

CASEY DUÉ AND MARY EBBOTT

Mothers-in-Arms: soldiers' emotional bonds and Homeric similes

In teaching the *Iliad*, each of us uses modern comparisons of various kinds to help our students imagine and engage with the story. Ebbott has even joked with her students that everything in today's popular culture reminds her of the *Iliad*. A recent interview on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* not only reminded us of the *Iliad*, however; our subsequent discussions of it led us to reconsider some *Iliadic* similes that we had interpreted in our earlier publications. In this essay we want to share the insights into the *Iliad* that a statement made by an American soldier about his experience in war has given us. Because the discovery process involved here was particular to this inspiration, we have included details about it that make this essay more personal than a typical academic argument. The modern examples included here and the insights they provide into the *Iliad* are also important for how we present the epic to our students, and so we also discuss the impact they have on our teaching. So let's start with the interview that inspired all that follows.

On the July 14, 2011, episode of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Stewart interviewed Sgt. First Class Leroy Petry, who has been awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor for his deeds in battle in Afghanistan.¹ Stewart asked Petry how it was possible for him, after being wounded in both legs (and later after his hand was blown off by a grenade), to be able to maintain his leadership role, continue to protect the other men, and also communicate back with his commanders. In his

spontaneous response he almost choked up, saying that “we are all brothers out there,” and that he wouldn’t give up on any of them just as he wouldn’t give up on any of his children. He said that the way he felt about the other men is like how a bird takes care of its young.

I Achilles, Mother Bird Reconsidered

In book 9 of the *Iliad*, Achilles uses a striking simile to describe his feelings about the situation in which he finds himself: he compares himself, as Sgt. Petry did, to a mother bird. Believing that he has been disrespected and stripped of honor by Agamemnon, he has withdrawn from battle.² The Greeks, now losing without him, beg him to return. He says (*Iliad* 9.323–327):

ὡς δ’ ὄρνις ἀπτῆσι νεοσσοῖσι προφέρῃσι
μάστακ’ ἐπεὶ κε λάβῃσι, κακῶς δ’ ἄρα οἱ πέλει αὐτῆ,
ὡς καὶ ἐγὼ πολλὰς μὲν αὐπνοὺς νύκτας ἴαυον,
ἤματα δ’ αἵματόεντα διέπρησσον πολεμίζων
ἀνδράσι μαρνάμενος ὀάρων ἔνεκα σφετεράων.

Like a bird that brings food to her fledgling young
in her bill, whenever she finds any, even if she herself fares poorly,
so I passed many sleepless nights,
and spent many bloody days in battle,
contending with men for the sake of their wives.

In a previously published book and article (Dué 2005 and 2006), Dué argued that here Achilles is drawing on the suffering of mothers in order to articulate his own sorrow, as he struggles against his mortality and the pleas of his comrades that he return to battle. By using a traditional theme of women’s lament traditions, that of the mother bird who has toiled to raise her young only to lose them, Achilles connects on a very visceral level with the women that he himself has widowed, deprived of children, and enslaved as he has fought in this war.

One of the many passages in Greek literature that bring together the imagery of mother birds with the grief of war (and especially the lamentation of a mother for her fallen son) comes from Euripides’ tragedy *Trojan Women*. This play shows the experience of the women of Troy soon after the Greek victory, and it is structured as a series of laments by the principal characters and the chorus. In Hecuba’s

opening monody, she compares herself to a mother bird, screaming over her lost young (*Trojan Women* 138–150):

ὦμοι, θάκους οἴους θάσσω, / σκηναῖς ἐφέδρους Ἀγαμεμνονίαις. / δούλα δ' ἄγομαι /
γραῦς ἐξ οἴκων πενήθηρη / κρᾶτ' ἐκπορθηθεῖσ' οἰκτρῶς. / ἄλλ' ὦ τῶν χαλκεγχεῶν Τρώων /
ἄλοχοι μέλαι, / καὶ κοῦραι <κοῦραι> δύσσυμφοι, / τύφεται Ἴλιον, αἰάζωμεν. / μάτηρ δ'
ὥσει τις πτανοῖς / ὄρνισιν, ὅπως ἐξάρξω ἴω / κλαγγάν, μολπάν, οὐ τὰν αὐτὰν / οἴαν ποτὲ
δὴ / σκήπτρω Πριάμου διεριδομένα / ποδὸς ἀρχεχόρου πληγαῖς Φρυγίους / εὐκόμποις
ἐξήρχον θεοῦς.

