

Wounds That Will Not Heal: Heroism and Innocence in *Shane* and the *Iliad*

Carl A. Rubino
Hamilton College
Clinton, New York, USA
crubino@hamilton.edu

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Table of Contents

Editorial

Moving Popular Culture Studies Scholarship Into the Future
Lynnes Chapman King and Arno Cocheriller

Guest Editorial

"*Κολών ὄντοπιμίου βίου εὐνοτόρμων*": Popular Culture as a Pedagogical Lens on Greco-Roman Antiquity
Kirsten Day and Benjamin Haller

Part I: Epic Reconsiderations

Wounds That Will Not Heal: Heroism and Innocence in *Shane* and the *Iliad*
Carl A. Rubino

O Homer, Where Art Thou?: Teaching the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* through Popular Culture
Malory Young

The *Odyssey* and Its *Odyssey* in Contemporary Texts: Re-Visions in *Star Trek*, *The Time Traveler's Wife*, and *The Penelopiad*
Mary Economou Baley Green

Part II: Reception and Narrations

Theseus Losses his Way: Viktor Pavlev's *Helmet of Horror* and the Old Labyrinth of the New World
Alison Trawick

300 and *Fellini-Satyricon*: Film Theory in the Tertiary Classroom
Leanne Glass

Part III: Gender in Cinematic Narratives

The Labyrinth of Memory: Iphigenia, Sabinides, and Classical Models of Architecture as Mind in Chris Nolan's *Inception* (2010)
Benjamin Haller

Violence and Mel Gibson: Power, Vulnerability, and What Women Want
Geoff Blackwell

Experiments in Love: Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe* and Henry de Vere Stacpole's *The Blue Lagoon*
Kirsten Day

Part IV: Reviews

Graphic Novel Review — *The Adventurers of Johnny Bunko: The Last Great Guide You'll Ever Need*
Robert G. Weiner

Video Game Review — *Final Fantasy XIV: Bravel Up Forever*
Lrian Cowlishaw

Abstract:

George Stevens' film *Shane*, which dates from 1953, remains an especially successful version of the heroic paradigm that is established in Homer's *Iliad*. Just as Achilles, the hero of Homer's poem, considers abandoning the war at Troy in favor of a long and uneventful life at home, the film's mysterious hero makes a futile attempt to abandon his violent past for a "normal life" as an ordinary farmer in the American west. In the end, however, the threatened status of the domestic world *Shane* is trying to enter makes it impossible for him to renounce his heroic nature and violent past. Because he wishes to save his newfound friends, *Shane*, like Achilles, is compelled to become a hero once again. As a result, once *Shane* succeeds in rescuing his friends from danger, he is compelled to leave the community he yearned to join and for whose sake he risked his life.

This paper examines some of the ways in which the film's portrayal of the hero, *Shane*, echoes that of the *Iliad*. In doing so, it attempts to cast light on how the great classical texts continue to exert a powerful influence on modern works of art and on how those modern works both embody the classical heritage and also adapt it to fit the needs of their own times. The paper also develops some attention to the highly charged issues of "highbrow" and "lowbrow" culture and to the considerable benefits of using films to bring the classics alive for students of today.

Homer's *Iliad* is, among other things, the *locus classicus* for uncovering and interpreting ancient Greek notions about heroes and their place in human society. Their awesome achievements or qualities – Achilles' prowess on the battlefield, Helen's breathtaking beauty – lift these heroes far above ordinary mortals like ourselves. Yet for all their almost superhuman excellence, they remain human, mortals after all, falling far short of real divinity. Thus their lives and their deeds, truly the stuff from which dreams are made, are also the matter of heart-rending tragedy: as Helen says to Hector in the *Iliad*, they are destined to lead unhappy and miserable lives so that poets will sing of them in times to come.^[1]

Although it can be – and has been – argued that the *Odyssey* presents a sharp contradiction to the heroic paradigm established in the *Iliad*, it is also true that, whereas the figure of Odysseus evolved in the direction of the so-called anthero (recall his modern inscription as Leopold Bloom in Joyce's *Ulysses*), heroism as defined by the *Iliad* and embodied in its principal character Achilles became the foundation of the Western heroic tradition. When we think about heroes and what constitutes heroism, for better or for worse our conceptions remain within the limits established by Achilles. Thus the *Iliad* and works like it can serve as reference points for examining modern conceptions and treatments of heroism.

