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Master Chief: A True Hero of the War on Terror?

How Antiquity's Heroic Character and the Contemporary War on
Terror are Apparent in William C. Dietz's *Halo: The Flood*

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Title: *Master Chief: A True Hero of the War on Terror? How Antiquity's Heroic Character and the Contemporary War on Terror are Apparent in William C. Dietz's Halo: The Flood*

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Abstract: *Halo: The Flood* by William C. Dietz is a novel comprehensively based on a video-game series, which despite its success has attracted only minor attention from scholars during the last decade. In this essay, focus lies on the dual nature of the main character Master Chief. The aim is to show that he exhibits superhuman qualities like enormous strength and courage which are derived from antiquity's heroic character, and that he embodies a general theme of unquestionable duty which is linked to the contemporary war on terror. Without doubt, he comes across as an archetype and therefore he is investigated from the perspective of archetypal literary criticism, gathered from mainly "The Myth of Super Man" by Umberto Eco and "The Domestic Production of Gender, Power, and Privilege" by Michele Adams and Scott Coltrane.

Key Words: *Halo: The Flood*, Master Chief, archetypal literary criticism, video-game novel, epic narrative, heroic character, war on terror, strength and courage, duty

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1. Introduction

Thesis Statement and Purpose

The endurance of the epic narrative which in western culture mostly centers on a heroic character is without doubt extraordinary. Both listeners and readers have for thousands of years been captivated by incredible deeds as well as legendary battles, often fought in some fantastic and fascinating land. Nowadays, the inclusion of unarguably epic motifs in everything from cinematic films to computer games clearly shows that the form is still present in the popular consciousness (Bates ix). Of utmost importance in any epic narrative, whether long ago or today, is nevertheless the heroic character himself. Such a man stands as a bulwark against many a tidal wave of tentacled horror, but also amounts to nothing less than a personification of the ideals and images which can be said to epitomize his context. While there certainly have been many such characters throughout the history of western culture, they continue to appear even in our own age. As Travis notes, “Achilles was the protector of the Greeks, Hector of the Trojans, Odysseus of his house-hold on Ithaca, as the Master Chief is the protector of humanity” (“Why Plato” 33). By investigating these individual fates, it becomes possible to unravel quite interesting aspects about the values and virtues deemed important by the societies in which they were produced.

The disposition of the character Master Chief is consequently the focus of this essay. In the service of humanity, he endures a perilous space-battle with a hostile alien race which is called the Covenant, and crash-lands on a primordial though artificial ringworld known as Halo to finish the fight. All of this is exhaustively portrayed in the video-game novel *Halo: The Flood* written by William C. Dietz. From the perspective of archetypal literary criticism, I intend to argue that Master Chief here exhibits superhuman qualities which are derived from antiquity’s heroic character, and that he embodies a general theme which is linked to the contemporary war on terror. To elaborate, he possesses the physique as well as the ability of

someone from mythology, who overcomes any dreadful enemy imaginable from across the dark voids of the universe (see *Umberto Eco*). Furthermore, he follows virtually all orders from his superior with a machinelike sense of patriotic duty, in which no attention is given to situations beyond a restricted field of battle (see *Michele Adams and Scott Coltrane*). The employment of antiquity's heroic character here represents the legacy of the Greek epic narratives which today still maintain some importance, while the presence of the contemporary war on terror constitutes a wholly new American theme which can speak to a modern-day audience.

There is obviously more to heroic characters as well as epic narratives than simply a Herculean person who daringly and quite violently ends a Cimmerian peril. Of importance are subjects which a contemporary audience can relate to, whether in first century Athens or twenty-first century Washington. The emphasis on strength and courage in epic narratives from those of Crete and Athens to those of the United States is because war continues to be present in the public mind, whether long ago in accounts from the fields of Marathon or today in the newsreels from the deserts of Iraq (see *Umberto Eco*). The superhuman qualities of Master Chief are similar to those found in antiquity's heroic character. But the obvious theme of Greek family honour in *The Iliad* might in contrast not speak as much to a modern-day audience, and consequently the universe of *Halo* must relate to something which has more significance today, such as the question of American patriotic duty as virtually incontestable (see *Michele Adams and Scott Coltrane*). Therefore, the general theme which is manifest with Master Chief also involves the contemporary war on terror.

What unarguably makes Master Chief the most important part of a narrative which is comparatively epic, are precisely those relatable aspects and communal experiences which can be found in antiquity's heroic character and the contemporary war on terror. But it should also be mentioned that culturally induced psychological needs and desires can be satisfied

vicariously by consuming this kind of literature, so it might be beneficial to consider the actual readership as well (see *Janice Radway*). Novels based on video-games have a predominantly male audience and it could be interesting to investigate what this sometimes overlooked group is actually reading. Today, commercial successes like the female-oriented *Twilight* series are scrutinized by scholars and journalists alike, but the literary installments of the male-oriented *Halo* franchise have not received any greater attention by these experts (Clarke 3 & Parke 11). However, there may be a perfectly good explanation for this.

According to surveys and studies performed in the last decade, young women tend to read a lot more literature than young men do (Parke 11). Worth mentioning is also the fact that for example the number of sold copies of *Twilight: New Moon* far exceeds that of *Halo: The Flood*. Nevertheless, it definitely is important to take an interest in what kind of literature young men actually consume, even if they obviously are relatively few in comparison with reading young women.