Alas, what sort of seat is this that I have taken, I who am seated before the tents of Agamemnon? As a slave I am led away from my home, an old woman, my head shorn piteously in grief. Ah! wretched wives of the Trojans with their bronze spears and maidens, unfortunate brides, Ilium is smoldering, let us cry out! Like some mother-bird that over her fledglings screams, so I will lead off the shout, the song and dance; not the same as that I once conducted, as I leaned on Priam's scepter and with loud-sounding beats led the dance for the Phrygian gods.

In large part because of passages like these, Dué has argued that Achilles' comparison of his own feelings to those of a mother bird would have resonated with ancient audiences as a particular kind of grief, the grief of a mother who has lost her son in war.³ What she did not realize when she made those arguments initially is that the emotions conveyed by Achilles in that moment are shared by our soldiers fighting today in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Sgt. Petry's experience is in many ways the opposite of the situation of Achilles in *Iliad* 9. Sgt. Petry did not retreat, whereas Achilles has, to the extreme detriment of his comrades. But we are fascinated that Sgt. Petry would use the same metaphor to describe his experiences in war. When we first talked about the interview, Ebbott recalled that Jonathan Shay noted in his book *Achilles in Vietnam* that the soldiers he counseled, who had fought in the Vietnam war, also described their relationship in terms of being not only brothers, but as being a mother to one another: "While the kin relationship of brother seems to be the most frequent symbol of the relationship between combat soldiers who are closest comrades, in our culture the powerful territory of feeling and symbolism of mother often seems to apply just as well" (Shay 1995:42).⁴ And further, "The terror and privation of combat bonds men in a passion of care that the word brother only partly captures. Men become mothers to one another in combat. The grief and rage that they experience when

the special comrade is killed appear virtually identical to that of a child suddenly orphaned, and they feel that the mother within them has died with the friend” (Shay 1995:49).⁵

Putting these modern accounts together with the Homeric simile caused Dué to reexamine Achilles’ words: what Achilles seems to be trying to say, in his own soldierly way, is that he has experienced the same intensity of war that Sgt. Petry attempts to describe, but that he has not gotten anything for it. He has been dishonored even so—he has not been awarded a medal of honor. He wants out. He wants to go home and live a normal life. Like many soldiers, however, he does not leave, and he never makes it home. He tells his comrades shortly after he compares himself to a mother bird that (unlike them) he knows from his goddess mother what the future holds in store for him: returning to the war means he dies at Troy (*Iliad* 9.410–416). Looking at it this way, we understand even better what it means for Achilles to return to battle after Patroklos’ death later in the epic. Achilles withdrew from battle, and the person who did not get protected as a result was his closest friend in the world. This failure to protect Patroklos grieves him more than even the loss of his own life.

The toil of the mother bird is, traditionally speaking, only half the story, however. The simile of *Iliad* 9 comes to an end just where we would expect it to narrate the subsequent loss of the nestlings and the bird’s lamentation.⁶ Traditional laments by mothers in ancient Greek culture are not purely expressions of sorrow; they also convey anger at the loss of the loved one, and can even include calls for revenge.⁷ By leaving out this crucial segment of the bird’s story, Achilles does not yet seem to threaten the vengeance that is very often associated with loss and lament. But ancient audience members may well have made the connection to Achilles’ coming vengeance for the death of Patroklos later in the poem, a sequence of events of which Achilles himself remains unaware at this point.