The plot of the *Iliad* is not difficult to describe, for very little happens in the poem. Achilles, by far the best warrior among the Greeks, quarrels with Agamemnon, who has behaved badly. Agamemnon, however, has the political power to get his way. Achilles then withdraws from the fighting at Troy, leaving Agamemnon and the Greeks to fend for themselves. Through his mother Thetis, Achilles asks Zeus to restore his lost stature, and the god agrees to do so. All this happens in Book 1, and the remaining twenty-three books of the poem show us Zeus' plan to bring about this completion. For Achilles to regain his lost stature and win the everlasting glory that was his priority in coming to Troy, he must return to the fighting. Zeus sees that the only way to get him back is by making him angrier at Hector and the Trojans than he is at Agamemnon and the Greeks. Thus the god begins by favoring the Trojan side: after Achilles' withdrawal the Greeks suffer loss after loss, and their fortunes at Troy reach a low ebb. Achilles' beloved companion Patroclus is moved by the plight of his comrades, and he enters the battle in an attempt to help them. After some initial success, he foolishly challenges Hector and is killed, then stripped of the armor Achilles has lent him. Zeus' plan has worked: overcome by sorrow, guilt, and rage, Achilles returns, perfunctorily accepting Agamemnon's self-serving apology, and proceeds to wreak havoc on the Trojans, finally pursuing and killing Hector, whose corpse he mutilates in an excess of rage. The *Iliad* ends with the portrait of that terrible anger subsiding: in a moving and extremely human scene, Achilles turns Hector's body over to his bereaved father Priam. At the cost of his beloved comrade's life and the lives of so many others as well, Achilles has regained his stature and won his everlasting glory; the heroic value system that had been so rudely derailed at the poem's beginning is back in working order at its end.^[2]

In Achilles, Homer has left us a perfect example of the Greek hero. This young man's fearsome prowess and final victory on the battlefield establish his credentials as the definitive citizen of martial valor. As with others at his level, the almost superhuman qualities he possesses are reflected in the fact that one of his parents – his mother, Thetis – is divine. Thus he is protected from the oblivion that is in store for the general run of humans like ourselves – we are in fact commemorating him here, nearly thirty centuries after his story took form in the *Iliad*. Yet we likely think it to be that every last one of us will be forgotten very soon after we die, have one absolutely crucial advantage over him: we are alive today, and he is not. As extraordinary as they are, heroes cannot escape death. They are not quite human, but because they too must die, neither are they divine. They inhabit a lonely, isolated space between gods and humans, supremely alone in all their splendor.

As Helen's words indicate, heroes are indeed different from ordinary people. In the case of Achilles, however, this "heroic difference" is carried to its logical extreme. Achilles is not merely different from the rest of men; he is almost completely isolated from them. His difference as a hero is made clear at the beginning of the *Iliad*, when, in the midst of Achaean troubles, he calls upon Agamemnon to seek the help of a prophet and then promises the prophet protection should his message offend. His ultimate isolation is more than adumbrated in the fateful quarrel that follows: when he stands up to Agamemnon and publicly expresses resentments that must have been shared by many of his peers, no one comes forward to support him.^[3] Nestor's unsuccessful attempt to smooth things over remains flattering to Agamemnon and only serves to emphasize Achilles' difference from the rest of the Achaeans. Achilles may indeed be the best of the Achaeans, but as Nestor says, he remains subject to Agamemnon, who as "a scepter-holding king," holds "honor beyond the rest of men," honor given to him by Zeus himself.^[4] Interestingly enough, it is only the repugnant Thersites, physically the most "other" of all the Greeks at Troy, the man most hateful to both Achilles and Odysseus, who openly echoes the sentiments expressed by Achilles.^[5] If Thersites stands alone at the bottom of the Achaean pecking order, it is also true that Achilles himself is essentially alone at its top. The *Iliad* goes on to ratify and document the lonely isolation of its hero: Zeus' plan for the recovery and enhancement of Achilles' stature hinges on the loss of his only friend Patroclus, his last and best contact with the world inhabited by his fellow humans. The death of Patroclus at Hector's hands causes Achilles to lose his taste for life: the only thing left for him now is to kill Hector and then await his own impending death. By the end of the *Iliad*, then, Achilles has become the perfect embodiment of the inexorable and cruel logic of heroism, standing in splendid isolation, supremely alone at the end of his short but incandescent life.