In conclusion, when all this is considered one can identify two aspects that clearly place Master Chief in a comparatively epic narrative context. Firstly, whenever he exhibits a superhuman quality like defeating a horde of aliens single-handedly, he adheres to the heroic character derived from antiquity, which has acquired new importance in the society of today. (Never accepting defeat, performing quite violent deeds, having great physical strength, etc.) Secondly, whenever he embodies a general trait like the willingness to follow a superior without question, he adheres to a contextual subject as in antiquity, but addresses the war on terror which speaks almost exclusively to an audience of today. (Functions almost like a machine, only comprehends the restricted field of battle, follows an order without hesitation, etc.) I will begin by investigating his stature and preexisting status, and how this is perceived by others (*Chapter 1*). In order to lay down a general introductory picture of his character, the focus here lies on how he *is* rather than how he *behaves*. After this I will proceed by looking

at his specific actions with regard to the fact that he exhibits a heroic (*Chapter 2*) but also machinelike (*Chapter 3*) nature that is more explicitly displayed. Consequently, here the focus lies on his actual conduct in this narrative. Lastly I will investigate how the ancient and modern side of him comes together, and clash with or complete each other on two separate though not unrelated occasions (*Chapter 4 and 5*).

Theory

So called archetypal literary criticism holds that literature is structured by widespread communal thought patterns known as archetypes (Staton 97). These could be symbols and images as well as narratives and characters. A transmitter of archetypal patterns is culture and by adopting this perspective, literature is interpreted as “versions of [for example] social practices” as Staton remarks (97). The works which are used as theory in this essay all share this view to some extent, as will be seen below.

Umberto Eco

Halo: The Flood is comparable to virtually all science-fiction series that portray formidable protagonists with futuristic superpowers. But here is also someone who both exhibits a superhuman quality which is derived from antiquity’s heroic character and embodies a general theme which is linked to the contemporary war on terror. Hence, this video-game novel can be said to display the hallmarks of a comparatively epic narrative.

As a theoretical background, the most relevant essay on the subject is perhaps “The Myth of Superman” by semiotics professor Umberto Eco. Here it is underscored that the heroic character with capabilities that surpass those of ordinary people continues to be present in popular imagination (Eco 146-147). In century after century, the embodiment of vice and worth is apparent in epic narratives from hexametric poems about Hercules to mass-produced comics about Superman. Yet despite the quasi-divine implication for example with regard to heritage, one must not disregard the importance of the unremarkable. The heroic character

often represents “the extreme realization of natural endowments such as astuteness, swiftness, fighting ability, or even the logical faculties and the pure spirit of observation found in Sherlock Holmes” as Eco notes (146). The listener or the reader of epic narratives is thereby prone to undergo the psychological process of self-identification.

It is also important that the account favored in antiquity was mostly the story of something which had already happened and of which the public to some extent was aware (Eco 147-148). There could in a play or a poem for instance be mild criticism of some prevailing tradition in society. This kind of attribute would change the percipient into participant by which listeners and readers are brought to identify with the situation and the character (Eco 148). Consequently, the very nature of the heroic character which emerges in quite a few epic narratives over the centuries now becomes clear:

The [heroic] character of [for example] comic strips finds himself in this singular situation: he must be an archetype [as depicted in epic narratives], the totality of certain collective aspirations, and therefore he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature that renders him easily recognizable. (Eco 149)

Master Chief is without doubt “the totality of certain collective aspirations” which are manifest in both images and ideals of twenty-first century United States. Likewise, the “fixed nature that renders him easily recognizable” is apparent because of the incorporation of values and virtues made more important by the war on terror, which will be shown in this essay.

Michele Adams and Scott Coltrane

Halo: The Flood like any other epic narrative is influenced by the context in which it was produced. As mentioned before, the war on terror is perhaps the single most important factor to consider. Recruitment campaigns and newsreels helped to promote a public preparedness to serve the United States in uniform and with a weapon at the ready. A connection or even inspiration is without doubt evident here, since the epic narrative identified in this video-game novel is excessively militaristic as well as patriotic.

As a theoretical background, a relevant essay on the subject is “The Domestic Production of Gender, Power, and Privilege” by gender scholars Michele Adams and Scott Coltrane. Here it is emphasized that violence and aggression sanctioned by the state are today being linked to masculinity through wartime imagery, and this is the case in various media as well as in popular culture (Adams & Coltrane 239). The war on terror brings about the need to fully prepare a predominantly male portion of the public for military service, just like in ancient times when war was a more or less expected part of life. Thus, the political discourse helps to shape various media as well as popular culture in order to stimulate the concept of patriotic men prone to violence, who can meet a political agenda (Adams & Coltrane 239-240). Because the war on terror can be said to influence the context, writers and other artists may quite consciously or even without thinking incorporate this kind of character and theme into their works. Many of the images as well as the ideals which are manifest in the social context thus emanate from modern warfare:

As traditionally masculine enterprises, wars tend to institutionalize certain hegemonic ideals of masculinity . . . [f]or example, the recent “war on terrorism” has reinvigorated a certain image of “real” men as “brawny, heroic, [and] manly”. (Adams & Coltrane 239)

If one recalls the “the extreme realization of natural endowments such as astuteness, swiftness, fighting ability” which according to Eco designates the heroic character of antiquity, one can distinguish a clear parallel in the masculine standard of today (146). However, nowadays “the notion of physical prowess [especially] in the service of patriotic duty is [moreover] firmly back on the pedestal” as Adams and Coltrane note (239).

Thus, a new sense of patriotic duty emerged when for example a coalition force under the United States crossed the deserts of Iraq in order to secure nuclear and biological weapons which United Nations inspectors could not confirm the presence of. The justification of the campaign was largely doubtful. Nevertheless, combatants should by almost blind patriotic duty completely focus on securing victory, not asking questions which could potentially

divert them from their objectives and orders. Ideals and images which are evident in various media as well as in popular culture therefore reject the influence of past eras when men were more empathic, in order to accentuate a coldness of personality and even a likeness to machinery (Adams & Coltrane 238-239).