There is an abundance of meaning, then, in Achilles’ comparison of himself to a mother bird, revealing how Achilles feels toward his comrades and how the dishonor has hurt him, but also potentially foreshadowing his future grief and anger and guilt at the loss of his closest friend. Because Homeric epic is traditional poetry (composed in performance and handed down for centuries without the technology of writing), Homeric similes accumulate additional meaning and resonance over time. They are part of the system of language that makes up this traditional poetry. Since the similes are traditional, we must try to uncover the associations that can be left implicit in them (Muellner 1990:66, 92, 96–98).⁸ Just as we saw with the mother bird simile, in which there is an implicit “next step” after

the bird's loss of her young (namely her subsequent lamentation, and then in turn the revenge inspired by that lamentation), we often must take a larger view of any Homeric simile in order to fully understand its implications.

We can, for example, compare this particular simile to other Homeric similes that feature mothers, and see how those add to our understanding. Once Sgt. Petry's words reminded us of those of Achilles in *Iliad* 9, that simile then prompted us to think about a number of other Homeric metaphors and similes, such as one in which Achilles compares Patroklos to a little girl running after her mother, when Patroklos comes to Achilles in tears because of the devastating losses the Greeks are sustaining while Achilles remains out of battle (*Iliad* 16.7–10):

τίπτε δεδάκρυσαι Πατρόκλεες, ἤϋτε κούρη
νηπίη, ἣ θ' ἅμα μητρὶ θεοῦσ' ἀνελέσθαι ἀνώγει
εἴανού ἀπτομένη, καὶ τ' ἐσσυμένην κατερύκει,
δακρύεσσα δέ μιν ποτιδέρεται, ὄφρ' ἀνέλῃται.

“Why are you crying, Patroklos? (You are) like an oblivious girl, who, running along with her mother, begs to be picked up, grabbing onto her robe, and she hinders her as she is trying to go, and tearfully she looks at her, in order that she be picked up.”

Carroll Moulton has noted that the relationship between Achilles and Patroklos is several times described in the *Iliad* by similes that involve the parent/children motif, and Achilles is usually in the role of the protector (see Moulton 1977:100–104 as well as Mills 2000). Therefore we can read Achilles as the mother here. Patroklos is of course the little girl asking for protection. The word *nēpios* in Homeric Greek, here translated as “oblivious,” is often translated as “foolish.” But as Susan Edmunds (1990) has shown, the word more accurately conveys the lack of awareness common to infants or young children. In her thorough study of the word, Edmunds defines it as the state of being mentally and socially disconnected in a way that is characteristic of children. So here the word is not emphasizing the girl's foolishness, but more her lack of awareness of her and/or her mother's plight. The application of the word *nēpios* to the girl and to Patroklos by extension shows once again the power of Homeric similes to engage the full totality of the larger narrative: Patroklos is about to beg to be allowed to return to battle, but he is unaware that when he goes back he will meet his death.⁹

This simile about the little girl and her mother has recently (Gaca 2008) been reinterpreted as depicting a mother about to be taken captive by an enemy army (as the Achaeans have done to women from surrounding towns and as the Trojan women will be at the end of this war). The mother and her daughter (and presumably, other women and children) are running from the invading soldiers, and the little girl begs to be picked up because she cannot otherwise keep up. If Gaca is correct, then this simile too evokes protection and danger, sorrow and loss in war, not unlike the simile of the mother bird. If we accept Gaca's interpretation of the simile, moreover, the girl's pleas to her mother and her mother's stopping to pick her daughter up will likely lead to both of them being captured.¹⁰ The parallel between what will happen to the girl and her mother and to Patroklos and Achilles lies in the fact that when Patroklos and Achilles make their agreement that only Patroklos will go into battle, their decision will result in both of their deaths: Achilles will return to battle to avenge the death of Patroklos and seal his own fate in doing so.¹¹