Achilles has sought and achieved perfection, glory that will never fade, something immune from the ravages of time, change, and corruption.^[6] The traumatic events of Book 1 serve to show him that what Agamemnon can take away, Agamemnon can take away, forever shattering his innocence. The restored glory promised to his mother by Zeus must and will be superior to what he had before, exceeding anything that Agamemnon and his ilk can deliver. This is why the long list of gifts offered to him by Agamemnon's agents in Book 9 holds no allure for the disillusioned Achilles. Now he is after something immeasurably greater, something perfect, permanent and inappreciable. And this he does achieve. But at what a cost! The second great disillusionment of the *Iliad* strikes the hapless Achilles upon the death of his beloved comrade, and it is far more devastating than the first. This time he comes to realize that his relentless quest for unfading glory and immortal perfection has cost him his humanity. Not the least of the grand legacies bequeathed to us by the *Iliad* is its harrowing and abiding portrayal of a young man's tragic loss of innocence.

Works like the *Iliad* have, of course, become mainstays of highbrow culture. Irrespective of what they were at the time of their composition, they have long since attained the status of cultural monuments worthy of inclusion in the "canon" of Western civilization's "great books." As such, they are standard fixtures of courses in Western civilization and Western literature, where they are often forced upon unwilling high school and college students. Indeed, they have become just the sort of thing that many critics of American higher education like to prescribe as the wondrous cure for all the ills that plague our social fabric.^[7]

It is, however, an altogether different matter with a movie – I do not say *film* – like *Shane*, or with the novel on which it is based.^[8] Here we have a piece of lowbrow fiction, a "popular Western epic" from the director of *Grand* and other such films.^[9] There is nothing very lofty or *nouvelle vague* here, not even something suitably British – Tony Richardson's *Tom Jones*, for example, or one of David Lean's epic films, or perhaps something from *Masterpiece Theater* – something that we can at least pretend has sufficient stature and the proper droll of class. On the contrary, *Shane* gives us movie actors who are shamefully American: Alan Ladd, whom no one ever compared to John Gielgud, Albert Finney, or Alec Guinness (or even, for that matter, to Marlon Brando or Dustin Hoffman); Jean Arthur at the end of her career, in a role that does not really suit her; Van Heflin, solid and workmanlike, as always; Brandon De Wilde a short time before the passing of his beautiful youth and seemingly inflexible innocence; and, last but far from least, Jack Palance, leering and violent, overdoing it disgracefully – radically, relentlessly, and so successfully déclassé. Is this the sort of thing we ought to be mentioning in the same breath with the Homeric poems, certified masterpieces and monuments of high culture that they are?

Answers to that question abound, only three of which I shall mention here. The first one has already been suggested: at the time of their composition – a notion that is already problematic when one is speaking of oral poetry – the Homeric narratives had not yet become arcane and sacred texts accessible only to the few who possessed sufficient intelligence and skill, as well as sufficient inclination, to read them. Rather than being books reserved for a caste of scholars or priests, in their own time they were splendid examples of living art, accessible to anyone with the good fortune to stand in the presence of the bard. Plato's criticism of the Homeric poems shows that he, to take but one outstanding example, was very well aware of this. Indeed, there is more than a hint of aristocratic, snobbish contempt for such forms of "popular culture" to be found in Plato's obsessively "rational" opposition to Homeric poetry, and it would be worthwhile to have a close look at the *Ion* or the *Republic* with this in mind.

Second, Hollywood movies of the caliber of those made by directors such as George Stevens at the peak of his powers are the products of very considerable art and technical skill – *techné* in the truest sense. Anyone who knows the slightest thing about the complex and difficult process of putting together a modern motion picture can attest to this. Those fortunate enough to have seen *Day for Night* by the great French director François Truffaut (the film's French title is the marvelously evocative and instructive *La Nuit américaine*) have been treated to an ample demonstration that success and excellence in this very difficult medium demand technique, artistic, intellectual, and social skills of the highest order – skills often far in excess of those required to produce any number of highbrow creations and certified cultural monuments. There is no need for us to apologize on behalf of George Stevens or for our interest in his work: as admirers and students of Homer, we are not yet feel embarrassment or shame at being moved by and honoring movies that, their occasional lapses notwithstanding, often attain the highest levels of art. And thus it is that, without succumbing to the highbrow and snobbish connotations of the term, we can call *Shane* a film after all.^[10]