Janice Radway

In addition to these two works on heroic and masculine images, one can briefly mention the study *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* by literary scholar Janice Radway. The act of reading a novel is here seen as a behavior which is operated in the ongoing social life of actual social subjects (Radway 7).

Focus lies on the American women who read romance novels, and overall they are subjected to a somewhat contradictory female ideal. On the one hand, they are as Radway notes “told by mass-media symbolism that their very worth as individuals is closely tied to their sexual allure and physical beauty” (106). On the other hand, they are as Radway puts it also “educated by their families and churches to believe that their sexual being may be activated only by and for one other individual” (106). In order to adhere to these mixed messages, the American women read romance novels. “In trying to satisfy culturally induced psychological needs and desires that can be met fully only through activities that are themselves illogically proscribed or limited, the readers have found it necessary to fill their needs vicariously” as Radway concludes (106).

This can without doubt be related to the young American men who are subjected to media campaigns and political discourses which promote the model man as being prone to violence and eager to go to war (Adams & Coltrane 239). Of course, not everyone will answer the calling and actually join the armed forces. But in order to affirm their adherence to the values of their social context, they may very well fill their culturally induced psychological needs vicariously, by playing certain video-games or reading literature which embodies certain

ideals and images just like the American women tend to do (Radway 106).

Previous Research

Master Chief can be placed in the “epic, a genre in which [the narrative of this video-game novel] is fully entitled to membership”, according to Travis for example, because of a general similarity to narratives often found in Greek and Roman literature. (“Why Plato” 25). Indeed, previous research has compared the original video-game *Halo: Combat Evolved* on which the video-game novel *Halo: The Flood* is comprehensively based, to particular as well as canonical works in the western classical tradition. One notable study also carried out underscores that aspects evident in the universe of *Halo* resemble some central elements of *The Aeneid* for example. Quite fittingly the Covenant and Flood contingents are compared to the Carthaginians and Master Chief is more or less regarded as a counterpart to Aeneas (Travis, “Bungie’s Epic”). However, few if any have investigated how Master Chief more specifically may be said to constitute a decisively heroic character rooted in a comparatively epic narrative.

As mentioned before, the purpose of this essay is to investigate both his ancient and his modern side. This consequently is a contrast to previous research, which merely states that within the narrative emerges “a hero found in any epic tale”, as for example Parker claims without any deeper examination of the ascribed nature in question (162).

Here I could also mention that the nature of my study is similar to observations made in *Guts and Glory* by Lawrence H. Suid which investigates themes in the movie *Heartbreak Ridge* by Clint Eastwood. The movie deals with how the invasion of Grenada and its aftermath during the Regan era affect an unbending drillsargent. In short, the audience witnesses his inability to function as anything but a soldier because of the expectations that have been placed upon him by society (Suid 569). This is very similar to what happens to Master Chief, which will be shown in this essay. I am therefore by no means alone when it

comes to investigating how fiction might employ themes such as socially induced militarism with regard to the undertakings of a main character.

2. Results

Chapter 1: Man and Machine from Mythology

The opening passages from the cryo storage tube where Master Chief remains half-frozen and fast asleep until his combat prowess is required, includes the first as well as the most clear-cut illustration of his impressive nature: “Here, about to rise as if from a grave, was a true hero. It was a moment to remember, and if he [i.e. the Tech Officer] was lucky enough to survive, to tell his children about” (Dietz 17). Even though he has not performed any incredible triumph in this particular battle yet, he still constitutes “a true hero” with a potential for great deeds in the eyes of others. Furthermore, one could note the assertion of the Tech Officer who beholds Master Chief “to tell his children about” this awe-inspiring moment, which resembles the building of ancient myths and legends by passing down a personal account (Eco 146).

The remarkable if not exceptional status as well as stature which is evident from the beginning, obviously indicate a human being with superhuman qualities:

The Spartan was huge, easily seven feet tall. Encased in pearlescent green battle armor, the man looked like a figure from mythology—otherworldly and terrifying. Master Chief SPARTAN-117 stepped from his tube and surveyed the cryo bay. The mirrored visor on his helmet made him all the more fearsome, a faceless, impassive soldier built for destruction and death. (Dietz 19)

He brings to mind the equally feared and revered Greeks of Sparta who trained from birth to endure as well as enjoy a life of warfare, and who were similarly clad in traditional bronze mail. But ideals and images might also be found in mythology. He upholds the physical stature of a Hercules ready to club the Nemean lion as well as the divine armour of a Perseus which can protect even against the Harpies. In any case, one can discern that here is a human being with superhuman qualities who is more than capable of combating and conquering every possible evil.

This more or less obvious link to the past with regards to overall appearance is something that Eco understandably underscores as being the hallmark of antiquity's heroic character (146-147). However, one must not fail to recognize a more contemporary influence as well. The reason for describing this undoubtedly modern character as "a figure from [ancient] mythology" is because the ideal of such a terrifying and aggressive colossus of a man still has significance today. The war which is waged against terror by the United States has, according to Adams and Coltrane, "reinvigorated a certain image of 'real' men as 'brawny, heroic, [and] manly'" (239). Thus, the narrative with regards to the status and stature of Master Chief can be said to adhere to a contemporary social context, but the ideals and images of masculinity which are present here belong in both ancient Greece and modern America. What brings them together despite being separated by centuries are, as Radway puts it, precisely those "culturally induced psychological needs and desires" which the audiences might seek to fill vicariously (106).