Stepping a little further back to consider the wider context of the simile, we may be able to go even further with this interpretation. Just before the simile of the girl and her mother, the tears of Patroklos that prompt Achilles' comparison are first likened by the narrator to a spring that flows down the face of a rock (δάκρυα θερμὰ χέων ὡς τε κρήνη μελάνυδρος, / ἤ τε κατ' αἰγίλιπος πέτρης δνοφερὸν χέει ὕδωρ; *Iliad* 16.3–4), a simile that evokes the traditional story of Niobe. Niobe was a mother who lost all her children through her own boasting about them—Apollo and Artemis killed them when Niobe boasted that she was a better mother than Leto, the mother of Apollo and Artemis. After her death she was transformed in her grief to a weeping rock.¹² As Dué has pointed out (2006:160–161), Niobe is adduced within the lament-filled final book of the *Iliad* as the ultimate mourner (*Iliad* 24.614–617):

νῦν δέ που ἐν πέτρῃσιν ἐν οὐρεσιν οἰοπόλοισιν
ἐν Σιπύλῳ, ὅθι φασὶ θεάων ἔμμεναι εὐνάς
νυμφάων, αἳ τ' ἀμφ' Ἀχελώϊον ἔρρῶσαντο,
ἐνθα λίθος περ εἴουσα θεῶν ἐκ κήδεα πέσσει.

And now somewhere among the rocks in the lonely mountains
in Sipylos, where they say are the haunts of goddesses,
the nymphs who dance around the Acheloos river,
there as a stone she weighs her cares from the gods.

With its traditional associations with perpetual grief, the simile of the rock, when applied to Patroklos in *Iliad* 16, once again seems to suggest his coming death, and Achilles' grief in response to that loss.

What we have seen about mothers in the two similes we have already examined makes it all the more significant that Achilles draws on traditional imagery from women's laments for children to describe himself in *Iliad* 9, given the central importance of Patroklos' death (and Achilles' avenging of that death) in the *Iliad*. As so often happens in Homeric poetry, larger themes and events of the poem are articulated by a character who should not have the omniscience to foretell them. The truncated mother bird simile of *Iliad* 9 foreshadows future events for an audience who knows well what is to come in the story. In this way the simile unites Achilles' grief for the loss of his comrade Patroklos (in battle, without the protection of Achilles that he should have had) with the grief of the mothers he himself has put in mourning.

II Brothers-in-Arms: Ajax and Teucer

Sgt. Petry's words about being a bird with its young also convey the idea of loving protection, which is exactly what he was doing for his men even while gravely injured. That profound notion made Ebbott rethink yet another Homeric simile involving a mother that she had previously examined in her published work. In *Iliad* 8, the fighting method of the half-brothers Ajax and Teucer is described, and that description includes a compressed simile about a child and his mother (*Iliad* 8.266–272):

Τεύκρος δ' εἵνατος ἦλθε παλιντονα τόξα τιταίνων,
στῆ δ' ἄρ' ὑπ' Αἴαντος σάκει Τελαμωνιάδαο.
ἔνθ' Αἴας μὲν ὑπέξέφερον σάκος· αὐτὰρ ὃ γ' ἦρωσ
παπτήνας, ἐπει ἄρ' τιν' οἴστεύσας ἐν ὀμίλῳ
βεβλήκοι, ὃ μὲν αὐθι πεσῶν ἀπὸ θυμὸν ὄλεσσαν. 270
αὐτὰρ ὃ αὐτίς ἰὼν πάϊς ὡς ὑπὸ μητέρα δύσκειν
εἰς Αἴανθ'· ὃ δὲ μιν σάκει κρύπτασκε φαιινῶ.

Teucer came ninth, bending back his curving bow,
and he stood under the shield of Ajax, son of Telamon.
Then Ajax was lifting his shield up and out. And then the hero,
once he looked around, would shoot someone in the crowd

and hit him—that man falling down on the spot lost his life.
And then Teucer would go back, like a child runs behind his mother,
to Ajax. And Ajax would hide him with his shining shield.

