

5-1-2013

# The Contemporary Relevance of the Iliad

Erwin F. Cook

*Trinity University, [ecook@trinity.edu](mailto:ecook@trinity.edu)*

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## Repository Citation

Cook, Erwin F. "The contemporary relevance of the Iliad." (The Johns Hopkins University Press, August 2, 2013 (5,706 words). <http://jhupressblog.com/2013/08/02/chapter-verse-the-contemporary-relevance-of-homeric-poetry/>).

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## **“The Contemporary Relevance of the *Iliad*”**

Erwin Cook

*Originally presented as a lecture for the Food For Thought Lecture Series,  
Trinity University, May 1, 2013.*

### **Introduction: The Plot of the *Iliad* and the Problem of Interpretation**

I initially balked at the request to talk about the contemporary relevance of Homeric poetry. I did so because I am of the camp that maintains great art does not need to be defended on these terms, which is to say its skill, beauty and profundity give it all the relevance it needs to be of lasting relevance. But I do recognize that my justification, which also keeps me from studying ancient graffiti and medieval doorknockers, assumes that at some level of remove there are enduring qualities to these works that do indeed, and will always, give them contemporary relevance. Instead of trying to sell the *Iliad* in these terms, however, I found I could do something more in the spirit of the original request and show how it allows us to see certain aspects of the contemporary world with almost shocking clarity. In particular, I will deal with the *Iliad*'s unvarnished portrayal of the human will to power, the sociology of inner-city street gangs, and the psychological damage that warriors sometimes suffer on the battlefield.

As the *Iliad* begins, Akhilleus has recently sacked Lurnessos, Pedasos and many neighboring cities. In the division of the spoils that follows, Agamemnon is awarded Khruseis, and Akhilleus Briseis. The father of Khruseis soon turns up in camp and attempts to ransom his daughter. He bases his appeal on his offer of gifts and on his status as a priest of Apollo. Agamemnon brusquely dismisses the priest, who retires to the beach and prays to Apollo for revenge. Apollo hears his prayers and causes a plague that kills many Greeks. On the tenth day, Akhilleus calls an assembly and asks if prophet,

priest, or dream interpreter could explain why Apollo is angry. At that Kalkhas stands up and declares the god is angry because Agamemnon dishonored his priest. So far, everything proceeds according to a clear and orderly causality, and is in fact a model of coherent, linear narrative. But what follows is puzzling in more than one way, and is sure to be misinterpreted if we try to do so in terms of our own cultural assumptions.

Agamemnon gives Kalkhas an angry look and says to him “Prophet of evil! never once have you said anything good to me . . . . All the same I am willing to give her back, if that’s better, I would rather the army be safe than to perish. But you must straightway make ready a prize for me, so that I am not alone among the Argives without a prize, since that would be unseemly.” Akhilleus replies by asking how the Akhaians can give him a prize since they have already been distributed. He nevertheless orders Agamemnon to give the girl up, with the promise that the Akhaians will repay him with interest if they sack Troy. Agamemnon replies “Don’t try to cheat me! You won’t get past me, nor persuade. Or is it because you want to have a prize yourself, but me to sit around thus, lacking one, that you tell me to give her back? . . . . If the Akhaians do not give me a prize I myself will take, either your prize, of the prize of Aias, or Odysseus.”

Akhilleus then asks Agamemnon how anyone will follow him in the future, for the Akhaians only came to Troy to secure honor for him and Menelaos. “But now,” he declares “you are threatening to take my prize, over which I have labored greatly, and the sons of the Akhaians gave me. Never do I get a prize equal to yours, whenever the Akhaians sack a prosperous city, though my hands manage the bulk of the furious fighting. . . . So now I will go back home to Phthie, I have no intention of gathering goods and wealth here for you.” Agamemnon bids Akhilleus to flee if he wants, for there

are others who will honor him, above all Zeus. “But,” he adds, “I threaten you thus. Since Phoibos Apollo is taking Khruseis from me, . . . I am going to come to your hut and lead off your prize, Briseis, so that you know how much more powerful I am than you, and another man will shudder to declare himself my equal.” Akhilleus deliberates killing Agamemnon on the spot, but Athene descends from heaven and instructs him to withdraw himself and his men from the fighting, “for you shall receive three times so many shining gifts on account of this hubris.” Akhilleus obeys.