It is nevertheless important to note that wholly encased in armour both ancient and futuristic, he becomes just as faceless and nameless as the assault rifles or the plasma grenades which he utilizes with such expertise. Even though he has or once had "John" as a forename, his military designation "Master Chief" in addition to his operational code "SPARTAN-117" are employed almost exclusively by characters like Cortana for example (Dietz 19). This is a stark contrast to every other character who have and are addressed by their individual names, from humans christened Hikowa to aliens called Igido (Dietz 168). One perceives nothing more than a mere instrument who or which is virtually hefted from a crate whenever some superior may require him or it (Dietz 17).

Moreover, one should note the designation "Reclaimer" in connection with Master Chief, which for example 343 Guilty Spark routinely uses throughout the narrative (Dietz 233 & 328). This kind of branding also says much about what other characters consider him to be; he

is reduced to nothing but a function in both name and spirit. Anything beyond the decree *to reclaim* is prohibited, like the transport of certain objects though by no means the acquisition of them (Dietz 253).

The absence of most personal traits no doubt borders on dehumanization, but this is nevertheless close to Adams and Coltrane who consider the uniform machine an ideal of today (238-239). It is crucial that one recognizes this. In the contemporary context of the narrative, the media and political discourse tend to link masculinity to duty and obedience. When considering this, it becomes more understandable that he appears so manifestly to be machinery, in both name and spirit, since he without doubt is a literary product of his time. A fact that reinforces the notion that he was more or less *designed* to be a weapon is that he can always be upgraded like any other software or equipment:

Additional memory packets and signal conduits had been implanted into the Spartan's body, and two externally accessible input slots had been installed near the base of his skull. Taken together, the combined systems served to double his already lightning-fast reflexes, and make it possible for him to navigate through the intricacies of any high-tech battlefield. (Dietz 20)

To summarize, even before any battle has been fought he appears to constitute “the extreme realization of natural endowments such as astuteness, swiftness, [and] fighting ability” in accordance with Eco (146). He possesses the stature of a demigod able to awe anyone who dares to behold him directly. Furthermore, he communicates a “brawny, heroic, [and] manly” appearance which is “unemotional,” in the sense that he comes across as a literal instrument of war, in accordance with Adams and Coltrane (239). He appears as anonymous as any kind of weaponry and is unpacked virtually like a machine, which is a prevalent ideal of the war on terror. Master Chief consequently seems to adhere to notions that a man should be both imposing physically and able to obey without the least hesitation.

Chapter 2: Triumphant within a Restricted Field of Battle

Master Chief obviously has no problem whatsoever once fearsome alien hostiles, equipped for impeding his progress and focused on facilitating his demise, eventually emerge in the narrative. One could mention that mythological traits are manifest even among the Covenant who almost seem to emerge from the Greek underworld in line with remarks like “chrome-armored demons spouting plasma fire” (Dietz 29). Appropriately enough they are also highly devout beings bent on eradicating humanity due to its alleged religious impiety, so the threat of a strange faith not unlike Islamic extremism has a parallel in the modern age as well (Dietz 17). But opposition such as this never becomes anything more than a nuisance due to the superhuman qualities of a true classical hero. Indeed, his advantage in strength is apparent with almost comical clarity when a group of Covenant Grunts leap onto Master Chief and wrestle to uncouple his distinctive helmet: “He flexed his shoulders, and shook himself like a dog” (Dietz 37).

Great muscular powers are perhaps the most central feature of antiquity’s heroic character, as Eco argues, and here one certainly perceives a man whose strength is equal to that of his literary as well as historical forerunners (146). But the reason for the lingering presence or persistence of these muscular and no doubt classical traits, even on a technologically advanced battlefield where weapons of almost unimaginable power are readily available, is because the audiences of both today and yesterday expect them since they render him easily recognizable as a real hero (Eco 149). There is a common understanding in western culture, through the centuries, of what he should be like in order to be seen as both heroic and superhuman. Strength is the most archetypal attribute which can convey this, as numerous episodes in the narrative show with abundant clarity.

Even without the sophisticated weaponry that he generally has available, he can repulse anything that ventures too near by physical force. Such daring acts are without doubt similar to the Spartans who fought so ferociously with their fists and teeth in Thermopylae long

after their shields and spears had been shattered by the Persians in a legendary battle of life and death: “Without pause, the Spartan tackled the alien and slammed its armored head into the burnished deckplates” (Dietz 110). Despite the fact that he roams a technologically advanced battlefield; if the situation calls for it, he can resort to very primitive combat up close. Again, that is what renders him fixed in an emblematic way and therefore easily recognizable as an archetypal hero (Eco 149). Thus, more than once he “crush[es] the head of [a Covenant] Elite with his fist” because the superhuman quality of strength which he possesses, as was shown in *Chapter 1*, can always bring about such methods without much difficulty (Dietz 81-82).

One should emphasize that all of the killing and bloodshed evident here, for instance, does not depart greatly from the depiction of Odysseus forcing a wooden stake into the massive eyeball of Polyphemus (Homer, *The Odyssey* 343-345). Previous research also connects the explicit violence directly to that of antiquity. As Travis notes, “[a]ncient Greece was a place where war was a fact of life. To make a young man unwarlike would have been to [for example] Plato just as bad as to make him a quitter or a liar” (“Why Plato” 32).

However, this aptitude for gruesome but rather helpful means of combat is certainly not practical against the insurgents of modern Iraq, even though it most definitely suits a warrior in ancient Greek poetry. One must understand that modern warfare is more indirect than the battles fought one millennium ago. Combatants of today will almost always just glimpse each other briefly through the scope of a rifle; they do not go around actively trying to rip the spine out of each other.

