

# Heroic Virtue (Protestantism)

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VERSION 1.0 | PUBLISHED DECEMBER 7, 2023

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## 1. Introduction

The term *virtus heroica* and its vernacular translations – in English ‘heroic virtue’ – regularly appears in the Reformation and early Protestantism. Originally from the Latin translation of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (Eth. Nic.), the term is often used by Protestant authors in ethics textbooks. However, in the early modern period, the term already encompassed the general characterisation of heroic deeds and [qualities](#) as well as the heroic personality. The following article first explains the history of the concept and then the overall phenomenon to which the term gives expression.

## 2. The Aristotelian background

The so-called ‘heroic virtue’ plays a considerable role in the Catholic procedure of canonisation (see [Heroic virtue \(Catholicism\)](#)). Since the middle ages, Catholic theologians have understood the saint as a religious special case of heroism. Thus the originally Aristotelian term became a theological criterion of the genuine saint. Beyond Aristotelianism the link between the hero and the saint can also be contemplated in general from both an intellectual history and an anthropological perspective.<sup>[1]</sup>

Because of this background it would be expected that the rejection of saint veneration in the Reformation would have made the subject of religious heroism insignificant or unnecessary in Protestantism. The opposite is the case, however. Protestant books on ethics and politics comment extensively on heroic virtue and contain long lists of figures in whom such a virtue bestowed by the spirit of God can be recognised. [Heroes](#) and [heroism](#) are a favourite subject of emergent Protestantism. For that reason, despite its confessional relevance, canonisation doctrine was only a

partial aspect of the broad spectrum of early modern discussions on religious, political and artistic heroism.[2]

The Protestant concept of heroic virtue, much like the Catholic one, can be understood within the framework of the Latin reception of Aristotle. The term appears in *Eth. Nic.* 7.1, in which Aristotle declares that “heroic or divine virtue” was attainable only for few individuals because it constituted something higher than human conduct. Therefore, according to Aristotle, we can seldom label someone like the [Homeric hero](#) Hector for example a “god-like” individual. Since Aristotle explicitly links heroic virtue with a divine quality here, it is understandable that canonisation was discussed in Christian Aristotelianism in the context of *Eth. Nic.* 7.1.

For the Protestant reception of Aristotle, however, *Politics* (Pol.) 3.13 is decisively significant. In that passage, Aristotle advocates for aristocracy. An individual whose “virtues and political capacity” stand out among those of others “may be deemed a god among men” (*Pol.* 3.13, 1284a9-11). In the perfect state, the one is to rule who “is pre-eminent in capability”. All other citizens obey such rulers willingly, so that the excellent individuals become “kings for life”. For Aristotle, that which is “natural” is evident in the aristocracy of the best men. In addition, he teaches that there is actually no law for such outstanding men, for “they are themselves law”. (*Pol.* 3.13, 1284a12-13 and b32-34).

For the later Protestant understanding of this passage, it is both the divinity of the ruler and his insulation from the law that are meaningful. The aristocracy thereby attained a religious legitimacy; as an exceptional human being, the ruler can also act against existing laws because he himself is able to embody and create the law through his outstanding virtue (see also [Princely Heroic Virtue](#)). Already in the Latin middle ages, *Eth. Nic.* 7.1 and *Pol.* 3.13 were being examined together in Peter of Auvergne’s commentary on politics.[3]

In his *De regimine principum*, Giles of Rome offers a popular version of this political commentary. This treatise by Giles became one of the most influential mirrors for princes and its fundamental idea was still being discussed in the age of European reformations across confessional boundaries. Giles teaches that heroic virtue is very useful in particular for kings and princes. They claim a divine virtue and thereby declare themselves demigods.[4]