Third, films have become a powerful and indispensable tool for teaching the classics.^[11] Among Westerners, *Shane*, *Unforgiven*, *Red River*, *The Searchers*, *High Noon* and the like have become staples of classics courses. In a course I teach on heroism, for example, they add immeasurably to the way in which students respond to the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*. The students are astonished by the connections between popular films they find easy accessible and the forbidding monuments of classical literature. The films provide them with a new way to look at the classics, which, they suddenly realize, have a great deal to say in the world of today. On the other hand, needless to say, the great classical texts give them a new and deeper perspective on the films themselves. With regard to *Shane*, which dates back to 1953, I myself remain astounded at the degree to which it appeals to students today.

Before we leave the vexed question of "highbrow" and "lowbrow," it is worth noting that Jack Schaefer, the novel's author, was a student of Greek and Latin during his undergraduate years at Oberlin, going on to graduate study in English at Columbia, where he specialized in the 18th century. The rest of the story is best told in his own words:

While I was at Columbia I had what I thought was a bright idea for my thesis. I wanted to do research on the development of motion pictures. At the time I had an aunt who reviewed films ready to assist me. Besides that, I had a tremendous interest in films. The thesis committee at Columbia just laughed at me. They said that movies were merely cheap reproductions of stage plays. After that I left Columbia. I have never been back and have never regretted leaving at all.^[12]

Those plots are indeed worthy of note!

The plot of *Shane*, like the plot of the *Iliad*, is quite simple. One day in the old West a stranger rides into a Wyoming valley. A small farming family offers him hospitality, and he soon agrees to stay and help with their arduous work. As the days pass, an abiding friendship and mutual respect develop between him and the farmer, whose wife and young son are becoming increasingly fascinated with their mysterious and formidable guest, who has identified himself only as Shane. Meanwhile terrible violence threatens the family from without: the valley's leading cattle rancher is engaged in an attempt to drive out the farmers, seeing them as a threat not only to his wealth and power but also to his entire way of life. After suffering a few setbacks, he mounts a darkly murderous gunfighter to do the job. It is quickly clear that only the stranger, Shane, has the ability to stand against him, which he eventually and inevitably does. When the necessary killings have been done, Shane rides out of town, never to return to those who love him. Shane, as we grown-ups know all too well, will never come back.

Shane is a film about good and evil and also about guilt and innocence. In its treatment and development of those themes, it stands as an especially successful example of a modern version of the Western heroic paradigm. In the film's earlier stages, the hero persists in a futile attempt to abandon his violent past for a "normal life" as an ordinary farmer – a "sod-buster," to use the almost Hesiodic language of the film's descriptively so well by Achilles when he tells us about the "two sorts of destiny" announced to him by his divine mother Thetis.

My mother Thetis, a moving silver grace,
Tells me two fates sweep me on to my death.
If I stay here and fight, I'll never return home,
But my glory will be undying forever.
If I return home to my dear fatherland
My glory is lost but my life will be long,
And death that ends all will not catch me soon!^[13]

In agreeing to stay and work on Joe Starrett's farm, Shane is attempting to fulfill the second of those two destinies: he is willing to renounce the glory of his gunfighting days for a long and peaceful domestic life on the farm. And, unlike the terminally unmanageable Achilles, *Shane* seems to possess the talents required for such a life: not only does he prove himself a willing and able "sod-buster," but, as the story unfolds, he also becomes a potentially dangerous rival for the affections of Starrett's wife and son, both of whom come to love him.

But the domestic crisis, with its heavily Freudian overtones (perhaps heavier still in Schaefer's novel, where the story is told in the words of the enthralled son after he has grown to adulthood), is averted, bowing to the inexorable demands of the heroic paradigm – and to the scapegoat mechanism as described by René Girard.^[14] It turns out to be the same for *Shane* as for Achilles: just as the Greeks need Achilles, *Shane's* potent presence and help are necessary if his newfound comrades are to survive the deadly violence represented by the ranchers, whose unbounded and increasingly obsolete way of life they threaten. Yet *Shane* himself knows full well that his own way of life, his own brand of deadly violence, is just as obsolete, even though he cannot escape it, try as he might. When he challenges the cattle baron Ryker, telling him that his "kind of days" are over, Ryker replies "My days? What about yours, gunfighter?" *Shane's* next words give the game away: the difference between the two of them, he says, is that he knows it.