Consequently, one could argue that the strength and violence which Master Chief exhibits throughout the narrative is largely too excessive; it goes well beyond the wartime male image of today which Adams and Coltrane mean is promoted by the media and in political discourse (239). While the readers can easily identify him as an archetypal hero in accordance with the

attributes which Eco describes, they would perhaps find it difficult to fill their culturally induced needs vicariously as Radway puts it, since the novel's ideal of strength and violence is different from the one present in contemporary society (149). As mentioned in *Chapter 1*, the brawny stature and physical status of Master Chief can appeal to both Greeks and Americans since they are subjected to similar images of what a man should be like, but the excessively brutal employment of his abilities would probably seem outrageous to the latter.

Another trait in the narrative which might not speak as much to a modern audience is the emphasis on individualism: “[Master] Chief worked his way [alone] through Flood-infested galleries, subfloor maintenance tunnels, and more galleries,” (Dietz 240). This ability to almost single-handedly take on entire legions of horror, which virtually swarm up from the underworld, is something which no ordinary human can ever be thought to accomplish. Here one can easily see the legacy of Master Chief's ancient predecessors, who fought virtually alone in order to complete various tasks like those of mighty Hercules (Eco 145-146).

One should stress that there are times in the narrative when he operates together with other human forces, but mostly he is required to overcome threats on his own. Just like his excessive use of strength, this is something which can perhaps be related more to antiquity than to the modern age. Adams and Coltrane argue that being a part of a military machine is the male ideal of today, which means functioning as a part of a group which is driven by a shared patriotic zeal (239). Again, the readers will have no problem identifying him as a real hero in accordance with Eco's definitions, but it would be difficult for them to “affirm their adherence to traditional [and social] values” as Radway puts it, since the narrative in this aspect differ from contemporary society by emphasizing the individual rather than the group (149).

However, there are of course other aspects of his nature that can speak to audiences both new and old.

Master Chief is much accomplished in the deadly usage of various alien and human firearms: “The [sniper] rifle barked twice more, and a pair of [Covenant] Jackals fell. He reloaded with practiced ease, and continued sniping . . . [and soon] the enemy fell in ones, twos, and threes” (Dietz 102). Despite the obvious strength of a Hercules, Master Chief also enjoys the capacity of a Paris who aims his bow with utmost precision at the exposed heel of Achilles (Homer, *The Iliad* 477). In situations such as these, one clearly sees a parallel to the modern age with the focus on defeating opponents by other means than raw strength.

“In one [last] fluid motion, the Chief drew, primed, and dropped a frag[mentational] grenade, practically at the [Covenant] Elite’s feet” (Dietz 83). In situations such as this, he also behaves more like a graceful but deadly athlete than a rough brute. Thus, he not only neutralizes a large number of opponents but he overcomes any hostility with utmost sophistication and precision as well. One can easily discern the astuteness as well as the swiftness which Eco underscores as being part of antiquity’s heroic character (146). However, one could perhaps also argue that his grace for example is not as critical a characteristic as superhuman strength, but it nevertheless is an indication that here is someone with capabilities that surpass the constitution of common men.

Furthermore, the extraordinary kind of resilience which he exhibits most definitely suits a Hercules who severs the infinite heads of the Hydra, but is crucial in order to overcome the steadfast Taliban instigators of modern Afghanistan as well: “And so it went, as the Chief worked his way through Flood-infested galleries, subfloor maintenance tunnels, and more galleries, before rounding a corner to confront yet another group of monstrosities” (Dietz 240). The determination in spite of numerous and tough opposition retains much importance from antiquity to contemporary society, since the Greek demigod much like the American serviceman adheres to similar contextual ideals of never accepting defeat.

It is not difficult to understand why “other humans rally and fight with renewed vigor”

whenever and wherever this colossus of a man appears (Dietz 96). It would probably be no exaggeration to say that Master Chief is the legendary hero without whom every battle would be lost.

Chapter 3: Helpless outside the Confines of an Objective

However, the fact that he is always following orders suggests that he is incapable of any real thinking in situations beyond clubbing down aliens or blowing up vehicles.

When he emerges victorious from yet another relentless battle, he follows a roadway ahead but is confronted by a chasm and feels compelled to consult a higher authority on what to do next (Dietz 82). The answer he receives is rather telling: “‘The roadway ahead ends in a gap, but it’s logical to assume that there’s some kind of bridge mechanism. Find the controls that extend the bridge and we should be able to get across,’ [Cortana answered Master Chief]” (Dietz 82). Here one sees that such a simple way of reasoning is not an option for Master Chief, who rather than search in the vicinity on his own must ask Cortana, who does not pinpoint the controls but instead can deduce that some mechanism is likely to be nearby.

Situations such as this clearly show that he seems to adhere to “the notion of physical prowess [especially] in the service of patriotic duty” which, according to Adams and Coltrane, can be traced to the social context that predetermines men to know their place in the military machine (239). The influence from the war on terror is a possible explanation for the fact that he functions entirely within a restricted field of battle and that he must ask someone higher up in the hierarchy for guidance about everything beyond this.

Throw him into a conflict where hostile alien throngs need to be neutralized and he triumphs on his own. This was clearly shown in *Chapter 2*. But place him before any other problem such as a dead-end road and he immediately resorts to his superiors.

It is consequently evident that Master Chief never contemplates the to him petty question of *why* clubbing down that tentacled monstrosity is required or *why* blowing up that sophisticated structure is obliged. Everything that matters to him is the fulfillment of objectives (Dietz 111 & 117). As Sharpless understandably notes, he seems “condemned to a life of war and murder, programmed to follow without question” like some computer or other mindless machinery (19).

