

3

ACHILLES AND THE HEROIC IDEAL

[Achilles] who stands as a great bulwark of battle over the
Achaians.

(Homer, *Iliad* 1.283–4)

In Homer's *Iliad*, Achilles, "the best of the Achaeans," (1.244) dominates as both the model heroic warrior and then, in the words of one scholar, "the be[a]st of the Achaians."¹ This paradox is not simply poetic exaggeration but in fact reality for many who have experienced battle, who enter combat with ideas of martial virtue but then find themselves committing frightful acts of killing and worse. The model of Achilles, like so much more in Homer, provided the Greeks with an exemplary form of conduct that constantly reappears in later poetry and in the commemorative monuments erected in the Greek city-states. This idea of heroic virtue, however, is by no means limited to ancient times. The idealized nature of heroic conduct continues into the present, in the form of the expected *Courage Under Fire*, as the recent Hollywood film puts it, and the corresponding shame of not meeting this standard—of playing the part of the coward.

Closely related to this heroic image is the idea of manliness, a word and concept that today in the early twenty-first century seems, as Harvard scholar Harvey Mansfield has written, "quaint and obsolete."² Yet from Homer on, Greek authors tie manliness to war, the latter being the calling and domain of men. Mansfield rightly comments on the passing of manliness as an attribute in today's politically correct society. Yet elsewhere in the world today the idea survives as among the Greeks. Among the Dinka of Sudan, for example, *muoc*, or manliness, derives directly from *moc*, man, who alone may be regarded as *keec*, or courageous—an attribute achieved only in war.³ Manliness and the heroic virtues appear to possess a universal calling, and, despite the

1 King 1987:13–28, at 13.

2 H.Mansfield, "The Partial Eclipse of Manliness," *Times Literary Supplement*, July 17 1998, pp. 14–16.

3 I learned of this in discussions with my Sudanese colleague Jok M.Jok, who told me that this attitude became an issue for women who supported the independence movement in

millennial breach separating us from antiquity, the expectations of the warrior seem little different today than they were for the Homeric heroes or the Greeks of the classical era.

Greek heroes

I [Eteocles] will take six men, myself to make a seventh...
opponents of the enemy in gallant style.

(Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes* 283–5)

The *Iliad* is Achilles' story, as the poet makes clear at the beginning of the poem: "Sing, Goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilles and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the Achaians, herded in their multitudes to the house of Hades" (*Iliad* 1.1–3). In the years that the Greeks had besieged Troy and fought the Trojans and their allies, Achilles had distinguished himself as the bravest of the Greeks, the man on whom the Greeks came to rely for victory. In countless fights and raids Achilles had displayed great courage and skill, but also honor in treating his enemies generously. This can be seen in a statement of Andromache, Hector's wife (*Iliad* 6.414–19), where she relates the death in battle of her father, killed by Achilles, who treated his corpse with dignity—an ironic anticipation perhaps of the death and mutilation of her husband. But things begin to go badly for Achilles as the ignoble Agamemnon takes Achilles' woman Briseis to compensate for his own loss of the captive Chryseis, whom he had been obliged to return to her father. It is this insult that leads Achilles to withdraw from battle, with terrible results: for the Greeks, who suffer horrific casualties at the hands of the emboldened Trojans; for Achilles himself, whose best friend Patroclus is killed by Hector, leaving him to live with the consequences of his survival. Achilles then becomes the heroic model of a survivor trying to make sense of his loss.

In this dramatic and tragic scene there are several situations which may be noted. In the confrontation between Achilles and Agamemnon over the women captives, Achilles delivers a stinging taunt to Agamemnon, "You wine sack, with a dog's eyes and with a deer's heart. Never once have you taken courage in your heart to arm with your people for battle, or go into ambuscades with the best of the Achaians" (*Iliad* 1.225–7). Achilles may be, and probably is, exaggerating Agamemnon's cowardice or skulking, as in the *Iliad* Agamemnon is credited for killing more than a dozen Trojans. Perhaps what Achilles has in mind is that Agamemnon has not killed as many men as he, taken as many towns, or distinguished himself in so many fights.

Sudan and were unable to win equality with the men because only the latter could be manly.

What we have here is actually a “pissing contest,” the sort of things that soldiers have always, as we can see here, indulged in, attempting to show that the other is less a man, less courageous, or serving in a less dangerous place than him. Paul Fussell mentions such competition while a graduate student at Harvard after World War II, and Sophocles in his play *Ajax* does so too.⁴ Here Menelaus taunts Teucer, brother of the dead Ajax, for his less than manly skills as an archer (Sophocles, *Ajax* 1120–24), and I must admit to doing something similar myself. One day while in from the field, resting but mostly drinking, I began taunting several Signal Corps enlisted men, calling them REMFs (“Rear Echelon Mother Fucker”) and candy-asses. With their soft jobs listening to radios all day, they were hardly “real” men going out looking for the enemy, getting shot at and worse. These young guys were about ready to shut me up—actually they were going to beat me up and in my condition I could probably have mustered only feeble resistance—when a sergeant said something like, “Sir, that’s enough—you should leave these boys alone.” A few days later, after I had sobered up, the men told me that they were about to beat me up when they realized their intended victim was an officer.

It seems that Achilles, angered as well as inspired by drink, has also attempted to paint a picture of Agamemnon as a REMF so as to make himself appear the greater, the more important, so as to justify keeping his captive woman and his honor intact. But if Agamemnon’s later actions and victories are any guide to his skill as a warrior, then Achilles is not exactly honest in his description of Agamemnon’s martial valor.

Achilles’ taunt, his reputation as the “best of the Achaeans,” undoubtedly shows that he enjoyed the reputation as the most valiant warrior, one who was unafraid of standing up to anyone, friend or foe, who crossed him. Still there emerges also a picture of a valiant warrior, one who does not strike down the helpless or, in doing so, dishonors himself. The death of Patroclus changed all this. Patroclus, Achilles’ alter-ego and boyhood companion, cannot abide the destruction of the Greeks as his friend sulks. He borrows Achilles’ armor so as to impersonate Achilles and bring heart and hope to the faltering Greeks. Initially he is successful, but then, as fortune and the poet dictate, he encounters Hector, the great Trojan, who mortally wounds him. With his dying breath, Patroclus tells Hector that Achilles will avenge him and bring destruction to him and the house of Priam (*Iliad* 16).