In the twenty five years I’ve taught the poem, I always dread this discussion, which always includes variations on the following: “Agamemnon is being petty!” “He’s paranoid!” “He’s an idiot!” “Akhilleus is acting like a spoiled brat!” “They’re both acting like spoiled brats!” If I’m really lucky, someone will ask, Why did Agamemnon accuse Kalkhas of never saying anything to his benefit? Or, How did Akhilleus realize so quickly Agamemnon intended to take Briseis? Or even, Why do they keep calling their women prizes?

Part of this we can dispose of rather quickly. To begin with Agamemnon’s supposed paranoia: the poet tells us in his own voice that Apollo caused Agamemnon and Akhilleus to fight because Agamemnon dishonored his priest; he also says that Hera put it in Akhilleus’ heart to call the assembly because she pitied the men dying. We know that Agamemnon is at fault and that Akhilleus is well-intentioned. But this is plainly not how Agamemnon sees it and he is far from being paranoid: it is a fact of history that until World War II more soldiers died of disease than in actual combat. Dysentery in particular was a constant threat: seen in this light, Agamemnon sealed his fate the moment he did not return Khruseis, since plague in the camp was inevitable and would be naturally

attributed to Agamemnon's offense against Apollo, who is the god of plagues. Of course, it still remained for someone to make that link, which may or not be "real," whatever that even means, and hardly even matters when the army is dying. Agamemnon clearly thinks that Kalkhas, who has a nasty habit of making him lose young girls, has invented the link, and he suspects he knows who put him up to it. When Akhilleus asks for a prophet to explain the god's anger, Kalkhas stands up and declares that he knows, but demands that Akhilleus protect him, "for," he says, "I believe I will anger a man who powerfully rules over all the Argives, and the Argives obey him." Akhilleus replies at once, "take courage, and speak the prophecy you know. For by Apollo, dear to Zeus, to whom you, Kalkhas, pray as you reveal prophecies to the Danaans, no one . . . will lay heavy hands on you, not while I live . . . not even if you should name Agamemnon, who now boasts that he is much the best of the Akhaians." "Why, it *is* Agamemnon!" Kalkhas exclaims, "he dishonored the priest of Apollo." Agamemnon is not the least bit paranoid: it seems obvious to him that Akhilleus has suborned the priest in order to make Agamemnon lose face.

We are still left with the issue of psychology, which is only sharpened when we recall that Khruseis and Briseis are slaves and that Akhilleus later declares he wishes Briseis had died rather than cause the quarrel that resulted in the death of Patroklos, someone he plainly cares about a whole lot more than her. Why, then, does he nearly kill Agamemnon over her in this scene, and how, to repeat the question of my dream student, does he so quickly realize that Agamemnon intends to take Briseis? Finally, why is Akhilleus' love for Patroklos, which is clearly non-sexual in Homer, so intense that later critics have found it difficult to explain except in sexual terms. A full explanation

involves us directly in the continued relevance of Homeric poetry. To make my point, I will take two radically different approaches to the scene, one by comparing Homeric society to inner city gang behavior, and another comparing Homeric warriors to Vietnam vets suffering from post traumatic stress disorder.

### **Part I: The Sociology of Homeric Society and The Code of the Streets**

My discussion of the sociology of inner city gangs is based on Elijah Anderson's *The Code of the Streets*.<sup>1</sup> Inner city gangs form a society within society, with clearly defined members and rules. This inner society arises from a variety of causes, which include: a lack of law enforcement; little or no support from society at large; a lack of institutional superstructures to protect individuals; internalized contempt and rejection of society at large; general poverty, helplessness and hopelessness. In short, it assumes a *Weltanschauung* of personal abandonment in a hostile world, and a general sense that there is little respect to be had: consequently, everyone competes to get what he can of what little respect is available (89). A further effect is that as soon as one person decides to gain respect by being feared, structures emerge, leading to formation gang communities and the code of the streets.

