

Book Review: Chris Walsh, *Cowardice: A Brief History*. Princeton University Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0691138633 (Hardback). 292 Pages. \$27.95.

Reviewed by Amanda Konradi¹

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Chris Walsh's engaging *Cowardice: A Brief History* explores the social construction of timidity. Walsh examines how courage relies on there being cowards, the many ways in which men's behavior is driven by the accusation of cowardice, and the persistent relevance of the concept to daily life. He shows that cowardice endures because it operates to reinforce moral boundaries.

Walsh constructs his "brief history" from a wide range of sources – literature, philosophy, history, print media, anthropology, blogs, psychology, and evolutionary biology. His primary focus is on the last 300 years in North America and Europe, but he builds arguments by drawing effective contrasts that reach beyond – i.e., between the modern and Roman military practice, between political leaders in the US and Islamic Jihadists – and by circling back repeatedly to Dante's *Inferno*.

In his introduction to *Cowardice*, Walsh lays out key ideas and issues. First, he provides a working definition of a coward as "someone who, because of excessive fear, fails to do what he is supposed to do" (7-8). Cowardice, or cowardly behavior, he argues, is marked by a refusal to perform a duty. But, he furthers, duty is always contextual, not a given. It depends on the specific activity in which a person is engaged and, importantly, on whether it is a solo or collective endeavor.

What is universal, Walsh contends, is that being labeled a coward is stigmatic and a source of shame. In times when action is necessary for the good of the group, the threat of shame has value as a motivator,

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