Shane comes from without as the noble champion who put an end to the horrible violation that threatens the valley from within. Unlike Achilles, however, he seems genuinely willing, at least initially, to reject his heroic role and jettison his heroic past, which he sees as tainted. Thus his story tells us nothing about that past. Even his name is a mystery: he is *Shane*, and nothing more. The heroes of myth and legend, as both Lord Raglan and Otto Rank have noted, are blessed with mysterious and marvelous origins: their mothers are royal princesses or goddesses, their fathers gods or kings, the circumstances of their birth are unusual and difficult, as is their upbringing, and so on.^[15] Examples abound: besides Achilles, consider Oedipus, or Romulus and Remus, or the rewards of examining *Shane* in conjunction with a canonical heroic narrative like the *Iliad* is the opportunity it affords for observing the way in which a modern version of the heroic paradigm both simplifies and secularizes the early stages of the hero's story. *Shane's* entire past remains marvelous and mysterious precisely because we are told nothing about it: like the Starretts, we do not know where he comes from or what he did there, who his parents were, whether he once was married, and so forth. We do not even know his full name. Noting that *Shane* fits the pattern delineated in Robert Warshaw's classic essay on the Westerner in film, Danny Peary offers a description of the hero that puts this whole matter very well:

"He is a loner who has a mysterious, violent past that he cannot escape; he would like to settle down in the civilized West, and has even found a woman he loves, but he comes to realize he has no future—he just does the task which brought him to this town and retreats back into the past, the dead (Shane rides in through a graveyard) mythological-prehistory West."^[16]

For *Shane*, as for Achilles, there is no real future: he disappears as a human being, to remain in the valley only as a legend, as the subject of ceaselessly embellished stories for the generations to come.

The circumstances of the domestic world he tries to enter make it impossible for *Shane* to renounce his heroic nature and violent past. Because he wishes to save his newfound friends, he is compelled to become a hero once again. The transformation takes place before our eyes: in an episode at least as effective as any armng scene in Homer, *Shane* exchanges the drab clothing of the farmer for his old costume, the dazzling white garb of the gunfighter.^[17] The powerful impact of this almost ritualistic exchange remains unforgettable: it is then that we – and the boy Joey, who watches with us – truly know that *Shane* is different, that he is not one of us. Like Achilles, he never really had a choice. Such a being could never be contained by our beings, part of a world that is passing away, thereby surrendering all hope for that cherished "normal life" he cannot share with us. Thus at the film's end, immediately after he has done the killing necessary to save the world for his friends, he who seems to have come from nowhere rides off alone toward some equally indeterminate future. *Shane* mirrors the *Iliad* in ending directly after the hero's murderous triumph and the subsiding of his deadly impulses: just as Homer does not trouble to tell us what happened with Achilles after the passing of his rage and the funeral of his greatest victim, so does Stevens' film tell us nothing more of *Shane*.

Although *Shane*, unlike Achilles, does make a genuine attempt to reenter the world of "normal" human life, he cannot succeed in doing so. As we have seen, he represents the threat of destruction even in the domestic sphere: were it not for the intervention of the deadly violence imported by the ranchers, *Shane* and his adopted family would ultimately have to face the crisis brought on by the attraction he exerts on the wife and son of the farmer who has taken him in and befriended him. But the reasons for the inevitability of *Shane's* departure run far deeper. Heroes like *Shane* and Achilles (and perhaps Moses and Aeneas as well, two others who saw but never truly reached the promised land) exist to restore order, to rescue their weaker or less fortunate brethren in times of crisis and impending violence. Once the crisis has been averted and the violence has passed, there is no longer any real place for them in the communities they have rescued and restored.

Why must it be so? The answers to that question, many of which have been suggested by Girard, are varied and complex, but they surely involve matters of guilt and innocence, of pollution and purity. It is in order to shield his comrades from violence, the rescuing hero is compelled to commit violence himself: he is victorious over those who are violent, he must become the most violent. Thus it is that he is stained forever, indelibly marked, by violence and death. A violator and mutilator of human bodies, he is covered with blood and gore, like Achilles, or, like *Shane*, he carries with him a mysterious wound that marks him off from the rest of men.^[18] Like the same both marvelous and repulsive. We need such people when the crisis is upon us, but we cannot abide them once the crisis has passed and normal order has been restored. They are doomed to wander about the world, bearing with them their stigmata, polluted yet purifying, violent yet bearing peace, restoring order by giving vent to their own disorder, forever strangers everywhere.