Features of the code include, above all, an obsession with respect and reputation, or in Homeric terms *timē* and *kleos*.<sup>2</sup> Respect serves as an intangible coat of armor: it is a form of intimidation designed to produce fear. The psychology of respect is not, however, simply based on self-preservation, but equally on the need to be compensated for a sense of insignificance, powerlessness, and a lack of alternatives in the wider world. It is thus

an *oppositional* model, in which a group structured by respect turns its back on the rest of the world: within *this* world, life regains its meaning.

And in this world, of seeking and preserving respect, negotiations go on at a symbolic level, that involve clothing, grooming, gait, demeanor, facial expressions and looking. It is thus a form of prestation, in which physical objects assert the respect one is owed: put concretely, “I wear this jacket because I can”. “Dissing” is another symbolic activity, that can be quickly translated to physical action. The insult does not need to be true: all that matters is whether the speaker can make it ‘stick’.

The code may center on one being granted deference: however, “as people increasingly feel buffeted by forces beyond their control, what one deserves in the way of respect becomes more and more problematic and uncertain” (82). As a result, the code provides a framework and mechanisms for negotiating respect: whereas violence is a given, the code simply seeks to regulate it. A person’s clothing and so on are thus designed to *prevent* aggression: appearance *is* reality. That is, the goal is to ‘perform’ an identity that prevents others from challenging your respect. The code is thus based on physicality and intimidation, and it is ruthless.

A person who does not command respect may be in immediate physical danger. Respect must therefore be negotiated in real time: it is hard to obtain, is defined by the group, has a quasi-material basis, is quickly lost, and is under constant negotiation. People who live by the code have thin skins and are trigger happy: that is, they are supersensitive to slights in part because slights, however slight, are possible precursors to actual violence (note again the ‘real time’ aspect). This is exacerbated by their sense of alienation from society, which leads to bitterness and anger, and further shortens their

fuse. There can be no deferral, both because of the possibility of violence and equally because there are no institutional superstructures in place to offer deferred redress. This lack of superstructures creates a profound sense that one must take care of oneself and one's loved ones. As important, there can be no deferral because your self-worth is based on the group's perception of you: you or I might well walk away after being degraded because of our 'self' image, that is precisely because we do not have a sense of identity as a public, real-time negotiation. A gang member, by contrast, must respond at once, not least because if he loses respect in the eyes of the group he is instantly vulnerable. In other words, there will be immediate pressure by the rest of the group to lower his status still further. And so, if a gang member loses an encounter, he may feel compelled to seek revenge to restore his honor. He thus faces a double bind: high status invites challenges; low status is worse, however, as it invites spite.

Gang members learn the rudiments of the code already on the elementary school playground: as children they form small groups that yield their primary social bonds. In those groups, they test themselves against the other kids in a campaign for respect. Such respect is a zero-sum system and disputes are a primary mechanism of establishing rank and structuring the group.

The Code of the Street is thus in a sense a more sophisticated, and more lethal, version of a fifth grade playground. Put differently, we are never more authentically human than we are in fifth grade. Aggression thus has a social meaning: that is, aggression defines the boys as individuals and structures the group, as one boy succumbs to another's superior mental or physical powers. There is no place for humility in this system. Or mercy. Again, we see that the code involves self-preservation, and public

identity is what matters: an individual sense of self-worth counts for nothing. The code is thus a performance of “I am strong”, “I can take care of myself”, and “I love to fight so don’t even think about it”.

To return to the role of objects, wearing a pair of Air Jordans is a direct assertion of status. The symbology of physical objects also requires a rhetoric of scarcity, of material poverty. On the other hand, if, out of fear of having his sneakers taken, a gang member wears a pair of Keds, he invites spite, and could be assaulted for that very reason. He does not have the luxury of wearing Keds in a display of ‘goofy chic’ or ‘I don’t care’. “In acquiring valued things, therefore, a person shores up his identity—but since it is an identity based on having things, it is highly precarious” (88). Whereas some boys perform their status so well as to avoid being challenged, those unable to command respect this way are especially alive to the threat of being dissed. Conversely, the pressure on the person to have the goods required to perform his identity successfully will make him covet someone else’s, especially if that someone is perceived as weak and easy prey. And if he does take someone else’s stuff “seemingly ordinary objects can become trophies imbued with symbolic value that far exceeds their monetary worth” (88). The trophy can also be wholly intangible, a person’s honor, stolen by dissing him, for example. Women are among the most important objects that can be acquired or lost. In *Islands in the Street*, Sánchez-Jankowski argues that disputes over the possession of women are a significant source of tension within gangs: “There is no area,” he declares, “more sensitive and none that can do more to destroy the unity of the gang” (79). Finally, a way of gaining respect from the group is to display nerve by performing an action that puts your life at risk. True nerve is thus a public display of a lack of fear of dying: being