Patroclus’ death brings Achilles back to the fight, but he is a changed man. He is—perhaps strangely to the uninitiated—energized by his friend’s death and exacts a fearful toll upon the Trojans. So driven is Achilles to avenge Patroclus that he remarks that,

4 See Fussell 1996:190, and Shay 1994:205–6, who tries to discourage this attitude, noting that “no persons suffering is commensurable with any other.”

neither food nor drink shall go down my very throat, since my companion perished and lies inside my shelter...Food and drink mean nothing to my heart but blood does, and slaughter, and the groaning of men in hard work.⁵

Achilles' reaction to Patroclus' death and his manner in battle has been described by Shay as "going berserk," but it is a reaction to the stress of battle that knows no time or place.⁶ This Achillean terror finally culminates in the climatic battle of the *Iliad*, that between Achilles and Hector, the latter of whom must die and suffer ugly mutilation before all.

Achilles exacts a terrible vengeance upon the body of Hector, and other Achaean warriors join in mutilating the dead Hector before Achilles drags him around Troy (*Iliad* 22.369–404). The gods, however, are bothered by this and Apollo acts to protect Hector's body from actual outrage (*Iliad* 24.18–25). Slowly Achilles' great rage ebbs, though before it is gone completely he performs human sacrifice over his dead friend's tomb.⁷ In the end he makes a peace of sorts with Priam, Hector's father, and returns Hector's corpse to his family so that they might honor him too.

Achilles' name and glory would inspire generations of youths to come, as well as poets and writers who sometimes shaped him anew, reconfiguring him to fit a new need.⁸ These new Achillean images ranged from the creations of Livius Andronicus in the third-century BC Roman world to such medieval writers as Benoit de Sainte-Maure, whose story (c. twelfth century) would be translated into Italian and German.⁹ After Homer, however, new generations of Greek writers wrote of valor and death, and while they echoed the heroic ideal, they did not always see death in battle as a great thing.

Among these poets were Tyrtaeus and Archilochus, who composed so-called "lyric poems." The term "lyric" suggests lyre, and some of this genre of poetry was sung or spoken to such musical accompaniment. Other instruments, however, were used (such as the *aulos*, an oboe-like instrument), and the poetry itself came in various forms: "melic," meaning "for song," elegy from the elegaic couplet, and iambic, from the iambic meter, a monologue or song, often bawdy or rude.¹⁰ What is most interesting about this poetry, and what sets it apart from the epic poetry that preceded it, is its everyday quality. It refers to contemporary life and issues and not the remote past of

5 Homer, *Iliad* 19.209–14.

6 Shay 1994:77–94.

7 Homer, *Iliad* 24.23.175. For a discussion of this human sacrifice see Richardson 1993:188, who notes that the practice probably existed within the poet's own time.

8 For discussion see King 1987:110–217.

9 Ibid.: 110, 229–30.

10 West 1993: vii–x, who provides a much fuller discussion that is only summarized here. West also provides translations of the lyric poets with explanatory notes. See also Mulroy 1992, who provides another translation with explanatory notes.

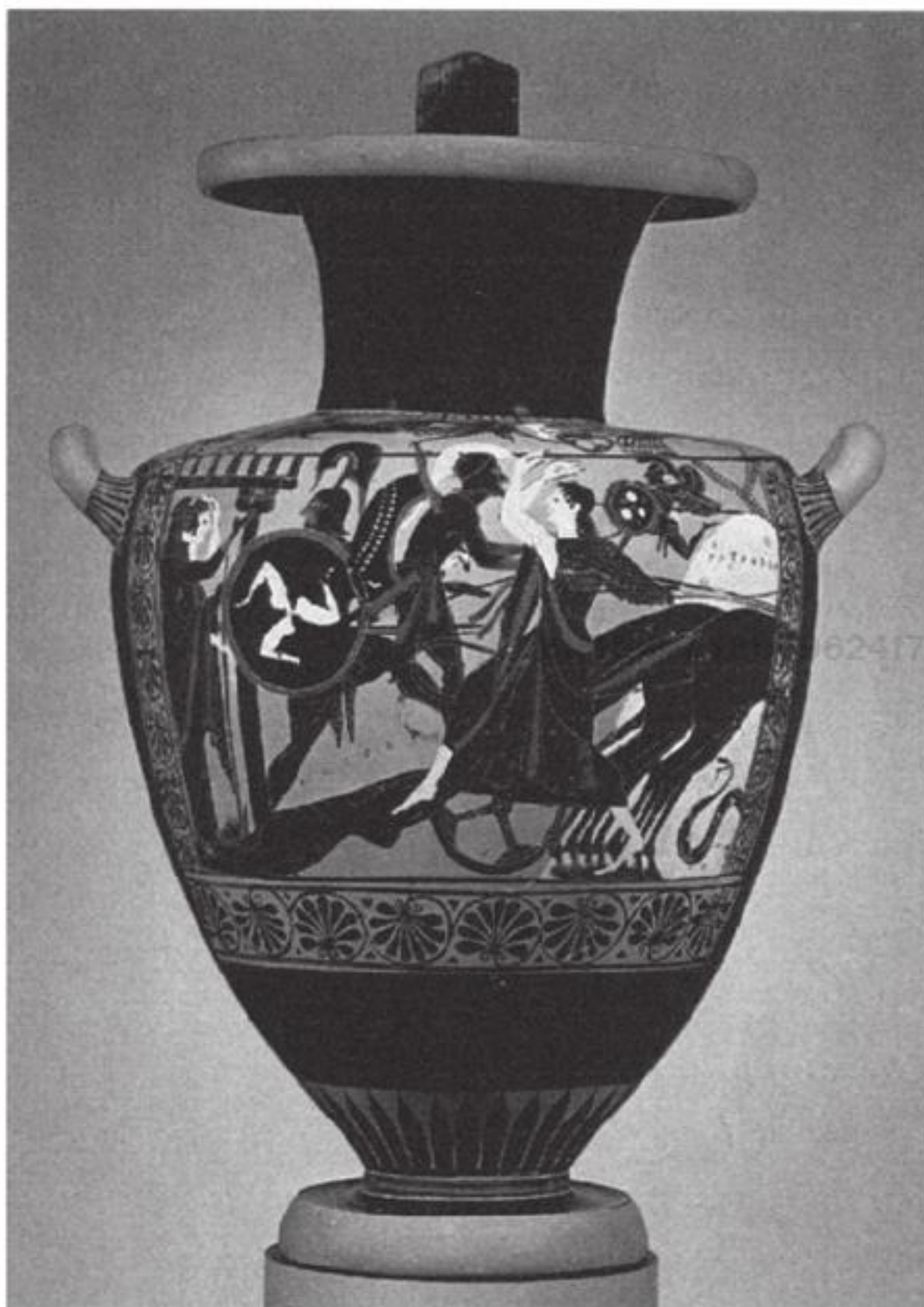


Plate 3 The Wrath of Achilles: having killed Hector, Achilles now drags his body around Troy, mutilating and dishonoring his enemy. Ceramic, black-figure vase painting on a *hydria* (water jar), attributed to the Antiope Group (Athens, Greece; c. 520–510 BC; H. 0.566m; D. 0.33m).

Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, William Francis Warden Fund.

larger than life heroes. This is personal poetry that is full of remarks about the hopes and fears of real people and how they dealt with these and responded to them. It is also full of value to the present-day ancient historian or classicist. From the poetry of Solon and Theognis, for example, the social and political affairs of Athens and Megara in the seventh century BC come to life. The crises that these two communities faced, the different routes they took to resolve them, leading to very different ends, are vividly, even passionately described.¹¹ The songs and poems of Tyrtaeus and Archilochus reveal not

only the romances and hardships in the archaic world of the Greeks, but also its heroism.

The poetry of Tyrtaeus is that of desperation amid hardship. Tyrtaeus lived c. 650 BC in Sparta at a time before the feared Spartan military society had emerged. In fact, it was the desperate times of which Tyrtaeus is a witness that would produce the Spartan military machine so well known in the classical era. The cause of this crisis was the conflict between the Spartans and their Messenian neighbors to the west, whom the Spartans had resolved to conquer so as to acquire new lands for a growing population. The Messenians naturally resisted and the result was a conflict that stretched over several generations and is now known to historians as the “Messenian Wars.”¹² In the end Sparta prevailed and the Messenians—those who did not flee—were conquered and reduced to helot status.¹³ But the conquest of Messenia was neither easy nor quick. The Messenians fought bitterly, and several times the Spartans were repulsed with heavy losses, and the whole community was disheartened and ready to quit. It was at this moment that Tyrtaeus wrote his stirring poetry. Two themes emerge from his writings: the first that it is virtuous to die for your country; the second that the consequences of not doing so lead to hardship and shame.

For it is fine to die in the front line,
a brave man fighting for his fatherland,
and the most painful fate's to leave one's town
and fertile farmlands for a beggar's life,
roaming with mother dear and aged father,
with little children and with wedded wife.¹⁴

But Tyrtaeus may have been even more concerned to show that the good man is also the brave fighter who does not leave his place in the ranks, who does not abandon the old veterans. The brave fighter is the man who will choose death before dishonor.

So let us fight with spirit for our land,
die for our sons, and spare our lives no more.

11 Both Athens and Megara suffered from social-economic ills resulting from the rise of trade and commerce that disrupted the traditional landowning elites. Solon was able to head off unrest and implement compromising policies that, while not agreeable to all, appealed to most. In Megara there was no Solon and the result was political polarization, strife, and political and economic decay—to Athens' benefit. There is no better way to understand Solon's greatness than through comparison with Megara's unresolved conflicts.

12 For discussion see e.g. Jeffery 1976:114–18 and Osborne 1996:177–9.

13 As noted above, the Spartans later recruited soldiers from the helots as their own manpower began to decline. But these “new men” never became full-fledged Spartans.

14 Tyrtaeus 10.1–6 (trans. M. West).

You young men, keep together, hold the line,
do not start panic or disgraceful rout.
Keep grand and valiant spirits in your hearts,
be not in love with life—the fight's with men!
Do not desert your elders, men with legs
no longer nimble, by recourse to flight.¹⁵

The poetry of Tyrtaeus is full of interest as it provides a truer and more realistic picture of hoplite battle than that found in Homer. The *Iliad*, it is true, provides numerous descriptions of combat and death, but these scenes are so grandiose and heroic that they lack a semblance of reality. Tyrtaeus' poetry, on the other hand, allows the reader to sense the fright of what it was like to stand in the battle line and struggle with yourself as to whether to stand and fight or to run. Tyrtaeus' poetry is much more authentic, too, in terms of what really happened amid the terror of battle; witness the old veteran warrior,

with head already white, and grizzled beard,
gasping his valiant breath out in the dust
and clutching at his bloodied genitals,
his nakedness exposed: a shameful sight
and scandalous.¹⁶

Abandoned by the younger men to face the enemy alone, the old warrior has been killed, as he lies on his back “clutching at [perhaps more accurately “holding”] his bloodied genitals.” His posture tells us that he is dead, as a wounded foot soldier will instinctively hug the earth to protect himself from further wounds. That he is holding his genitals reveals that an enemy has added a macabre humiliation, a grotesque joke, to the mutilation of the corpse. In this way Tyrtaeus' poetry depicts the nature of Greek warfare more realistically than anything before.

Tyrtaeus' gritty realism and his call to honor and service surely explain his poetry's survival into the modern era. His value as a guide to noble conduct in war can also be seen in the evaluations of later Greeks. The Spartan king Leonidas, who held the pass at Thermopylae against the Persians in 480 BC—and in doing so died fighting—was once asked his opinion of Tyrtaeus: “A good poet for sharpening the courage of the young” (Plutarch, *On the Cleverness of Animals* 1.1). The imagery of the battlefield is unmistakable and reflects the Spartan ideal clearly. It might be concluded that the values and standard of conduct Tyrtaeus sets forth would speak only to the Spartans. This idea would be mistaken. In the later fourth century BC, the only Greek city-state that could pose a challenge to Philip of Macedon was Athens. At the decisive battle

15 Tyrtaeus 10.13–18 (trans. M. West).

16 Tyrtaeus 10.21–25 (trans. M. West).

of Chaeronea (in 338/7 BC), however, the Athenians suffered a bitter defeat in a hard-fought engagement. In the years after, an Athenian statesman named Lycurgus (though possessing a Spartan sounding name, he was of an ancient Athenian family) would rebuild the economic and moral structures of Athens. In 331 BC he prosecuted for treason a fellow citizen named Leocrates, who had fled Athens in a panic after the Macedonian victory at Chaeronea; some five years later, Leocrates returned, thinking he could resume life as before. Lycurgus thought differently and hauled him into court with deadly seriousness, intent on finding him guilty and securing a capital conviction.¹⁷ In his prosecution speech, Lycurgus cited Tyrtaeus as a poet who taught courage and devotion to the *patria*. Lycurgus' familiarity with Tyrtaeus' poetry, and his endorsement of it for his own program of civic pride and recovery, points once more to the impact of the Spartan poet. Hundreds of years after his death, Greeks outside of Sparta found him a witness to the virtue of patriotism, the virtue of dying for one's country. Tyrtaeus' legacy, combined with Homer's, would remain powerful into the early twentieth century, as evident in the title of Wilfred Owen's great poem "Dulce et Decorum Est," though Owen's take on the theme was rather different.