As heroes, rulers are, on the one hand, models of virtue for everyone else with princes manifesting the highest degree of natural virtue to the extent that they seem to be a special gift from God. On the other hand, they have a supernatural understanding of divine law, which is inaccessible to other individuals. When kings act against natural reason, they are interpreting divine command in their own way. Others are not to imitate such conduct. In Giles’ mirror for princes, the aristocracy of *Pol.* 3.13 is interpreted to mean that princes constitute not just paragons of the highest virtue but also exceptions from ordinary rules. Both Aristotle (*Pol.* 3.13, 1283a35) and Giles presuppose that rulers are already capable at birth of such behaviour.[5]

Even though the political utilisation of heroic virtue constitutes its most important application, it is possible that other exceptional talents are achieved similarly. In the late middle ages, Jean Buridan taught in his ethics commentary that some exceptional human beings can transcend the natural boundaries of good and evil. Such individuals are role models for heroic virtue, which presupposes both innate goodness and an excellent education. Interestingly, Buridan taught that heroic virtue can arise in both political and the contemplative life. In the latter, heroic virtue manifests as outstanding intellectual living and wisdom.[6] That second dimension is important for emergent Protestantism.

### 3. Luther and Melanchthon

Martin Luther employed the literary genre of the mirror for princes in his exegesis of Psalm 101 from 1534–1535. Even though he was addressing Protestant princes, *De regimine principum* remained the template of his exegesis.[7] Luther explained that God had created two types of people, the ordinary and the extraordinary. Extraordinary individuals are rare exceptions who follow a particular star that brings fortune and success. As historical examples, Luther mentions Cyrus II of Persia, Alexander the Great, Themistocles, Augustus and Vespasian. The capabilities of such rulers are God's gifts of creation. For Luther, the political order manifests the will of God which can and also should be understood as a gift. Luther argues the historical examples were princes guided by God who learned everything exceptionally quickly and thoroughly already during their education.[8]

As contemporary examples, Luther names the jurist Fabian von Feilitzsch and Prince Frederick III of Saxony. God gives humanity such "Wunderleute" (God's miracle people) whenever he wishes. Luther cites *Pol.* 3.13 in order to show that *Wunderleute* seem to be like gods among men who follow their inherent laws exclusively. Emulating extraordinary persons is not recommended because they act in exceptional situations. Whenever necessary, God sends an excellent hero or a *Wundermann* (miracle man).[9]

A divine inspiration is the prerequisite for exceptional heroism. Such a hero follows the rule of God. To be able to exhibit "high princely virtue" ("hohe Fürstliche tugent"), one needs God's guidance. Luther cites Cicero's *De natura deorum* (2, 66, 167), according to which no one can become a great man through his own power, rather exclusively through divine inspiration.[10]

In his 1530 exegesis of Psalm 82, Luther offers a brief mirror for princes in which his use of the German and Latin terms is distinctly apparent. The Latin term *virtus heroica* is mentioned.[11] In German, Luther uses the following terms: *hohe, fürstliche, adelige tugent, königliche, Göttliche tugent, ritterliche tugent, Fürstliche tugent, heubt tugent der Götter* ("high, princely, noble virtue, royal, divine virtue, knightly virtue, princely virtue, main virtue of the gods").[12] Like with Giles of Rome, theological terms are associated with political terms. The gods mentioned in Psalm 82:1 are the princes to whom God speaks.

When princes practice their knightly virtue, they can in a limited sense be labelled gods, says Luther. God remains the actual ruler, "supreme god" or *Obergott*, but the princes ensure the divinely ordained social order. What Luther is talking about here are the social estates, primarily the state. Because the estates are holy through God's word, they can also be called "divine estates" ("Göttliche Stende"), which implies that rulers in a certain sense are also divine. Such divinity does not mean any personal holiness.[13] The essence of the ruler's divine character is helping the oppressed to justice, feeding the hungry and protecting the poor from the egoism of the strong. In this way, the princes are, like God, also saviours, fathers and protectors.[14] This is how Luther interprets the Aristotelian-mediaeval mirror for princes in a Protestant fashion.