prepared to die garners respect, and death is preferable to losing it. Those who behave in this manner “often lead an existential life that may acquire meaning when they are faced with the possibility of imminent death” (Anderson, 92).

I hope you have already seen some immediate and significant connections between Anderson’s account and the *Iliad*. In fact, I want to claim that the code of the streets, the heroic code, and the rules of Homeric society are nearly identical. For example, we see at once that both societies are obsessed with ‘honor’. From the code of the streets we can infer that the Greek obsession implies feelings of insignificance, helplessness and poverty. More important, it leads to the further inference that this is a normal human response to such feelings. As an oppositional model, we can see the heroic code as the product of largely environmental factors, noting that we for the most part are well insulated from nature, while ancient man felt himself subject to vast and often hostile forces that he proceeded to personify and sacrifice to. As for dissing, we see that Akhilleus’ eloquence in insulting Agamemnon is a fundamental part of the symbolism of honor: in other words, it owes its importance in part to the fact that honor is a symbolic economy. On the other hand, Akhilleus is so quick to infer that Agamemnon will take Briseis because it is a cultural assumption that both of them will engage in such activity. For the same reason, Agamemnon wrongly infers that Akhilleus is engaged in a naked power grab. It is also clear why it is not important to Agamemnon whether the prophecy of Kalkhas is true: all that matters is that he delivers an authoritative performance that Agamemnon cannot refute, though he can attempt to nullify its effect by taking Briseis. We also see that honor is very much a zero-sum system: Agamemnon can only understand losing honor in terms of Akhilleus gaining it in relative and absolute terms. In

that honor is negotiated in real time, it is difficult if not impossible for Agamemnon to accept the deferral of compensation that Akhilleus proposes. What is truly remarkable, and requires divine intervention to achieve, is that *Akhilleus* defers revenge for the insult Agamemnon inflicts. This issue is exacerbated by a lack of institutional superstructures that could be used to manage their conflict. Moreover, although a symbolic economy, honor can be concretely embodied in physical objects: Briseis is, in effect, a pair of sneakers, and Akhilleus and Agamemnon are engaging in blood-sport over who gets to wear them. Hence the insistence on calling her a 'prize'. This again implies a rhetoric, if not the reality, of material scarcity. And it is a blood sport because to lose honor is not only to become vulnerable, it is an outcome even worse than death, since honor is the only thing worth living for. Above all, we are allowed to see what the stakes are for Agamemnon and Akhilleus. As Agamemnon sees it, his entire enterprise in being at Troy is at stake, while for Akhilleus, what's at stake is the meaning of his, or even human existence. If, following Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, we accept that the will to power defines us as human, then Homer is probing a truly central nerve. In other words, the epics allow us to see basic drives that exist within all of us, which Homeric society simply attempts to regulate rather than to disguise and suppress.

## **Part II An Excursus on the Anthropology of Homeric Society**

Now that we've established its relevance, we can add to our understanding with a more detailed anthropology of Homeric society, which is structured through 'agonistic exchange' or 'competitive reciprocity':<sup>3</sup> specifically, what I hope to add is that variations of the social dynamics we have observed can emerge under any egalitarian system,

although it may be disguised by cultural sanction. Marcel Mauss teaches us that all exchanges are prestations integral to the social construction of individuals.<sup>4</sup> Trade is thus domesticated warfare; in Freudian terms, capitalism is a sublimated version of the heroic code. Moreover, even ‘friendly exchange’ is disguised agonistic exchange. Egalitarian reciprocity thus creates hierarchy, through being outsmarted, simple errors of judgment, coercion and so forth. Georg Simmel calls attention to the tensions underlying all social exchange.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, economic exchange always involves sacrifice and resistance, and value derives from this. The social risks of exchange are therefore enormous, while the nature of exchange invites cunning and outright deception. A gift is thus an imposition of identity and even, or especially, unequal exchanges influence both parties.