All this brings us, I think, to the precise point at which *Shane* makes its most telling contribution to the development of the heroic paradigm – to something in the film that seems uniquely and irreducibly American. A boy on the verge of his coming of age is witness to *Shane's* fateful preparations for the decisive encounter. Along with his faithful dog, he follows *Shane* into town, running as fast as he can in order to be present at the encounter itself, in which he eventually participates by shouting a warning to the hero as the killing nears its end. Bidding him farewell, the wounded *Shane* rides off, never to be seen again, unheeding as the boy cries desperately for him to return. *Shane* will never return, and those final, incandescent visions of him and his wondrous deeds are what the boy will remember for the rest of his life, closing and sealing the innocent days of his childhood in the wide-open spaces of the great American West, not yet spoiled but all too soon to be, stands *Shane*, bright in his memory, the great hero whose transcendent deeds saved the world for him and his family. The boy's pure vision has not yet comprehended the stark reality of violence and the nature of the wound that will never heal. The boy will continue to dream. But the man *Shane*, like Achilles once he has fathomed the full meaning of Patroclus' death, knows the truth. The wound that will not heal is the indelible stain of violence.^[19] That, the film tells us, is why *Shane* will never return.^[20]

Endnotes

- [1] *Iliad* 6.354-358.
- [2] See Sale, "Achilles and Heroic Values" 86-100.
- [3] Note Achilles' words in *Iliad* 1.223-244.
- [4] *Iliad* 1.278-279. All translations of the *Iliad* are those of Stanley Lombardo.
- [5] The reviled Thersites appears in *Iliad* 2.211-277.
- [6] See Rubino, "A Thousand Shapes of Death," 12-18.
- [7] For a classic example, see Bloom.
- [8] The word *film*, like *cinema* and unlike *movie*, carries a certain highbrow cachet. Note, for example, that colleges and universities have departments or programs in Film Studies. Movies may be studied there, but only in disguise.
- [9] George Stevens' *Shane* was released in 1953, and Jack Schaefer's novel, his first, was published in 1949 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin), after an earlier version had appeared in 1946 as a three-part serial in *Argosy*. Extremely valuable for students of both the novel and film is *Shane: The Critical Edition*, edited by James C. Work, which contains the text of the novel, a group of essays on both the novel and the film, and a brief bibliography. It includes an interview with Schaefer himself, and its "Afterword" is a short address of his dating from 1976. I am grateful to James R. Baron for making the existence of that book known to me.
- [10] Indeed, *Shane* has benefitted from the sincerest form of flattery – imitation: two of Clint Eastwood's films, *Pale Rider* (1985) and *Unforgiven* (1992) offer clear reflections of Stevens' classic film. See Buscombe 32-33. *Unforgiven* has been the subject of the important paper on classics and film by Mary Whitlock Blundell and Kirk Ormand.
- [11] The expanding amount of published work on classics and film shows that scholars are becoming aware of this fact. Examples containing essays on Western films include Winkler, Eckstein and Lehman, and Day.
- [12] Henry Joseph Nuwer, "An Interview with Jack Schaefer: May 1972," in Work 278.
- [13] *Iliad* 9.410-416.
- [14] René Girard has discussed the "scapegoat mechanism" in many places, perhaps most fundamentally in his *Violence and the Sacred*.
- [15] Danny Peary's forceful descriptions of the mysterious and marvelous origins of the hero, see Raglan and Rank. [16] For their own classic description of *Shane* appears under the entry for the film in his *Guide for the Film Fanatic*. Robert Warshaw's essay "The Westerner" first appeared in 1954 and has been variously reprinted.
- [17] See Shay's book and Rubino, "Achilles in America."
- [18] *Shane* is wounded in the film's final confrontation, and he rides out of the film bearing that wound. It is not clear, however, who inflicted the wound and how serious it is.
- [19] See Shay and Rubino, "Achilles in America."
- [20] I would like to thank the editors of this issue, Kirsten Day and Benjamin Haller, for their generous and perceptive suggestions.

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