In his later *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545), Luther articulates his Latin terminology in diverse ways. Many Old Testament figures manifest heroic virtue in various ways. For example, Jacob can serve Laban for fourteen years through his heroic impetus. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son is heroic, but at the same time an act that can in no way be emulated.[15]

When religious heroes distinguish themselves through their exceptional deeds, these are not their own achievements, but acts of divine power, which is effective in exceptional situations. This moderates the praise of a hero because his exceptional character ultimately testifies to God's absolute sovereignty. The *Lectures on Genesis* also show that Luther's understanding of heroes was not just political in nature. Religious heroes like Abraham and Jacob can manifest their *virtus heroica*

in different ways.

Philipp Melanchthon links heroic virtue with his general teachings on the soul. He emphasises the role of what he calls the 'capacity of discovery' (*vis inventiva*), which operates in different areas of life, such as the sciences, art and politics. Through his creative capacity, the rhetor can connect his message with the expectations of his listeners. Melanchthon thinks, however, that this capacity enables the invention of all new knowledge and understanding and is therefore fundamentally important for the human intellect. In addition, the capacity of discovery is, for him, a divine gift that has been divided among humans very differently. Heroic and genius minds possess exceptionally great talents or endowments that are testaments of divine inspiration.[16]

In his first ethics textbook, *Epitome ethices* (1532), Melanchthon examines heroic virtue in the context of traditional habitus theory. While Scholastic habitus theory underscores the repeated exercise as the effective cause of virtue, the Reformers question the human contribution to the formation of virtue. Which is why Melanchthon emphasises that, besides virtue and habitus, natural talent plays a considerable role in the formation of virtue. Exceptional talents are of a heroic nature; they are always given from God, as Cicero says in *De natura deorum*. According to Melanchthon, the composer Josquin des Prez is an example for such heroic virtue. He also names Alexander the Great, Scipio, Themistocles, Caesar, Homer, Archimedes and Ovid as examples. These figures of ancient paganism had exceptional virtue, the dimensions of which must be classified as heroic. Melanchthon could therefore count scientists (Archimedes) and artists (Ovid, Josquin) as heroes.[17]

In his *Philosophiae moralis epitomes* (1546), heroic virtue is elaborated on in detail. Melanchthon undertakes to create a dichotomy of virtue theory:

"There are two kinds of virtues, the ordinary and the heroic. A virtue is heroic when an exceptional divine influence moves great men to certain good works. Such works are extraordinary, exceeding the normal human possibilities. Such was the heroic bravery of Achilles, Alexander, Caesar and Scipio, that is, courage which exceeds the human powers and can only be achieved through God's singular influence. While the ordinary virtues take place due to the voluntary election, the excellent virtue that is called heroic is a singular action worked by God. The divine influence helps the election, as it enlightens the soul so that it can judge better, and it also strengthens the will. For this reason, a heroic artist exceeds ordinary artists by far ... Also the virtues of the saints which the Holy Spirit causes are of similar kind, for instance, the virtues of Abraham, David, Paul and other holy people." [18]

Here as well, Melanchthon underlines artistic heroism. Because his theory of the soul and ethics invariably presuppose the special gifts effectuated by God, the creative abilities grounded therein can be felt in various areas of life and even be present among non-Christians. Although Luther and Melanchthon emphasise the political dimension of heroism, artistic, intellectual and religious talents are equally important for the Reformers and can be described as 'heroic'.

#### 4. Early Protestantism

New historical studies emphasise that the heroic is virtually ubiquitous in the early modern period.[19] From Renaissance humanism to political absolutism, several waves of admiration for heroic conduct have been observed. Not just different classical and mediaeval models but also political and military opportunism play a substantial role in panegyric literature.[20] That is why the reception of Aristotle is a literary factor, the effect of which was produced in the complex context of different historical forces. This factor is highlighted below primarily because history of the Protestant

notion of heroic virtue can be traced precisely and in detail from *Eth. Nic.* 7.1 and *Pol.* 3.13. At the same time, however, it must be kept in mind that Aristotelian texts present a textbook-like space for many topics the substance of which had already been fundamentally transformed by new influences over time.[21]