These brothers fight together as a coordinated pair, but in their life-stories, an important difference between them is that Teucer is illegitimate. Teucer's mother was the war captive of Telamon, who was Teucer and Ajax's father, while Ajax's mother was Telamon's wife. In Ebbott's examination of the ways in which Teucer's illegitimacy is portrayed, she connects this simile to other images we find in Greek literature in which the *nothos* ('bastard') is pictured as a perpetual child (Ebbott 2003:39–40). She then goes on to explore other Indo-European myths of twins or pairs in order to think about how Teucer's identity is connected to that of his brother (Ebbott 2003:41–44). But considering this simile in conjunction with the other similes depicting mothers and their children, she now wonders whether the mother-child simile here, especially in light of the obvious role Ajax is playing as his brother's protector on the battlefield, reflects not only the special relationship between these two, but the relationship generally between soldiers who fight together on the battlefield. The fact that Teucer himself will later end up as the protector when he safeguards Ajax's corpse after Ajax kills himself out of shame (his suicide does not happen in the *Iliad* but the audience would have been aware of it) adds poignancy to this image, but also reflects the possibility that the role of "mother" can change depending on the circumstances of battle. When a warrior is killed, even if he had been the leader, he relies on his comrades to protect him in turn. When Patroklos is killed in the *Iliad*, for example, the Greeks immediately move in to protect his body. And once again, the mother as protector is invoked in a simile: Menelaos is compared in this moment to a cow protecting her first-born calf (ἀμφὶ δ' ἄρ' αὐτῷ βαῖν' ὥς τις περὶ πόρτακι μήτηρ/πρωτοτόκος κινυρὸ οὐ πρὶν εἰδύια τόκοιο, *Iliad* 17.4–5).¹³

When we look at the other similes featuring mothers in the *Iliad*, we see that they also express the relationship between fellow soldiers. Twice in the *Iliad* Athena is compared to a mother. In *Iliad* 4, the hostilities resume after a cease-fire when the Trojan archer Pandaros (encouraged by Athena in disguise) shoots at Menelaos. The arrow flies right toward its target, but Athena deflects it (*Iliad* 4.127–133):

Οὐδὲ σέθεν Μενέλαε θεοὶ μάκαρες λελάθοντο
ἀθάνατοι, πρώτη δὲ Διὸς θυγάτηρ ἀγέλειη,
ἧ τοι πρόσθε σταῖσα βέλος ἐχεπευκὲς ἄμυνεν.

ἦ δὲ τόσον μὲν ἔεργεν ἀπὸ χροῶς ὡς ὅτε μήτηρ
παιδὸς ἐέργη μυῖαν ὅθ' ἠδέϊ λέξεται ὑπνω,
αὐτὴ δ' αὖτ' ἴθυνεν ὄθι ζωστήρος ὀχῆες
χρῦσειοι σύνεχον καὶ διπλῶος ἤντετο θώρηξ.

But the blessed, immortal gods did not forget you, Menelaos,
and the daughter of Zeus who drives off spoils [=Athena] was the first,
who took a stand in front of you and warded off the piercing missile.
She kept it far from your skin, as when a mother
keeps a fly from her child when he lies in sweet sleep,
and she guided it to where the golden clasps
of the belt joined and the two parts of the breastplate met.

Although Athena's role here is complicated by the fact that the gods want and need the hostilities to begin again, she nevertheless is protecting Menelaos from a fatal wound, and that protection is likened to that of a mother. Menelaos' vulnerability (like a sleeping child) and Athena's ease in deflecting the arrow (like brushing away a fly) toward a part of Menelaos' armor that could protect him are highlighted by the details in the image, but once we examine the simile together with the others, we can see that the mother-protector comparison is a common theme here as she "takes a stand" in front of Menelaos. The second time Athena is compared to a mother is in a speech of Ajax, son of Oileus. Ajax has just lost the footrace to Odysseus (who had help from Athena, the narrator informs us) and says that Athena always protects (literally "stands next to") and helps Odysseus, "like a mother" (*Iliad* 23.783).¹⁴ Such a compressed comparison can easily be misunderstood as Odysseus being called a "mama's boy," but even though Athena is female, as a virgin goddess she is not and never will be anyone's mother. Instead, she is a fellow warrior, a comrade in battle, such as we see in her interactions with Diomedes in *Iliad* 5 and Diomedes and Odysseus in *Iliad* 10, and Achilles in *Iliad* 22. So all of these mother similes appear in contexts when fellow warriors, whether human or even divine, are protecting, or attempting to protect, one another.¹⁵