Similar in vein to Tyrtaeus but yet with a sense of irony and even humor is Archilochus, whose name means literally "Company Commander," who fought and wrote about the same time as Tyrtaeus. Archilochus lived the life of Achilles, fighting during the era of Greek expansionism associated with the foundation of new city-states in the Aegean and elsewhere (a parallel to the Spartans into Messenia), and he may have been an exile, though little about his life is certain. In the fragments of his poems, he shows a flair for humor, as in these lines about his shield: "Some barbarian is waving my shield, since I was obliged to leave it behind under a bush. But I got away, so what does it matter? Let the shield go; I can buy another just as good" (Lattimore 1949:2 [Epigram 3]). In short, Archilochus shows that fighting to the death does not always make good sense and that preferring discretion to valor may also be heroic. Elsewhere, however, Archilochus reveals the hard life of the soldier, and above all the grim reality of war:

Shield against shield,
keep the shield wall tight.
And the gift of death
they bring, let no man take.
In the hospitality of war
we left them their dead
as a gift to remember us by.¹⁸

17 See discussion in Tritle 1999:1227–33

18 Davenport 1964:8, 64 (Archilochus, Fragments 16, 184).

In one of the longer poems that has survived, however, we find a commonplace oft-repeated among soldiers, “don’t cry, get even,” when remembering or talking about friends who were killed in battle. In the following poem, Archilochus is telling a friend, surely a fellow warrior and survivor, exactly this:

Blaming the bitterness of this sorrow, Perikles, no man in all our city can take pleasure in festivities:

such were the men, the surf of the roaring sea washed under, all of us go with hearts aching against our ribs

for misery. Yet against such grief that is past recovery the gods, dear friend, have given us strong endurance

to be our medicine. Such sorrows are variable. They beat now against ourselves, and we take the hurt of the bleeding sore.

Tomorrow it will be others who grieve, not we. From now on act like a man, and put away these feminine tears.¹⁹

This poem is important because it reflects the aftermath of a fight and the grieving over friends lost. Archilochus, however, responds that today it is our turn to mourn but tomorrow it will be the other side that cries. But most important is the final line, “act like a man, and put away the feminine tears.” This sentiment is discussed by Shay in his *Achilles in Vietnam*, where he argues that such conduct interrupts the grieving process and makes it difficult for the traumatized warrior or veteran, for example, to find a sort of closure with the death of close friends.²⁰ Archilochus’ statement shows that this reaction, so well known to twentieth-century veterans, is not unique but was also known among veterans/warriors in the ancient world. In Vietnam the term for this was “payback” and it was what motivated many soldiers in seeking vengeance for friends lost. Jonathan Shay refers to one of his veterans who “really loved fucking killing, couldn’t get enough. For every one that I killed I felt better. Made some of the hurt went away” [in compensation for friends killed].²¹ What this conduct does is to make it more difficult for the veteran to recover from his trauma as he enters a repeating cycle of violence and death.

The study of the poetry of Tyrtaeus and Archilochus, two warrior-poets who experienced battle and wrote of it, reveals differences and similarities with the Homeric poems. In terms of the differences, Tyrtaeus and Archilochus provide a much truer picture of the hoplite fighting that was so typical of the Greeks in the archaic and classical eras. In Tyrtaeus especially we see the emergence of the idea that it is virtuous, even right, to die for one’s *patria*—

19 Lattimore 1949:2–3 (Archilochus, Poem 8).

20 Shay 1994:81–2.

21 Ibid.: 78.

a powerful idea into the twentieth century, though we might wonder if Archilochus shared this view. There are, however, similarities with these poets, too; chief among these is the virtue of the heroic warrior who takes revenge for the deaths of his friends, for example Achilles for Patroclus, or Archilochus telling Pericles to hold back his tears and get back at the other side. There is also the concept that the good man is the brave man and vice versa. These ideas and others that relate to the study of violence, culture and survival can also be found among the later poets and warriors of the classical age of Greece.

The surviving body of Greek tragedy (written in a poetic idiom, it must be remembered) provides rich resource material with which to investigate the impact of violence on culture. It might appear initially that to make such use of Attic drama is to distort its origins and obscure its place in Athenian society. Yet, as noted above, Aeschylus was prouder of his martial exploits than he was of his dramatic achievements. Next to him stand Sophocles and Euripides. While they did not share the experience of Aeschylus' generation of "Marathon-fighters," they too would have served the community in some sort of military capacity (and in fact Sophocles held the office of *strategos*, or general).²² Like Aeschylus, then, they can be expected from time to time to reflect on this experience in their dramas, especially as both lived through the Peloponnesian War, which surely gave them much to ponder.²³ Interpretations of Attic drama, then, should not be regarded as final or fixed; nor is there a single simple message to a particular drama. As Simon Goldhill has argued, it is as in the case of Pentheus' body:

dismembered by the Dionysiac chorus, [it] can only be collected in fragments, but never reconstituted to wholeness, so each person's attempt to comprehend the corpus of tragic texts—through the violence of reading, the selectivity of analysis—can never hope to

- 22 For Sophocles' generalship see Develin 1989:89–90. Such service does not necessarily mean that he was also a great commander, only that he possessed sufficient public support to win election to the post. A number of Athenian generals were not particularly "gifted" field commanders but rather prominent citizens seeking to show off. See Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.4.1, which records a conversation between Socrates and an unsuccessful candidate for the office of general, Nicomachides, who lost to an inexperienced "political" person, Antisthenes. See Develin 1989:226, 291.
- 23 Winkler 1985:37 argues that "Greek tragedies frequently examine moral issues that become acute under the pressure of warfare." Shay 1995 takes this a step further, arguing that drama was created so as to return combat soldiers to the culture and society of the democratic state. While Shay's position may seem extreme, the combat service of tragedians such as Aeschylus and Sophocles, suggests that this interpretation should be given serious attention. Griffin 1998:43–4 is skeptical of this view and seems not to place too much value in the battlefield survival of, for example, Aeschylus and Sophocles.

attain the synthesis which can totally efface the signs of *sparagmos* [i.e. dismemberment], the *sparagmos* of signs.²⁴

The drama of Aeschylus, it has been suggested above, is that of a revolutionary and innovative poet, one whose experiences in the Persian Wars empowered his art. His plays, as his epitaph suggests, will reflect those formative experiences of youth, and this is certainly the case with his earliest two surviving plays, *The Persians* (472 BC) and *Seven Against Thebes* (465 BC). As with any number of writers whose first works are shaped by their wartime experiences, maturer productions examine other aspects of life and the human experience. In the case of Aeschylus, the “war plays” of *The Persians* and *Seven Against Thebes* will give way to the trilogy of the *Oresteia* and its more complex themes of justice (and the language of justice) and friendship.²⁵ *The Persians* will be examined in greater detail below, but similar strains of the survivor’s mentality and the realism of war can be seen in the less well-known drama, *Seven Against Thebes*.