Again, this is precisely what Adams and Coltrane are referring to when they discuss the hierarchy that emerges with the war on terror, whereby a serviceman's orders are always to be followed (238-239). In other words, a real man of the twenty-first century does what he is told to do and nothing but. By knowing his place and never involving himself in anything but fighting, Master Chief seems almost modeled on such contemporary images and ideals, which are being reproduced mostly by the media and in political discourse.

Furthermore, his superiors do not simply *tell* him who to rescue or what to retrieve when they have come to a decision: “I put a nav[igation] indicator on your HUD [i.e. visor],” Cortana said, ‘just follow the arrow’ (Dietz 72).” This means that he has a rather typical way of getting around: “The Master Chief saw the nav[igation] indicator appear on his HUD [i.e. visor], followed the arrow through a hatch, down a series of corridors, and out into the troopship bay” (Dietz 119). This more or less brings to mind a remote-controlled missile which is guided by some mechanism onto its exact target once it has been fired. Thus, he would fit perfectly on any technologically advanced battlefield of the twenty-first century due to a likeness to actual machinery as well as the machinelike mind of a model serviceman (Adams & Coltrane 239).

It should be said that Master Chief has some opportunities to be included in the decision-making process, well outside of his normal confines, but he is evidently not capable of contributing with anything the least bit substantial:

“Now all we need to do is find the Silent Cartographer and the map to the Control Room.” [Cortana said.]

“Right,” the Master Chief replied. “That, and avoid capture in unknown territory, possibly held by the enemy, with no air support or backup.”

“Do you have a plan?” she asked.

“Yes. When we get there, I’m going to kill every single Covenant soldier I find.” (Dietz 146-147)

The exchange of thoughts above illustrates that he overlooks the course of action called for (“find the Silent Cartographer”) while focusing on the potential combat to come (“kill every single Covenant soldier”). He more or less ignores the question of *how they can get there* and

instead answers what he will do *when they are there*. As always, Cortana is expected to lead and Master Chief merely follows. He does get a chance to assist (“Do you have a plan?”) but since he lacks all knowledge beyond a restricted battlefield, he speaks of something most likely more graspable (“I’m going to kill [etc.]”) to someone like himself.

It is true that the heroic character as such is recognizable though the centuries by always being resourceful like Odysseus for example, but one must not forget that he must exhibit something which a specifically contemporary audience finds appealing as well (Eco 146-148). As long as it does not affect the overall image of him as a true hero, one could argue that if some central attributes are retained, others such as free thinking can actually be removed. This seems to be the case with regard to Master Chief. It is evident that even though he is not even one tenth as resourceful as his literary predecessors, at least not outside of the battlefield, he is still clearly recognizable as a heroic character because of his strength and resilience, which was shown previously in *Chapter 2*. Not being so ingenious and therefore not independent might well serve to make him more relatable to a contemporary audience, which means that they are able to affirm their adherence to the values of their social context by consuming this narrative and consequently filling their culturally induced psychological needs vicariously (Radway 106).

Chapter 4: Able to Act without Being Sanctioned?

The first important scene to consider with regard to his ancient and modern side is when

Cortana enters the network of Halo and sends Master Chief away on his own:

“Captain—we’ve got to stop the Captain. The weapons cache he’s looking for, it’s not really—we can’t let him get inside!” [Cortana said.]

“I don’t understand.”

“There’s no time!” Cortana said urgently. . . . “I have to remain here. Get out, find [Captain] Keyes, stop him. Before it’s too late!” (Dietz 193)

Though he clearly offers a mild protest (“I don’t understand.”) he accepts the reason for why no additional explanation (“There’s no time!”) can be given, and promptly runs off.

However, when he encounters the parasitic Flood forms in the corridors and caverns which he must investigate alone, he does not muster his courage nor his strength in order to overcome this new kind of threat, as before during the clashes with the Covenant forces. (Dietz 105 & 83). This previously unassailable hero now decides to simply run away (Dietz 221). He clearly is overwhelmed by his tentacled attackers, but he also seems to buckle under his feelings of abandonment: “Where . . . was Cortana when you needed her? Always telling him to ‘go through that door,’ ‘cross that bridge,’ or ‘climb that pyramid’” (Dietz 223).

Master Chief has definitely not lost his superhuman abilities, for example through some physical injury or circuit failure. One perceives the potential for “the extreme realization of natural endowments such as astuteness, swiftness, [and] fighting ability” which Eco identifies as being the hallmarks of a true classical hero (146). He still appears just as daunting as the man from mythology who was described in *Chapter 1* and *Chapter 2*. On the face of it, the only unheroic thing about him is a seeming lack of courage. But here one must remember the social context which according to Adams and Coltrane accentuates a wholly *sanctioned* form of violence in the service of patriotic duty (239). Master Chief, whose purpose throughout the narrative hinges on someone else to direct him, currently has neither an order nor an objective to follow, and absurdly enough no superior is present to give him permission, it seems, to

utilize his very own superhuman abilities.

As mentioned in *Chapter 2*, the fact that he acts more or less alone throughout the narrative is an indication of the kind of individuality which is mostly found in antiquity rather than in modern times. Then again, he is never as detached from his fellow combatants as he is now, since he before had the voice of either Cortana or Keyes in his ear telling him what to do next (Dietz 72 & 82). Here he only has his superhuman qualities, just as those of any classical hero, but they alone are obviously not enough (Eco 146). One could argue that a likely explanation for showing him in this state of isolation as well as distress is to emphasize the necessity of always being and remaining an integrated part of the military machine. To venture outside its confines will lead to potentially dire consequences.

