology. Perhaps because of this, most of the arguments I put forth here have sprung directly from debates in the classroom over the last decade, with both graduate and undergraduate students alike. Though I am happy to take responsibility for all that is said, this text now seems to me to be a composite,

written version of all those classroom conversations. I am thus immensely grateful to the students who made it such a pleasure to teach and reteach these poems.

Finally, I would like to make special mention of James Porter. I have long stopped trying to puzzle out where his thinking ends and mine begins in this manuscript, but a thousand footnotes could not do justice to his influence. Thanks.

All citations in Greek of the Homeric texts are from the Oxford Classical Texts the *Iliad*, ed. David B. Monro and Thomas W. Allen, vols. 1 and 2 of *Homeri Opera* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920) and the *Odyssey*, ed. Thomas W. Allen, vols. 3 and 4 of *Homeri Opera* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917–19). I have used the translations of Richard Lattimore *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951) and *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), slightly modifying them in some instances. In the modified translations, italics denote modification.

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