Seven Against Thebes is a drama rich in the imagery of war and the consequences of violence. The play’s plot centers on the curse of Oedipus on his two sons/brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, and how these two bring that curse to life through their own choices.²⁶ But what stands out in reading this play is, as noted above, the images of war and violence that Aeschylus creates. There are two principal themes. The first is that of the warrior: his equipment and plumage, his fierce reputation and his courage. Related to this idea is the antithesis—cowardice—that Aeschylus notes. These rich descriptions provide the context for the second theme: the civic consequences of failure in war as seen in the destruction of a town, the death, rape, and brutal enslavement of its inhabitants.

The descriptions Aeschylus provides of the seven challengers and their Theban counterparts are alive with images of fierce warriors. Those of the challenger Eteocles and the Theban Megareus are typical: Eteocles carries a shield emblazoned with a man in armor mounting a ladder and inscribed with the words “Ares himself shall not cast me from the town” (*Seven Against Thebes* 465–9). Against him stands Megareus, whose own shield shows him capturing enemies as well as their city (477–8). These descriptions reflect Aeschylus’ own heroic past and suggest a certain affection for or affinity with his experiences as a warrior. Later Euripides caricatured these descriptions in his *Phoenician Women*, where Eteocles simply selects captains for each gate, without taking time to name them. Peter Burian may be right that Euripides is taking a “cheap shot” at Aeschylus, but the reason for doing so needs clarification.²⁷ It may be that Euripides, lacking Aeschylus’ military

24 Goldhill 1986:285–6. See also Goldhill 1997:345–6.

25 For discussion of the *Oresteia* see Goldhill 1986:1–56, 83–4.

26 Argued by Burian 1997:188.

27 Burian 1997:195.

experiences and unable to appreciate them, simply failed to understand the heroic overtones of Aeschylus' rich martial descriptions. It even seems possible that Euripides might have perceived Aeschylus as a sort of "war lover," and was criticizing his descriptions of men and their arms.²⁸

Mixed in with these descriptions of warriors and arms are those of cowardice and bravery. In these passages Aeschylus makes plain his views: that bravery is a virtue, cowardice a despicable and unmanly act. These values are conveyed to the audience in various ways. Eteocles, early in the play, rebukes the Thebans for their timidity on hearing of the approach of the Argive host of his brother (*Seven Against Thebes* 181–202). Two warriors, the Argive Tydeus and the Theban Amphiaraus, announce other heroic sentiments: Tydeus rebukes a seer for revealing a cowardly will in the face of battle, thus implying that one should not be afraid, or at least not let it show (383–4). Amphiaraus carries a shield that is blank—no device, no motto. The idea Aeschylus expresses here is that, rather than "seeming to be best" (i.e. by carrying some boastful remark or device), Amphiaraus is best by being so (591–3). Finally, in death Eteocles represents the noble warrior dying for his community, the same sort of sentiment revealed earlier in the poetry of Tyrtaeus and so many others (1008–11).

Eteocles' heroic death saved his city from destruction. This is a motif that Aeschylus conveys repeatedly to his reader today, as he did to his audience on staging the drama. This is evident, for example, in the several passages that refer to a city being overrun by the enemy and then being put to the torch (*Seven Against Thebes* 219–22, 432–6). Elsewhere he is much more explicit, revealing clearly the fate of a town that falls to the enemy:

unlucky indeed the fate of a city captured—murder, fire, and rapine,
all the city polluted by smoke, and the breath of Ares on it maddened,
desecrating piety, slaying the people.²⁹

In another place Aeschylus notes the fate of the women who survive such an assault, "the girls, new servants, new to misery, must endure a war captive's bed, bed of a man successful. Theirs the expectation of night's consummation but for a triumphant enemy to help their tearful sorrow" (362–7). For Aeschylus, a survivor of war and violence, the past was ever present and was so conveyed in his writing, as shown so clearly and graphically in *Seven Against Thebes*.

Aeschylus' heroic themes find echoes elsewhere in fifth-century BC Greek literature and culture. Herodotus, for instance, is full of such heroisms, particularly in his accounts of the Persian Wars. These include the three

28 Suggested by Burian 1997:195–6.

29 Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes* 339–41.