These similes, then, also suggest that the role of a warrior who stands by and protects his fellow soldiers in battle is, in the traditional Homeric language, imagined as him (or her, in Athena's case) acting as a mother. We cannot know whether "real-life" ancient Greek warriors would have specifically used the analogy of being a "mother" to their comrades, but we can plainly see that the emotions the *Iliadic* warriors express about one another and the way that American soldiers feel

about their comrades have much in common. The traditional language of the similes certainly seems to be using the same analogy of fellow soldiers being a “mother” to one another as our modern examples do. Those poetics, the emotional connections they can evoke, and the resonance they can have with modern experiences of war are reasons why Homeric epic is meaningful to us still today.

III Another Contemporary Analogy

In *Iliad* 9, Achilles has only begun to experience the grief of war. It is only when his “child” Patroklos is killed by the Trojans that his need for vengeance takes over. Even before he returns, other “mothers” such as Menelaos and Ajax protect the body of Patroklos, as we have seen. Achilles is delayed in his return to battle because Patroklos went into battle wearing Achilles’ armor, and Hektor has now taken it (and is wearing it). So Achilles experiences an enforced delay, a time in which he cries, describes his feelings of guilt, and mourns his friend. When he returns to battle, he does so full of fury, and kills a large number of Trojans before killing Hektor, the man who killed Patroklos. As we mentioned above, the theme of revenge is the next stage of grief, not only for the Homeric warrior, or for the ancient Greek mother to whom he is likened, but at times also for today’s soldiers, and it is just one more way that the grief of war transcends time or place.¹⁶ Our discussion of Sgt. Petry’s interview led us to consider further another modern comparison that has helped us to understand the *Iliad* better: the documentary *Restrepo* along with an incredibly moving interview that aired on National Public Radio last year with Tim Hetherington, one of its creators.

In the interview, Hetherington describes what it was like to be an embedded reporter in Afghanistan with a platoon of the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team. Hetherington is asked in the interview whether he was “accepted” by the soldiers, and he relates that once they saw that he was willing to go through the same dangers that they were, he was indeed accepted. In fact the whole point of his documentary is to see war through the soldiers’ eyes. Their war became his experience too even though, as he says, he felt protected in a way by the camera. So there was a barrier between him as a narrator and his story, but it was a permeable one—which makes us think of the Homeric narrator as well, who necessarily “becomes” his characters whenever he performs the direct speeches that are a regular and important feature of Homeric epic.¹⁷ When a character laments in Homeric poetry, for example, the performer/narrator also laments. That permeability between poet and character mirrors in interesting ways the lack of boundaries that existed between Hetherington and the soldiers he was filming. (Sadly, Tim

Hetherington, the narrator who became so indistinguishable from his “characters” that their grief became his, is united with the soldiers he chronicled in more ways than one. This past April he was killed covering the fighting in Libya.)

The most moving part in the NPR interview is when Hetherington begins describing what it was like when one of their comrades, Staff Sgt. Larry Rougle, was killed in an attack and the enemy tried to drag his body away. As we noted above, Menelaos is compared to a mother cow protecting her newborn calf as he stands to protect the body of the slain Patroklos, and Ajax, too, is compared to a lion who stands over its cubs to protect them from hunters (*Iliad* 17.133–137) as he “hides” Patroklos’ body with his shield, just as he “hides” Teucer like a mother hides a child in *Iliad* 8. At the point in the interview when he is describing the enemy’s attempt to take Rougle’s body, Hetherington has to stop talking for a moment as he begins to weep. Hetherington says it was the one time any of the soldiers told him to turn the camera off, so that moment of the enemy attempting to take the dead American soldier’s body is not recorded. In the *Iliad*, on the other hand, all of Book 17 is devoted to telling the story of how the Achaeans prevent the Trojans from taking the body of Patroklos. The facts that the soldiers did not want that part of the fight recorded on film, that the filmmakers did not include even a reference to it in the final documentary, and that recalling it could make Hetherington sob, testify to how overwhelming an emotional experience such a fight is. Having this modern example (in the interview) allows us to explore such an experience with our students as they read *Iliad* 17.

