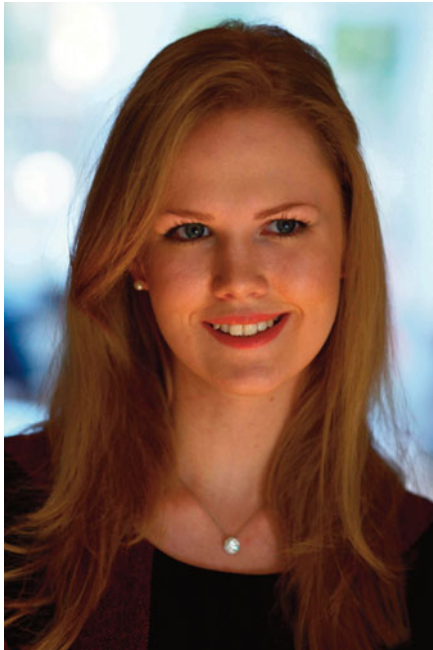


# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



40 *Lost in the wilds of Greece*

© Penny Turner

We are entering an age of robots. What took us so long? Philon of Byzantium came up with a humanoid machine in the late third century BC that I feel has long been missing from my life. Place a cup in her left hand and she'd pour you wine from her right. Voila! There was a similar sense of fun to the automata which adorned our dining tables throughout modern history: note-writing scribes, cello-playing monkeys. Need a 21st-century robot do much more than make music and help out around the house?

This issue of *Argo* is full of ideas about the ways we push the boundaries of being human. We look to the future as we think about how technology and medical research may be used to improve, extend or indeed emulate human life, but we look to the past, too. On page 38, Professor Paul Cartledge encounters 'ultramarathon man' Dean Karnazes, an American-Greek runner who has truly tested the limits of human endurance. A 350-mile nonstop run may sound like a bid for a new record, but Karnazes' chief competitor died millennia ago. He was Pheidippides, the fifth-century BC Athenian who was said to have run from Marathon to Athens.

We share the Greeks' fascination in the human capacity for superhuman feats. Wonder Woman, star of this summer's blockbuster, is princess, goddess and all-round superhero, but she is also, as Dr Jon Hesk explains in his review of a new history of the Amazons (page 34), a reflection of the real, nomadic warrior women who so startled the Hellenes with their skills.

We have always been ambitious to promote humans to the status of super-heroes and gods.

A similar desire for the ideal has led artists and writers down the centuries to evoke Helen of Troy as the proverbial beauty, even though, as Dr Catherine Rozier says (page 11), her beauty in the early Greek texts was 'assumed rather than described'. Today 'Helen' is perhaps most likely to be found in a factory in Japan; sex robots, we are told, are the future. They offer the beauty of a Marilyn without the complications of a human. A sex robot in a brothel in Austria is already putting its human counterparts out of business. There are surely more wholesome uses for this level of technology.

How refreshing it is, then, to be publishing Baroness Susan Greenfield's article (page 14) on the parallels between ancient Greek tragedy and modern neuroscience. We can build robots which look like humans and profess to 'think' like us, too, but for as long as the brain remains a 'mystery', a fount of unsolvable details which spring up like the heads of the Hydra, we cannot be matched. Among much else, modern science bears out Euripides' description of the dual forces at work upon human life – the bread (logic) and wine (capacity for abandonment) – as visualized in our fantastic cover art. As we move forward in the world, we shall continue to find ourselves by looking back.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

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14 *The 'mind' can be abandoned*

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