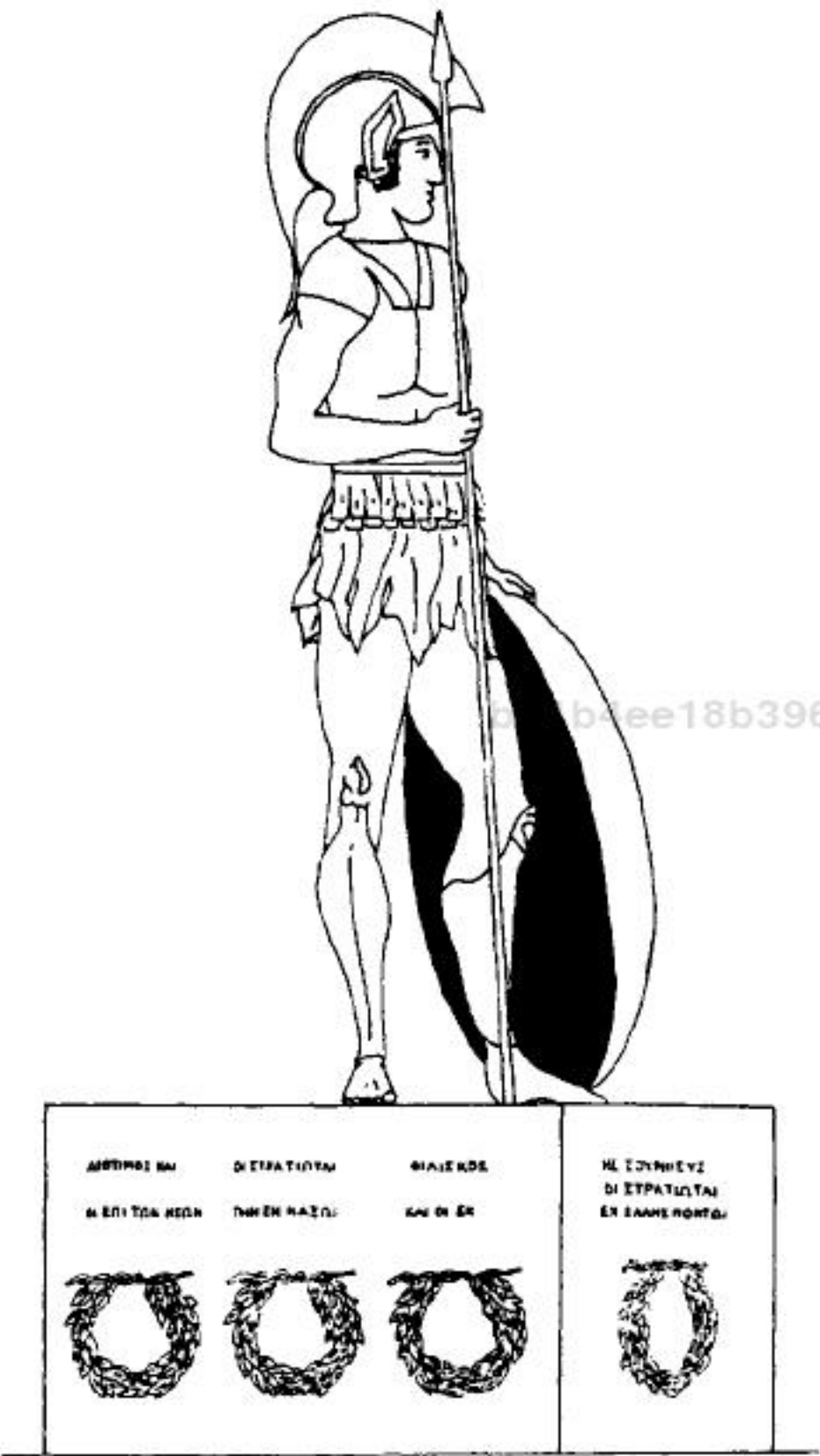


Plate 4 The Monument of Chabrias in the Athenian agora (mid-fourth century BC), erected in honor of the many victories of the general Chabrias. The figure’s pose commemorates a challenge to the Spartans to attack his forces *uphill*. They declined.

Sketch courtesy of Professor John Buckler.

Spartans, Posidonius, Philocyon, and Amompharetus, who won great personal distinctions at Plataea in 479 BC, as did the Plataean Callicrates. Mortally wounded before the battle began, Callicrates remarked to a friend before dying, “It is no sorrow to me to die for my country; what grieves me is, that I have not used my arm or done anything worthy of myself, such as I longed to do” (Herodotus 9.72.2). This sentiment evokes the passion for heroic action and death that can be found in Homer, Tyrtaeus, and Archilochus, and shows that these poets’ ideals reflected reality.

It is in the account of the struggle at Thermopylae, however, that Herodotus paints a portrait of heroism that lingers into the present. The noble Leonidas, who stayed on in Thermopylae to cover the retreat of the rest of the Greek army after the Persians had found a way round behind him (7. 219–20), is memorialized today at the site with a heroic-size statue. No less valiant were the Thespians who refused to leave the Spartans and died, seven hundred strong, with their Spartan allies (7. 222); and finally the Spartan Dieneces, who gained immortality for his wit and courage. When told that the Persian arrows would block the sun, he replied, “Excellent, we shall have our battle in the shade” (7. 226.1). These remarks could be multiplied easily and have their counterparts in the commemorative monuments that were erected in Athens as well as other Greek cities, and which will be discussed in Chapter 6. Taken together they show that the sentiments of the poets were indeed realized in the attitudes and beliefs of the Greeks of the classical period.

American heroes

Let it be known that a new generation of Americans has come forth, willing to pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, to assure the survival and success of liberty.

(John F. Kennedy, 1961)

John Kennedy’s inaugural speech was a stirring oration, and in the months that followed, many young Americans answered his call to serve the nation.³⁰ Many joined the newly organized Peace Corps, worked in the civil rights movement in the South, and with the Berlin and Cuban crises, flocked to the armed forces. Kennedy’s heroic call to service, to spread the ideas of freedom, democracy, and the American way of life, was widely regarded as a sort of divine mission at the time.³¹ This missionary ideal, a legacy of American victory in World War II, would be shattered in the Tet Offensive of 1968.

In the 1950s and early 1960s young Americans growing up in the halcyon days following victory over Germany and Japan were as familiar with images of war and heroism as the ancient Greeks. Sergeant Stryker at Iwo Jima, the exploits of Audie Murphy (who repeated his heroism on screen in *To Hell and Back*), and the comic book hero Sergeant Rock of Easy Company all conveyed influential images of battlefield bravery. Fifty years later we can

30 Wills 1992:212 notes the influence of the Greek rhetorician and sophist Gorgias, particularly the use of antithesis.

31 See the discussion in Turner 1996:19–22, noting various contemporary sources.

see that it was a strangely one-sided, biased account. It was always the other side, the brutal “kraut” or the little grinning “Jap” (terms used deliberately for effect—I’m fully aware of their connotations) who committed the atrocities, the acts of violence. Only now, and thanks to the heartrending accounts of E.B.Sledge and Paul Fussell, is contemporary America beginning to learn the truths of the American way of war then: the souvenir hunting of Japanese skulls and bones, the mutilation of Japanese dead, and the summary execution of German prisoners of war.³²

The “all-American” image of the conduct of war influenced the “boomers,” namely the generation born in the US following the triumphant return home of American soldiers, sailors, and airmen. Children idealized the exploits of their victorious fathers, and in this they were supported and encouraged by the media. After the war ended there had been several films that raised serious issues concerning the price of victory. One of these was the 1946 film *The Best Years of Our Lives* (which took the Oscar for “Best Picture”), which probed the human toll of war and violence—physical as well as psychological—and the difficulties that servicemen faced in returning to civilian life. In 1950 Marlon Brando made his screen début in *The Men*, a film that explored the psychological dimensions of seriously wounded soldiers, in this case paraplegics.³³ Many civilians, especially those who had not served in combat, were not terribly concerned to learn what happened in the war and treated ex-GIs with studied indifference. The prevailing attitude was, “we won the war; let’s get back to the way things were before.” Many former servicemen also adopted this view, as many of them wanted to forget the terrors they had experienced and put the war behind them. My own father and other relatives and friends who made the transition from war to peace have also told me this. The problem, however, remains complex, as has been demonstrated by the outpouring of reminiscences of old soldiers upon seeing Steven Spielberg’s tribute to the World War II generation *Saving Private Ryan*. Clearly, even in the case of the “Good War,” returning home was not a simple matter.