What the film does show, however, is the reactions of the soldiers to the death of their comrade, Staff Sgt. Rougle. You see how distraught Sgt. John Clinard becomes when he learns that his comrade has been killed. One of his fellow soldiers gently holds and restrains him from going to the body, which reminds us of how Antilochos, who is the one to inform Achilles of Patroklos’ death, holds Achilles’ hands, for fear that Achilles will harm himself, as he weeps along with him (*Iliad* 18.32–34). Since the soldiers in *Restrepo* are still under fire, they counsel each other to control their emotions (in an interview recorded later, Spec. Miguel Cortez says, “I wanted to cry, but didn’t.”). The following scenes show the same sequence of grief for a fallen comrade and a desire for revenge—the desire to kill the man who killed your friend, along with any other enemy who happen to get in your way—that we see Achilles experience in the *Iliad*. The leader of the unit, Capt. Kearney, asks where the compound of the enemy is and then says “I want it destroyed. Destroy it now.” (These are actual orders; the soldier with him responds “Yes, sir.”) Later,

orders are relayed to a group of soldiers, and we hear one calmly convey to the other, “Racon, next time you see that dude, take his head off.”

In the past Ebbott has tried to help her students understand (and sympathize with) the emotional reactions of Homeric heroes, especially their intense weeping, by telling them that it was “okay” for Greek heroes to cry and that we have to recognize the cultural differences involved. Watching *Restrepo* made her realize that she was wrong to explain such emotional reactions of the Homeric heroes as a cultural difference. She now realizes that weeping as well as anger are the true reactions of soldiers—of any war—facing the loss of their comrades. She will continue to show *Restrepo*, and especially this scene of the ambush in which Rougle is killed, when she teaches the *Iliad*, so that her students can also better interpret the emotional reactions of both Homeric heroes and today’s soldiers, and perhaps gain a truer perspective on the experiences of soldiers in combat.

These modern parallels—Sgt. Petry comparing himself to a mother bird, Vietnam veterans recalling being mothers to one another in combat, the experiences of the soldiers of the Battle Company 2nd of the 503rd Infantry Regiment 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team, who fought to prevent the theft of the body of one of their fallen comrades—reveal how much the *Iliad* and modern war have in common, despite the wide gulf of time and significant differences in weapons and methods. At the level of the experiences and the emotions of those in combat, the *Iliad* reveals some universal aspects of war. These cases show, moreover, how the experiences of modern soldiers can also give us insight into the poetry of the *Iliad*. In the case of Sgt. Petry’s spontaneous response to a question, the insight gained has led us to reconsider passages that we had studied in detail before. Our further investigation has revealed additional meaning in the “mother” similes in the *Iliad*: namely, that they express a profound truth about the relationship between warriors in combat. Using these modern parallels in our teaching also provide us with ways of communicating to our students the ways in which the *Iliad* conveys human emotional experiences across time and culture to evoke our compassion not only for the Homeric heroes, but also for those fighting wars today.