Membership in Homer’s elite society is thus a result of ‘performance’, of performing elite identity and having that performance accepted by others. Status is the result of competitive exchange: one establishes one’s rank by competing until meeting one’s match. To refuse to compete is to lose. Goods are properly acquired by competitive reciprocities, including gift exchange, marriage, and violence. Athletic competition, viewed as domesticated combat, is another means. Theft and trickery are also legitimate: the thief has proved he is the better man, provided the theft remains unavenged. Both warlike and peaceful exchange are designed to transform equals into unequals. No status can be acquired by competing with someone beneath you. Conversely, aiming too high is a recipe for death, or worse, humiliation.

There is relentless pressure on the individual to measure his abilities, and those of possible opponents. Such competition requires witnesses, since its function is social. In that the status won is given by the very peers with which one competes, the opinions that

count are the ones most grudgingly bestowed. Risk is greatly exacerbated by the fact that honor is a public construct: failure is immediately known to the group.

The *Iliad* is 'about' rank, about who is truly 'the best of the Akhaians', and it exposes a problem at the heart of elite competition.<sup>6</sup> Agamemnon believes he is the best because he rules the most people. Akhilleus believes he is the best because he is the greatest fighter. Nestor reveals his status as the greatest counselor by *not* asserting that this makes him the best. Agamemnon then uses his standing within the political system to deprive Akhilleus of status won as a fighter. Akhilleus thus believes he is owed compensation that will acknowledge his true worth. Agamemnon believes he cannot jeopardize his social standing by giving Akhilleus what he wants.

### **Part III: The Psychology of the Homeric Warrior**

So much for the sociology and anthropology of Homeric society. Further light can be shed on the poem by looking at modern combat veterans suffering from post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and vice versa. A breakthrough in this regard came in 1994 with the publication of Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam*.<sup>7</sup> Jonathan is a doctor of clinical psychiatry, who has devoted much of his career to treating Vietnam vets suffering from the disorder. In the book, Shay argues that PTSD tends to arise from feelings of betrayal. This may result in shrinkage of the soldier's social and moral horizons until it only includes a close friend. If the friend is killed, the soldier feels guilt and often goes berserk. If matters go this far, the resulting psychological damage is real and sometimes permanent. Superior officers, referred to endearingly as REMFs, or Rear Echelon Mother Fuckers, are comparable to the Homeric gods, constantly interfering on the battlefield in

irritating and even deadly ways. Ways of preventing and mitigating PTSD include: honoring the enemy, properly grieving for the dead, and communalizing grief and trauma through narrative, such as the *Iliad*. In all these ways, Shay sees the ancient Greeks as dealing with PTSD more effectively than the post-Vietnam US. Part of this is due to what he finds to be the tendency of modern western religion to demonize one's opponent, and another to the unfortunate fact that war was a way of life in the Greek world, which thus had to have effective strategies for dealing with psychological trauma as a simple matter of survival. That his audience consisted almost exclusively of combat veterans also ensured that Homer's account was psychologically authentic. More recently, in *Odysseus in America*, Shay has argued that performance of the *Odyssey* served a socially reintegrative function for the combat veterans by communalizing their trauma. I find this attractive, but would stress that Odysseus 'returns' in so many senses that he can stand for a wide range of experiences.

Again, I hope that at this point you are way ahead of me: Agamemnon inflicts moral injury on Akhilleus by taking Briseis. He does so by breaking the social contract, as Akhilleus immediately protests, according to which soldiers follow leaders into war so that they can win status by risking their lives in combat. By reducing status, as measured by "prizes", to the whim of the leaders, Agamemnon has left Akhilleus with no reason to risk his life fighting. Whereas Vietnam soldiers "withdraw" psychologically, Akhilleus does so physically, but both do so because the REMFs have violated the soldiers' sense of "what is right". Any soldier, Shay claims, will respond with "violent rage and social withdrawal" under such circumstances. His rage and withdrawal leave Akhilleus especially vulnerable when his closest friend, Patroklos, is killed because Akhilleus sent

him into war but did not accompany him. Shay's response to scholarly puzzlement over the closeness of their bond is that we Classicists don't get out much—specifically we aren't vets. The result of that rage is a battle in which Akhilleus so dominates the fighting that not a single other Greek fighter is mentioned for two full books. He is, in short, berserk. Yet his ability to share his grief with Priam at the end of the poem restores Akhilleus to humanity.