The reformed Ramist Theodor Zwinger understands heroic virtue as a theological reality. While ordinary virtue can be explained philosophically, illuminated cognisance of divine reality is required in order to know heroic virtue. For Zwinger, faith, hope and love are heroic virtues that come about through divine inspiration. In the end, they are more gifts than virtues.[22]

The Calvinist ethics reformer Lambert Daneau also understands heroic virtue as a divine gift. Through divine influence, all possible virtues can be transformed into heroic greatness. Non-Christians can present at most the 'shadow' of such heroism. For instance, Moses is for Daneau an example for heroic justice, while Cato constitutes the worldly shadow of utmost justice. For Daneau, Jesus Christ is a model for all heroic virtue.[23]

Bartholomaeus Keckermann's *Systema Ethicae* frequently mentions Melanchthon in his discussion of heroic virtue. Divine influence is invariably necessary for genuine heroism. Even intellectual and religious virtues can advance to heroic dimensions. [Heroic deeds](#) are not to be imitated because they bring an exceptional situation to light.[24]

An extensive compendium of Protestant heroism is provided in Johannes Avenarius' ethics commentary. He uses the writings of Melanchthon, Zwinger, Daneau, Keckermann and Catholic philosopher Francesco Piccolomini. Heroic virtue represents an exceptional perfection of virtue. Biblical and historical figures like Samson, David, Elijah, Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar as well as contemporary individuals like Martin Luther are examples of this heroism. Avenarius defends the Christian faith against Machiavelli as a point of view that can produce not only humility and peace, but also bravery and heroism. Christian heroism serves to honour god and the well-being of the church and state.[25]

Jakob Martini attempts a causal analysis of heroic virtue. God's exceptional influence is to be understood as its first effective cause. Besides that, practical reason and human will can be thought of as secondary causes. Although Jesus Christ and the biblical saints are examples of religious heroic virtue, according to Martini, the religious meaning of this term represents a similar usage that moral philosophy actually does not consider. Even intellectual heroism is an analogy. Ethics really only explain moral heroism.[26]

Wolfgang Heider's *Philosophiae moralis systema* repeats the common Protestant doctrine: heroic virtue is a special gift from God. Christians can better represent this virtue than non-believers. Even intellectual virtue can be labelled as being heroic.[27]

Particularly in Sweden, heroic virtue was discussed in a multitude of ways. In as early as the 14th century, the manuscript *Konungastyrelsen* was published, summarising in Swedish the fundamental concepts of Giles of Rome's *De regimine principum*. *The Revelations of Bridget of Sweden* also comprises passages that were written as a mirror for princes. Peder Månssons Barnabok (ca. 1520) uses Erasmus' mirror for princes. Gustavus Adolphus' teacher Johan Skytte published in 1604 a mirror for princes in which the princely virtues are discussed at length.[28]

At Swedish universities of the 17th and 18th centuries, heroic virtue was a popular subject of dissertations. This literature often follows the German and later also French models. A number of works also employ the medical theory of the temperaments. Andreas Norcopensis for instance argues that heroes such as Alexander the Great have the optimum temperament that makes their

bodies beautiful and their minds alert.[29]

Heroism was still a popular topic in Sweden in the age of enlightenment. In France, Rousseau and Voltaire had examined heroism in manifold ways, emphasising not just martial qualities, but also wisdom, spiritual strength and gentleness. In the panegyric writings on Gustav III, these enlightened characteristics are underlined.[30]

## 5. Heroic virtue in women

Even though famous men are mentioned most often as Protestant examples of heroic virtue, women are also occasionally thought of as heroes. In his *Lectures on Genesis*, Luther reflects on the divine calling of biblical women. He speaks of the “office of the saintly matrons” (“Amt der heiligen Matronen”) and the “list of the holy matriarchs” (“Liste der heiligen Matriarchen”).[31]

If not only martial heroes, but also witnesses of the faith, musicians and philosophers can constitute examples of heroic virtue, it would certainly be conceivable that women can also be counted as heroes. The parallel to Catholic canonisation would also support such an expansion of the term. However, the subject of feminine heroism in Protestantism has to date not been studied in detail.

