

ARTICLE INFORMATION

Foreword

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Abstract:

Volume foreword, by Gregory Nagy.

Bibliography:

Nagy, Gregory. 2017. "Foreword." Pages xi–xiii in *Coming Back to Life: The Permeability of Past and Present, Mortality and Immortality, Death and Life in the Ancient Mediterranean*. Edited by Frederick S. Tappenden and Carly Daniel-Hughes, with the assistance of Bradley N. Rice. Montreal, QC: McGill University Library. Online: <http://comingbacktolife.mcgill.ca>.

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Published by
McGill University Library and Archives

Foreword

Rev. Dr. Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, Professor of Religious Studies (2004–2014) and Dean of the Faculty of Religious Studies (2007–2014) at McGill University, was one of a kind. As her admiring friend and former teacher, I can bear witness to her stellar career in the academic world, and in fact I have already published such testimony through a pair of online posts at *Classical Inquiries* ([Nagy 2015a](#), [2015b](#)). In that testimony, I tried to personalize my admiration and fondness for Ellen, and I find that I said it best there. I repeat here the essentials.

The premature death of Ellen Bradshaw Aitken on June 14, 2014 deeply saddened me as her friend, colleague, and former teacher. The date for my putting together the *Classical Inquiries* pieces in May 2015 coincided with a special day set aside for celebrating Ellen’s life and accomplishments. That day of celebration at McGill University gave me the happy opportunity to tell about Professor Aitken’s research. In retelling my story there and now here, I will speak about her as Ellen, not as Professor Aitken, recalling those many happy times when I could talk to you directly, dearest Ellen.

Ellen’s knowledge of the ancient world was stunningly vast, and she combined her expertise with an acute literary sensibility. There is no need for me to tell my McGill colleagues, since they already know, that Ellen was an inspiring and conscientious teacher, with a special knack for initiating young people into the world of research and teaching. She instilled in her students—and in her colleagues—a true sense of wonder about the power of empirical thinking. She was also a prodigiously gifted administrator, decisive and efficient while at the same time full of *humanitas* and compassion. In a word, Ellen Aitken was a born academic leader on all fronts.

I want to concentrate, however, on Ellen’s discoveries concerning the topic of charioteering in Homeric poetry, which touches

Coming Back to Life

tangentially on this volume's theme of the permeability of death and life. Ellen's research on this topic goes all the way back to 1982, when she was a senior at Harvard College, studying in the program of the Committee on Degrees in Folklore and Mythology. That year, she submitted an honors thesis entitled “ὄπαων and ὀπάζω: A Study in the Epic Treatment of Heroic Relationships.” The thesis, combined with all her other stellar work as a young student at Harvard, earned her a baccalaureate degree *summa cum laude*. Then, more than thirty years later, Harvard's Center for Hellenic Studies initiated a plan to publish a second edition of this masterpiece in Homeric research. Ellen's untimely death did not thwart this plan, and an annotated version of her original work has now appeared ([Aitken 2015](#)). It is about a Homeric hero who had particularly interested Ellen: he is Mērionēs the Cretan, who fought in the Trojan War as an ὄπαων or “follower” of the hero Idomeneus, king of all the Cretans.

Ellen observed that the heroic pairing of Achilles and Patroklos is parallel to the heroic pairing of Idomeneus and Mērionēs. She noted in particular that, just as Patroklos is a θεράπων of Achilles, so too is Mērionēs a θεράπων of Idomeneus. Here, Ellen supports my argument that this word θεράπων, besides meaning “attendant” on the surface, carries the deeper meaning of “ritual substitute” under the surface.

In the case of Patroklos, what happens to this hero as a ritual substitute of Achilles is that he gets killed in the *Iliad*. Patroklos dies for Achilles. And here, as Ellen argues most effectively, is a big difference between Patroklos and Mērionēs. Though Mērionēs as a θεράπων of Idomeneus is a ritual substitute for that king of all the Cretans, this recessive member of the pair does not die for that dominant member. Mērionēs stays alive, destined to become a dominant hero in his own right. And a dress rehearsal, as it were, for this status of eventual dominance is the role of Mērionēs as a charioteer who competed in the chariot race organized by Achilles in *Iliad* 23.

Foreword

It is Mērionēs who competes in that race, not Idomeneus. And there is a word applied to Mērionēs that distinguishes him as a ritual substitute who will not die for Idomeneus but will survive to become, in his own right, a virtual Idomeneus. That word is ὀπάων, the etymological meaning of which, as Ellen explains, is “follower.” Mērionēs is the would-be “successor” of Idomeneus. Mērionēs stays alive, destined to become a dominant hero in his own right. And the key to his success, as Ellen shows, is that he is not only the θεράπων of Idomeneus, but also the ὀπάων of that hero.

I used to joke with Ellen by predicting that, as soon as the second edition of her 1982 thesis is published online, Mērionēs the charioteer will ride again. Now that we her many fellow researchers can no longer work with Ellen directly, it is all the more important, vitally important, for us to make sure that this magnificent chariot ride gets underway. So, let the wheels of the chariot start rolling again.

November 2016
Washington, DC

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