Shay also identifies a Homeric type-scene known as the *aristeia* (or lone hero dominates the battlefield) as the formal, narrative structure for berserking. "Type Scenes" are repeated scenes, such as sacrifice, that tend to follow the same general structure. The *aristeia* is used to structure all the major battle sequences in the *Iliad*.<sup>8</sup> Its typical features include:

1. A god rouses the hero to battle
2. Brilliance of hero (arming scene)
3. Appeal to companions
4. Test of martial valour
5. Initial setback by opponents (wounding)
6. Prayer to the god
7. Epiphany and encouragement
8. Renewed vigor and fresh exploits
9. Double simile

To illustrate, I will not use Akhilleus' much more complex *aristeia*, but the *aristeia* of his virtual surrogate, Diomedes, in Book 5. His *aristeia* includes the following, in which only element 3 is missing. To paraphrase:

Element 1) Then in turn, Pallas Athene gave strength and courage to Tydeus' son, Diomedes, so that he would be conspicuous among the Argives and win noble fame (*kleos*).

2) She kindled weariless fire from his helmet and shield, like the star of autumn, which shines especially bright when it has bathed in Okeanos.

4) Phegeus and Idaios separate themselves from the ranks and face Diomedes. Diomedes kills Phegeus. Other Greeks kill their opponents. "But as for Tydeus' son, you would not know which side he was on, whether he consorted with Trojans or Akhaians" (85-6).

5) [Pandaros] stretched his curved bow against Tydeus' son, and struck him on the right shoulder.

6) Then indeed Diomedes, good at the war-cry prayed, "Hear me, child of aegis-bearing Zeus . . . be kind to me Athene and grant that I kill this man and that he come within range of my spear, the one who struck me first and then boasted over me. . . ."

7&8) [Athene] stood near and addressed him: “Be of good courage, I have put paternal might in you chest. . . . Moreover, I have taken the mist from your eyes, which was formerly upon them, so that you may well recognize both god and man”. “Straightway Tydeus’ son went and mingled with the foremost fighters, and though eager before at heart to fight the Trojans, then three times the rage got hold of him”.

8) Diomedes kills many Trojans, including Pandaros, and wounds Aineias.

Element 8 is set up to look like the climax. When Aineias sees Diomedes mowing down the Trojans, he appeals to Pandaros for help. Diomedes’ charioteer, Sthenelos, sees them advancing, and declares: “Come let us fall back in our chariot, do not rage like this among the front ranks, for fear you lose your sweet life!” This is meant to be humorous, as it is tantamount to saying: “please don’t fight, it’s dangerous!” Diomedes replies in anger that of course he will fight and if he manages to kill them, then Sthenelos is to drive off Aineias’ horses as a war prize. In the event, Diomedes kills Pandaros, and goes on to wound Aineias, whose fall Homer describes with a formula that normally indicates the warrior dies.<sup>9</sup> Aphrodite then tries to whisk Aineias off the battlefield in a comic reprise of the rape of Helen, whereupon Diomedes wounds her. When she then ascends to heaven in distress the audience is prepared to believe the *aristeia* is over: he has, after all just wounded an Olympian god! But the poet then returns us to the scene of battle to find Diomedes still attempting to kill Aineias, even though Apollo is now protecting him. “Back off!” the god commands, and Diomedes does so, “a little bit”, the poet adds slyly. Now surely, we think, the *aristeia* is over, the god himself has marked the limits, one

might even say of human striving. But no, when Ares enters the battle, Diomedes stands down as Athene had earlier instructed. Then Athene returns, and takes the reins as Diomedes' charioteer and the two of them wound Ares. After two false closures, each serving to heighten the drama of the actual climax, we get that climax. There follows element 9, providing closure to Diomedes' *aristeia*: a double simile in which Ares' cry when Diomedes wounds him is likened to that of ten thousand warriors in battle, followed by likening his heavenly ascent to a storm cloud.