However, in this his greatest hour of need Master Chief encounters another superior in the form of 343 Guilty Spark who catches his attention: “Someone has released the Flood. My function is to prevent it from leaving this installation. I require your assistance. Come this way” (Dietz 232). This unambiguous command is lacking in information but it is nevertheless all that is needed for him to follow this up until now complete stranger, and willingly fight against whatever “horde of shambling, leaping hostiles” that may stand in his way (Dietz 239). Most of the American combatants in the Iraq war were certainly not clear about what they were actually fighting for, and here neither is Master Chief but as an obedient serviceman he continues to fight on anyway.

Furthermore, here he rises to the occasion and endures almost endless battles against flailing legions of horror, which is a stark contrast to before when he actually ran from the Flood when he lacked any guidance (Dietz 223). One should add that under his new superior, he is confronted by horrendous hostiles in quantities which he has never encountered before (Dietz 240). However, the main reason why he emerges triumphant here is not because of his strength or resilience as such but because someone is present to give him a mandate to utilize

these superhuman abilities, which one could argue is the attribute of a man who is subjected to a political discourse of the war on terror and who is therefore inclined to do something only when he is told to do it (Adams & Coltrane 239).

To summarize, he leaves one superior (Cortana) and when he is alone he loses his ability to function altogether, but when he finds another superior (343 Guilty Spark) he is again able to overcome any dreadful peril which the universe might have in store for him. Thus, one can see an ancient and a modern side coming together in him. He constitutes “the extreme realization of natural endowments such as astuteness, swiftness, [and] fighting ability” which Eco identifies as being the hallmarks of a classical hero (146). But he is also subjected to “the [contemporary] notion of physical prowess in the service of patriotic duty” which according to Adams and Coltrane means that every heroic deed must be sanctioned (239).

Chapter 5: Siding with or Seized by a Superior?

The second important scene to consider with regard to his modern and ancient side is when

343 Guilty Spark and Master Chief are to ultimately activate Halo:

The Monitor zipped around to hover at the Master Chief's side. "The final step is reserved for *you*, Reclaimer."

"Why do you keep calling me that?" the Chief asked. Spark remained silent.

The Spartan shrugged, accepted the Index [i.e. the key which 343 Guilty Spark had been carrying] and gazed at the panel in front of him. One likely-looking slot pulsed the same glowering green that shone from the Index. He slid it home. The T-shaped device fit perfectly. (Dietz 255)

The process of activating Halo is of course halted by the more or less enraged Cortana who explains that it kills the food of the Flood and not the organism itself. Meaning almost all sentient life in the galaxy.

Previous research also considers this part important with regard to Master Chief, but the question is whether it constitutes a depiction of independence or of dependence. As Parker claims, "[h]e is able to make that decision [i.e. to side with Cortana after the activation of Halo], as opposed to having a superior [like Cortana or 343 Guilty Spark] simply issuing an order. His internal morality is what drives his decision [here], reinforcing the sense of an idealized warrior" (166). However, nothing in the narrative up to this point indicates that Master Chief is the least bit capable of any independent thinking. On the contrary, he relies entirely on higher authorities in order to overcome even the most basic of tasks which he encounters beyond a restricted field of battle. This was clearly shown in *Chapter 3*. Again, one must consider the social context which, as Adams and Coltrane argue, stresses that all the prowess of masculine ideals like Master Chief must be entirely sanctioned by someone else (239).

Cortana presents very persuasive arguments for disobeying 343 Guilty Spark as humanity would perish together with the Flood. However, the most important thing is that she becomes the first of the two to actually issue a direct command to Master Chief: "We need to go right now! Get us out of here" (Dietz 257-258). It seems plausible that Master Chief could be

equally convinced by the explanation of 343 Guilty Spark that activating Halo remains the only decisive option in order to contain the Flood. Any justification of a command is nevertheless irrelevant. Every preceding event in the narrative has undoubtedly shown that Master Chief will follow any superior without ever pondering the reasons behind the command in question, which was evident in *Chapter 3*.

Accordingly, he becomes the ideal weapon in the modern war on terror, but what all together makes him so great, the extraordinary ability to follow as well as execute an order or an objective, is what ultimately almost wipes out humanity. While the media images and political discourse tend to idealize this type of invincible robot man, they do not stress the foolishness nor the naivety which become a consequence of this. Consequently, the question is whether the readers would actually be able to “satisfy culturally induced psychological needs and desires” by consuming this narrative (Radway 106).

Here one must try to determine if the masculine model man of Master Chief is something for other men to wholly aspire to become. Without him and his superhuman abilities the war against the hostile aliens would be lost, but these also restrict him and because of them he almost eradicates all sentient life in the galaxy. The significance of portraying him as this rather paradoxical character is perhaps that it makes him someone we can learn from. It is important to remember that the epic themes of antiquity, as Eco argues, dealt with a contemporary society with which the audience was aware (148). Most essential is that plays and poems back then could offer mild criticism of for instance the prevailing ideals and images of masculinity, but never challenge them lest the crucial cultural stability which in ancient times hinged on male superiority would be jeopardized.

The narrative seems to have a similar structure. One needs to be a fully able and obedient man in order to save the day, especially when one is storming a stronghold filled with Covenant hostiles or Taliban insurgents. But one must also think for oneself as much as

possible, so that one is not led into a disaster, such as activating Halo or bombing civilians in Iraq because of information possibly being withheld. In short, with great powers come great responsibility and that could be what is being communicated here.