Critically acclaimed work apart, however, it was the “comic book” format films commonly associated with John Wayne and Audie Murphy that soon captured the popular imagination. These stars and their films not only idealized war but also sanitized it. In effect these movies prepared the “boomers” for yet another war. To young people already growing up with the wartime stories of their fathers and uncles, these films delivered messages of sacrifice and heroism, of a sense of duty to succeed their fathers when their own time to serve came. One voice that speaks especially clearly and honestly here is that of Ron Kovic from his own life story, *Born on the Fourth of July*.

32 See E.B.Sledge 1981; Fussell 1988, 1989.

33 Critics rated *The Men* as one of the best films that year. Another drama that revealed the

Every Saturday afternoon we'd all go down to the movies in the shopping center and watch gigantic prehistoric birds breathe fire and war movies with John Wayne and Audie Murphy...Castiglia and I saw *The Sands of Iwo Jima*...The Marine Corps hymn was playing in the background as we sat glued to our seats, humming the hymn together and watching Sergeant Stryker, played by John Wayne, charge up on the hill and get killed just before he reached the top...every time I heard [the Marine hymn] I would think of John Wayne and the brave men who raised the flag on Iwo Jima that day. I would think of them and cry.³⁴

This may sound like so much adolescent hero-worship, and it is, but in Vietnam it became reality. Correspondent Michael Herr describes how “grunts would run around during a fight when they knew that there was a television crew nearby; they were actually making war movies in their heads, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire, getting their pimples shot



Plate 5 Achilles in Vietnam I. US Marines in Operation Texas, March 1966.

Photo: United States Marine Corps Historical Center, 127-N-A 186820.

complex new social issues of post-war American society was *Home of the Brave* (1949), which examined the war's impact on the changing nature of race relations.

³⁴ Kovic 1976:54–5.

off for the networks. They were insane, but the war hadn't done that to them."³⁵ What had done this to them was the glorification of war and violence that they had grown up with, as well as the desire to emulate their fathers' victories from an earlier war. What they had not been told, however, was the ugly side of war—how, as Erich Remarque mentioned long before in *All Quiet in the Western Front*, you would do *anything* to stay alive, even if that meant killing your own father.³⁶ The level of violence that this would lead to was both unknown and unknowable.

Ron Kovic's remarks on his upbringing are typical of the "boomers." Others, such as poet W.D.Ehrhart, another Marine veteran of Vietnam, tell much the same story of growing up in 1950s America.³⁷ Weaned on the tales of the previous generation and cinematographic images, indoctrinated with lessons of civic virtue and obligation, and imbued with a personal sense of duty, another generation was thus prepared for war. When these influences were reinforced by the "winning is everything" attitude of the star athlete, the result is the prototypical "American hero." Again Ron Kovic speaks for many when he tells how,

I joined the high-school wrestling team, practicing and working out every day in the basement of Massapequa High School. The coaches made us do sit-ups, push-ups... "Wanting to win and wanting to be first, that's what's important," the coaches told us. "Play fair, but play to win."...I won most of my matches that year. When I lost, I cried just like when I lost my Little League games... not talking to anyone for hours sometimes.³⁸

Kovic wanted to make this model of heroism a reality and so, as quickly as possible, he joined the Marines to do his duty as others before him (an attitude expressed also by Oliver Stone in *Platoon*). The experience of the Vietnam War, however, soon made clear the difference between reality and ideal: that the hero's course was not straight and pure. In two tours in Vietnam, Kovic would kill (accidentally) one of his own men, would see women and children killed, and would sacrifice his own body and psyche for the cause. There were other Ron Kovics, however, men like Billy Cizinski who joined the Marines at fifteen and fought his first firefight at sixteen and a half. He was eager to join because

35 Herr 1977:209.

36 Remarque 1929:113. Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1140–6 echoes this in not dissimilar circumstances: i.e. Oedipus' killing of his biological parent Lactes when threatened by him.

37 Ehrhart 1986:74.

38 Kovic 1976:62–3.

I grew up in an environment where communism was taboo, better dead than red. Went to a Polish school—same thing—And you can go back to the '50s and see how the country trained kids—the pledge of allegiance to the flag, a lot of militarism.³⁹

These same values also impelled Southerners, who were inspired as much by the heroics of their Confederate forebears as those of World War II. One such man was my OCS classmate, Morgan Weed of Decatur, Alabama, who died of wounds during the 1970 invasion of Cambodia. Weed was mortally wounded when, nearly alone, he bravely went to the aid of a group of soldiers pinned down by NVA fire.⁴⁰

It should not be imagined, however, that only young white America was so nurtured. In a series of short stories, Daniel Cano writes of the Chicano experience in Southern California during the 1950s and 1960s. This was virtually identical to Ron Kovic's or Billy Cizinski's experiences. In his semi-autobiographical story "Planting the Seeds," Cano relates the boyhood years of David Almas, his alter-ego. David Almas's boyhood activities mirror those of Ron Kovic: he plays Little League baseball on a championship team and listens to the World War II stories of his father and uncles, paratroopers who jumped at Normandy.⁴¹ In the same way Dan Cano and many young Chicanos were reared on the "American ideal" and were prepared to reenact their fathers' wartime exploits. Dan Cano tells basically how he and two friends volunteered for service in 1965:

David knew some facts, like the 82nd and 101st jumping behind German lines on D-Day, the first American to make contact. He told them about the standoff at Bastogne, the New Year's jump in Belgium, and how many Chicanos from Los Angeles were in the Screaming Eagles, gave their lives for the country...They talked about war movies, *The Sands of Iwo Jima* and *Guadalcanal Diary*. The three decided to join.⁴²

Young black Americans felt the same attractions. Reginald Edwards from Louisiana, while explaining that joining was "the only thing left to do" owing to a lack of any kind of employment opportunities, still thought "the Marines was 'bad.'" The Marines Corps built men. Plus just before I went in, they had all these John Wayne movies on every night."⁴³ But there were other young black Americans who believed that the US was their home

39 Cited in Appy 1993:63 (Appy records Cizinski saying "better red than dead," but this seems erroneous in light of his parents hating communism).