From a psychological perspective, Diomedes suffers a triggering event when Pandaros shoots him with an arrow: note that the *Iliad* treats archery as a sneaky and even cowardly mode of fighting, precisely because one can do so from a safe distance while catching one's opponent unawares. Note also that Diomedes expresses outrage at both the attack and the presumptuous boast that follows, when Pandaros claims Diomedes will soon die from his wound. Among modern vets such events often involve feelings of betrayal: their leaders issue stupid orders, their equipment malfunctions, and the like. Frequently, during the height of their battle rage, soldiers suffering acute PTSD say that they felt invulnerable, superhuman even. This has a direct analogy in Athene's appearance and its effect on Diomedes; but note that he already seems out of control during his initial exploits, when the poet declares that you would not have recognized whose side he was on. Nevertheless, the poet clearly marks Diomedes' acquisition of new powers: the mist is lifted from his eyes, his battle rage increases, and he gets a special weapon, consisting of Athene as his charioteer. It is also important to note in this context that Homer seems to see this as a *good* thing, or at least an *awesome* thing.

I conclude by asking you to consider Homer's technical achievement, and Shay's strategic victory. First the technical achievement, which I would again argue already makes Homer relevant to any modern reader who appreciates such things: simply put, battles on the scale of those in Homer are massive, random, chaotic and all but impossible to describe without likewise being massive, random, chaotic and as a result *boring*. Very few stories of actual warfare are any good as a result, yet war narratives remain hugely attractive, in part because the existential tragedy of man, and the drama and psychology that accompany it, are both constant and on a scale that can be made to feel truly superhuman. Homer's solution to the problem, his way to impose order on the chaos, was precisely the *aristeia*, which also makes an ideological statement, namely that individuals matter. What had largely eluded scholarship until Shay came along, was that the *aristeia* is also a psychological transcript, the narrative of traumatic stress and the psychological disorder that issues from it. When Shay first started treating Vietnam vets, in addition to their physical and psychological injuries, they had suffered from years of neglect and indifference. This was in part a tragic consequence of America's conflicted views on the war itself. And that leads to another point to which Shay calls attention: whether you or I support a given war, we are morally obligated to support the ticker tape parades when the soldiers return. It is enormously important, for their well-being and the well-being of all of society, to help them feel they have truly returned and to give them the instruments to communalize their grief and trauma. In short, what Shay accomplished, was to tap into the enormous cultural prestige of Homeric epic to show that the suffering of our veterans is a universal human experience. By relocating

Achilles to Vietnam, Shay helped our own vets tell their stories, and allow their voices to be heard. It doesn't get more relevant than that.

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Shay, J. 1994. *Achilles in Vietnam*. New York: Atheneum.

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### **For the *aristeia* (in addition to Cook, above):**

Marion Müller, M. 1966. *Athene als göttliche Helferin in der Odyssee*. Heidelberg: Winter.

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<sup>1</sup> For convenience, and as an encouragement to read the article, which is brief, all references to Anderson are to his 1994 article. For a more in-depth analysis, see his book, 1999, and the earlier study by Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991.

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<sup>2</sup> As Ta-Nehisi Coates writes: “Respect and reputation are everything there. These values are often denigrated by people who have never been punched in the face. But when you live around violence there is no opting out. A reputation for meeting violence with violence is a shield.”

<sup>3</sup> For detailed analysis of the anthropology of Homeric reciprocity, see my “Introduction” to McCrorie’s translation; see also Beidelman 1989, whose triangulation of Homer with Mauss and Simmel I here reproduce.

<sup>4</sup> Mauss 1967.

<sup>5</sup> Simmel 1978.

<sup>6</sup> For further on the problematic, see my “Introduction” to McCrorie’s translation and the authors cited there.

<sup>7</sup> Shay 1994, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> For the *aristeia* pattern, see Müller 1966; and for the *aristeia* of Diomedes, see id., 60-4, and my “Introduction” to McCrorie’s translation.

<sup>9</sup> On Homer’s “abuse” of formulas for “he died” see my “Introduction” to McCrorie’s translation.