However, the previous event has no impact on Master Chief who continues to reject a more committed role beyond the function of a mere instrument:

“So,” he said as he lowered [his weapon] and pushed more [ammunition] into the receiver, “don’t tell me—let me guess. You have a plan.”

“Yes,” Cortana replied unabashedly, “I do. We . . . have to destroy Halo.”

The Spartan nodded and flexed his stiff shoulders. “And how do we do that?” (Dietz 262)

The unasked question of *why* he again must demolish some designated target is substituted by the stated question of *how* he can accomplish a specified objective to come, for instance what paths to follow and what gadgets to collect or destroy (Dietz 262-263). Only in front of alien opposition within a restricted field of battle will he utilize his brains as well as his brawns in order to grasp the situation. A command of potentially great consequence from a superior does not require equal attention; instead he just stands around fiddling with his firearm and flexing his muscles.

“The Spartan moved almost as if he was on autopilot—he simply killed and killed and killed” (Dietz 308). Even though such an automatic approach to his objective previously made him almost eradicate all sentient life in the galaxy, he obviously does not exhibit any significant signs of change.

Of course, one must consider that like the heroic characters of antiquity he is also “the totality of certain collective aspirations [needed to overcome a perceived threat], and therefore he must necessarily become immobilized in an emblematic and fixed nature that renders him easily recognizable” as Eco comments (149). This was previously mentioned in *Chapter 2*. Consequently, because he adheres to a long tradition of similar epic narratives, he can not change very much because then he would no longer be a part of this tradition. His nature as

obedient serviceman must be consistent from beginning to end in order for an audience to recognize it, which was the case in antiquity and is the case today (Eco 149). Had it been a more conventional contemporary character found in another type of novel, one could assume that he himself would learn from his mistake and perhaps act more cautiously from here on, but that is evidently not the case.

To summarize, he follows any superior who may require him (first 343 Guilty Spark, then Cortana) and never attempts to take any initiatives of his own. This lack of independence is derived from the modern war on terror, which according to Adams and Coltrane emphasizes obedience and wholly sanctioned actions (239). He will not question an order and that makes him a great weapon, but it could also lead to potentially dire consequences (like activating Halo). The problems which occur because of his limited nature can be related to the epic narratives of antiquity which raised similar questions, in order to perhaps not question but offer mild criticism of some prevalent notion in society. However, the fact that he does not exhibit any signs of change despite this, is because he needs to be fixed in an emblematic way as Eco argues, so that he can be recognizable as a true classical hero (149). Thus, one can see a modern and an ancient side coming together in him.

5. Conclusion

I have made the case in this essay that Master Chief exhibits superhuman qualities which are derived from antiquity's heroic character and that he embodies a general theme which is linked to the modern war on terror.

Master Chief possesses the physique as well as the ability of a Hercules throughout each and every battle, in accordance with Eco. Even the most imposing aliens of the mighty Covenant are easily dispatched of through crude punches or expert marksmanship, which clearly fills his fellow men with awe, while the flailing onslaught of the numerous Flood are time and again countered through a resilience not found in any ordinary mortal. This obvious link to the past makes him a classical or archetypal hero, who like his predecessors of antiquity can be said to embody the most important ideals and images that are present in the social context (Eco 148-149).

Master Chief also follows virtually all orders from his superiors with a machinelike sense of patriotic duty, without doubt worthy of the ideal American serviceman in accordance with Adams and Coltrane. Whether expected to charge directly into a well-fortified Covenant position or requested to first activate and later destroy Halo itself, all in order to protect the galaxy from a perceived evil, nothing in the narrative indicates the slightest hesitation or even a need for justification. This connection to ideals and images which are made important by the war on terror is evident, since the fulfillment of objectives has priority in both the narrative itself and the society in which it was produced (Adams & Coltrane 239-240).

Important to note is that he retains the heroic and machinelike nature shown in *Chapter 1* throughout the narrative, as one can see by looking at his very much consistent behavior in *Chapter 2* and *Chapter 3*. The fact that he does not exhibit any significant signs of change serves to further characterize him as a true classical hero.

Thus, the employment of antiquity's heroic character here represents the legacy of the

Greek epic narratives which today still maintains some importance because of its emphasis on physical and violent prowess. And the presence of the modern age's war on terror is a wholly new American theme of patriotic duty which can speak to a contemporary audience. The presence of such relatable aspects and communal experiences are crucial in order to make Master Chief the most important part of a narrative which is comparatively epic. Therefore the main purpose of this essay, to investigate two aspects which are largely neglected by previous research, which merely states that within the narrative emerges "a hero found in any epic tale" as for example Parker claims without any deeper examination, may consequently be regarded as fulfilled (162).

Besides the video-games released over the last decade, the feats of this modern hero are displayed in several full-length novels and short stories as well as comic books and animated films. In order to carry out a more comprehensive study, therefore, one might perhaps include every production in which he emerges.

In conclusion, a reason for investigating this novel was furthermore to focus on a sometimes overlooked group of readers, namely the young males, and to take an interest in what images and ideals they are subjected to. They are told by media symbolism and political discourse that their worth as individuals is closely tied to their physical prowess as well as blind obedience and, in line with what Radway argues, by consuming this video-game novel they can with few exceptions vicariously affirm their adherence to the values of their social context (106). As the war on terror draws to an end, however, the question is whether the images and ideals present in the literary installations of the *Halo* franchise will remain socially and psychologically appealing. Should the political discourse shift and promote some other masculine model man to fit the political purpose of a new age, Master Chief would perhaps no longer be someone who young males would so easily aspire to become.

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