40 Told in Nolan 1990:263–8, 272–4. On Southerners in Vietnam see generally Wilson 1990.

41 Cano 1995:22–31, 70.

42 Ibid.: 50–1.

43 Appy 1993:62.

too, and were motivated by the same sense of patriotic pride and sense of ownership in the American dream. This theme comes out clearly in a number of the stories collected by Wallace Terry in *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*.⁴⁴ Lieutenant Archie “Joe” Biggers tells how,

We are part of America. Even though there have been some injustices made, there is no reason for us not to be a part of the American system. I don’t feel that because my grandfather or grandmother was a slave that I should not lift arms up to support those things that are stated in the Constitution of the United States. Before I went to Vietnam, I saw the ‘burn, baby, burn’ thing because of Martin Luther King. Why should they burn up Washington D.C. for something that happened in Memphis? They didn’t hurt the white man that doing business down there on 7th Street. They hurt the black man. They should have let their voices be known that there was injustice. That’s the American way.⁴⁵

Others, however, believed themselves exploited yet again and ordered to fight for the cause of freedom, something they did not have at home.

Much the same could be said of Native Americans who served in Vietnam. In his study *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls*, Tom Holm notes that 44 percent of the veterans he surveyed reported that patriotism, a belief in American values, motivated them to enter military service. This was a percentage point higher than those who joined on account of preserving tribal traditions. One veteran stated that the reason he served was,

[not out of] any particular loyalty to the United States, but because I have loyalty to my own people, my own tradition. We are pledged by a treaty to provide military assistance to the U.S. in times of war. I know that the U.S. has broken its part of the bargain with us, but we are more honorable than that...So, it was my obligation to do what I did, even though I didn’t really want to.⁴⁶

This explanation is itself essentially heroic, as seen in the value attached to a sense of obligation and duty. These are virtues that any self-respecting hero could identify with and that agree remarkably well with the life stories of other young Americans at the time who believed that they had an obligation to answer the call to duty.

The life story of the Ron Kovics of 1950s/1960s America seems possibly

44 Terry 1984:112, 129, 131, 175, 199–

45 Ibid.: 112.

46 Holm 1996:118–19.

curious as well as naïve at the beginning of the twenty-first century. His experience, like those of Billy Cizinski and Reginald Edwards and the other young Americans briefly surveyed here, reveals the great impact that winning World War II had upon American society in the 1950s and 1960s.⁴⁷ Some readers might think that such attitudes are not to be found among young Americans today. There are in fact, however, young men (and women too) who identify with the values and ideals of Ron Kovic's generation and the ideals of their upbringing. They understand how these men could have joined the Marines at age seventeen or eighteen and could have gone off to Vietnam thinking it was the right thing to do. One student, Sean, wrote in a review discussion of *Born on the Fourth of July* in the spring of 1998 that he too had been raised like Ron Kovic. Born to a newly arrived immigrant family, he had been taught to love God, be a competitor, and believe that the US is the land of freedom and opportunity. There are other young men today who have also grown up learning of the experiences of Vietnam veterans and who have joined the armed services because they too think that such service is the right thing to do. What both cases illustrate is the survival of the dream, the heroic ideal in American society at the dawn of the twenty-first century, much like it was a half century ago.

Yet it may well be true that few young people today would subscribe to views such as those of my student Sean, and just as true that the American dream that nurtured Ron Kovic and W.D.Ehrhart and so many others died violently in Vietnam. Listen to one of the Marine grunts in Gustav Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, Chili Vendor, on defending the American way of life shortly before moving in to take back the Hue Citadel from the NVA during the '68 Tet Offensive:

You won't come back, Joker. Victor Charlie is gonna shoot you in the heart. [They'll] ship your scrawny little ass home in a threehundred-dollar aluminum box all dressed up like a lifer in a blouse from a set of dress blues. But no white hat. And no pants. They don't give you any pants. Your friends from school and all of the relatives you never liked anyway will be at your funeral and they'll call you a good little Christian and they'll say you were a hero to get wasted defeating Communism and you'll lie there with a cold ass, dead as a rock.⁴⁸

The cynicism and the inverted values in Chili Vendor's words reflect the destruction of old truths, what in a sense Robert Graves captured in the

47 I have omitted from the discussion here those men who either submitted to the draft or volunteered as the result of coercion; also left out are those who went in because of a lack of economic opportunities. All of these are discussed by Appy 1993:44–55. Even many of these still saw the pull of patriotism and heroic glory.

48 Hasford 1979:56.

phrase, “Goodbye to all that.” Chili Vendor’s judgments have been forged by months of brutal combat that have replaced the heroic values of his youth and have changed him and his grunt buddies. The changed personality associated with the violence of battle is now familiar to us as one of the symptoms of PTSD. While this psychological disorder is usually regarded as a creation of the modern age, its first recorded occurrence is in the ancient Greek world.

4

CLEARCHUS' STORY

The heroic ideal transformed

This is the record of a war-lover.
[Clearchus] could have lived in
peace...but he chose to make war.
(Xenophon, *Anabasis* 2.6.6)

In *Achilles in Vietnam* one of Jonathan Shay's principal concerns is to highlight the changes that occur in those who experience combat and, while surviving battle, emerge from the experience transformed. As we have seen, Achilles, though a fierce warrior, was yet honorable before the death of his friend Patrocles. After this death, Achilles turns into a raging fighter who stops at nothing to "get even," "to pay back" the other side for his loss. It should not be imagined that Achilles is the only example of this traumatic character change to be found in the literature or history of the ancient Greek world. Among the other examples that can be noted are the Spartan commander Clearchus, who, we are told, loved war above all else, and even the great Alexander, who in a drunken rage could kill a close friend.

During the course of nearly eleven months in Vietnam, I encountered a number of men, both officers and enlisted men, who were serving their second or third tours, or had been "in country," as the phrase went, continuously for two or three years. Such a man was Sergeant X, who had been fighting in different parts of Vietnam for the previous three years and who clearly enjoyed the experience. Once during a firefight with the Viet Cong, he calmly stood upright in the middle of the fight and fired off a long burst of machine gun fire at the enemy. At the time I thought these men were simply crazy or stupid and probably both. Now upon reflection I understand that they had become "hooked" on violence. In a sense they loved war, much like Marrow, the antagonist in John Hersey's 1959 novel *The War Lover*, and, long before that, Clearchus, the veteran Spartan soldier, whom Xenophon in his *Anabasis* described as *philopolemos*, a "lover of war."

What I would argue here is that little separates Clearchus from those soldiers I knew in Vietnam, or others known and recorded elsewhere, who—