Many Protestant authors use Piccolomini’s ethics textbook, in which the question of feminine heroic virtue is addressed specifically.[32] Johannes Avenarius examines the question “whether heroic virtue also appears in women”.[33]

The Swedish queen Christina offers an outstanding example for the discussion of this question. Christina’s heroic virtue was already abundantly praised during her reign as the Lutheran queen of Sweden (1644–1654). After her conversion to Catholicism, this panegyric was continued by her Catholic admirers. Christina’s heroic virtue has been extensively examined in recent Swedish scholarship.[34]

I would add to that scholarship another two examples from the Finnish university founded in Turku in 1640 (the University of Helsinki today). The first professor of practical philosophy in Turku, Michael Wexionius-Gyldenstolpe, published an extensive ethics textbook in which heroic virtue is discussed in a separate chapter on 32 pages. That chapter also praises Christina’s heroic virtue.[35] Wexionius uses Wolfgang Heider as his main source.

In his dissertation, *De virtute heroica*, Johan Wassenius likewise cites Heider, Martini, Melanchthon and his teacher Wexionius. Wassenius has a preference for specific questions and examines whether women can also be called heroes. In his reply, the female founder of the Finnish university is praised alongside other heroic women:

“Both in earlier eras as well as today, many women are clear examples of heroic virtue, including Judith, Semiramis, Jael ... Margaret of Denmark and Elizabeth of England. And no one can dispute that even our own nation has brought forth Amazonian heroic virtues. We have a living example in our excellent and powerful Queen Christina, from whom heroic virtue emanates into the whole world.”[36]

## 6. Summary and the state of current scholarship

Early Protestantism does not treat political, religious and intellectual heroism as an alternative to Catholic canonisation, but rather because heroism is a ubiquitous subject from the 16th to the 18th century. Aristotle’s *Politics* and the late mediaeval and early modern mirrors for princes are the main



literary sources on this subject. The consolidation of monarchy, absolutism and church authority are the historical impetuses of this literary tradition. In addition, the individualist currents of the Renaissance and humanism play a considerable role in the growing [admiration](#) for heroes, saints, thinkers and artists.

The expression *virtus heroica* is used extensively in these discussions. Even though the *Nicomachean Ethics* is also used in Protestantism as a textbook, the Aristotelian writing offers merely the traditional framework that is filled with new substance. It is important to realise, however, that in the era of confessionalism the traditional term offered a conceptual bridge via which the various intellectual and social influences can be imported from Italy and France to Germany, Sweden and England.

Because Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon debate the earlier discussions on heroism and the formation of princes extensively and innovatively, a complex transformation of these subjects was already taking place during the Reformation. The institutional refinement of the summepiscopate of the Princes, of absolutist monarchy and of the academic educational ideal enriches the vocabulary of heroism in different ways. To systematically shed light on this complex set of issues in intellectual history, more individual detailed studies are necessary.

Among the newest studies on heroic virtue, there is the edited volume *Shaping Heroic Virtue* (2015), Disselkamp's *Barockheroismus* (2002) and Saarinen's 'The Heroic Virtue' (2017). The studies by Ronald G. Asch (*Sacral Kingship* (2014), *Herbst des Helden* (2015)) and the edited volume *Heroen und Heroisierungen in der Renaissance* (2013) shed light on the historical context.

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## Citation

Risto Saarinen: Heroic Virtue (Protestantism). In: *Compendium heroicum*, ed. by Ronald G. Asch, Achim Aurnhammer, Georg Feitscher, Anna Schreurs-Morét, and Ralf von den Hoff, published by Sonderforschungsbereich 948, University of Freiburg, Freiburg 2023-12-07. DOI: 10.6094/heroicum/hpte1.0.20231207

## Meta data

DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.6094/heroicum/hpte1.0.20231207">10.6094/heroicum/hpte1.0.20231207</a>
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Gefördert von der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft

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