Notes

1. The full citation and details may be viewed at <http://www.cmohs.org/recipient-detail/3479/petry-leroy-a.php>. The interview may be viewed at <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-july-14-2011/leroy-petry>.
2. For more on honor (τιμή) as a motivation for Achilles' withdrawal see *Iliad* 1.154–171, 1.503–510, and Dué 2002:45–47. The question of whether Achilles is more motivated by slighted honor or love for Briseis (the captive prize of war taken from him by Agamemnon) is debated extensively in the surviving scholia, on which see Fantuzzi (forthcoming).
3. For more examples, see especially Dué 2006, chapters 4 and 5.
4. In an interview (published on Amazon.com) about his 2011 book *War*, Sebastian Junger says likewise: "The undeniable hellishness of war forces men to bond in ways that aren't necessary—or even possible—in civilian society. The closest thing to it might be the parent-child bond."
5. Shay is drawing an analogy here between the veterans he works with and Achilles, noting that the "gentle side" of Achilles is lost when he loses his gentle and kind friend Patroklos.
6. See Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 40-71 and *Odyssey* 16.213-219, 22.302-308, and 24.537-538 with Dué 2005.
7. See especially Holst-Warhaft 1992 on the connection between lament and vendetta.
8. See also Dué 2010:280: "The result is that any individual audience member potentially has a wide range of associations on which to draw when hearing an epic tale. The sum collective of this range of associations is what we mean by epic tradition." For similes in particular, we have to understand that audience members would have had a range of traditional associations to draw on for each element within a simile (such as birds or lions or snow or other natural phenomena), but they could have also been familiar with more expanded versions of the same simile. For a fuller discussion of the meaning made possible by tradition, with specific reference to Homeric similes, see Dué 2010, as well as Scott 1974 and 2009 and Muellner 1990.
9. The comrades of Odysseus, who eat the cattle of Helios and are punished with destruction, are called *νεπιοί* in the opening lines of the *Odyssey* (1.8). Like children, even though they were warned, they eat the cattle anyway, oblivious to the consequences of their actions.
10. As Gaca (2008:159) writes, "In the mother's final gesture of protection, we sense the impending capture of both."
11. See Gaca 2008:163 for her characterization of Achilles in sending Patroklos into battle without accompanying him as "antithetical to that of the mother in the simile, and to that of all mothers in such Homeric similes."
12. For the image of the weeping rock, see also *Iliad* 9.14-16, Sophocles, *Antigone* 828–832, and Euripides, *Andromache* 116 and 532–534. See also Dué 2002:108-109 and Dué and Ebbott 2010:242.

13. Gaca (2008:162–163) also cites this metaphor as one of a group of Homeric similes “in which warriors who struggle to defend, or are helpless to defend, their endangered or fallen comrades are likened to mothers, animal and human alike, who protect or want but prove unable to protect their young against harm posed by predators.” She argues that *Iliad* 16.7–11 now should be included among them, and adduces also *Iliad* 17.133–137 where Ajax protects the body of Patroklos like a lion its cub and *Iliad* 18.316–323, in which a lion sets out to track down the man who stole her cubs. Another such simile, not cited by Gaca, is found at *Iliad* 11.113–121, which compares the Trojans watching Agamemnon kill and strip the armor from two of their men to a doe who is helpless as a lion kills her fawns, and she runs away in fear.

14. Compare *Odyssey* 13.301, where Athena tells Odysseus that she does “stand by and guard him in all kinds of hardships.” On Athena as the goddess who “stands by” warriors in battle see Dué and Ebbott 2010:297–299 and 311–312.

15. The similes in the *Odyssey* about mothers offer some parallels, but the different overall theme of homecoming and the fact that Odysseus battles the suitors, men who should be on his own “side,” also naturally create some differences. The “mother” simile that is perhaps closest to what we see in these *Iliadic* similes occurs in *Odyssey* 10, where Odysseus has gone on a mission to rescue some of his men from the sorceress Circe and has left his other companions behind at their ship. When Odysseus returns to these men, they are weeping and run up to greet him as calves do their mothers returning from the fields (*Odyssey* 10.408–415). In this case, too, the leader of the military unit (for these are all the remaining Ithacans Odysseus took to war with him) is like a mother to his men. This passage occurs in the part of the *Odyssey* where Odysseus is narrating his own adventures to an audience of Phaeacians, with the result that Odysseus himself is the speaker of this simile, just as Achilles was the speaker of the simile comparing himself to a mother bird. This parallel is intriguing, and gives support to the possibility that Achilles is speaking of his toil for the men under his protection when he compares his efforts to those of a mother bird. The other “mother” similes in the *Odyssey* have to do with the suitors, and so the thematic associations are somewhat different. In one case, the suitors are compared to a doe who leaves her fawns in a lion’s den; when the lion returns he kills both mother and children, just as Odysseus will destroy all the suitors (*Odyssey* 4.335–340, Menelaos speaking; it is repeated at *Odyssey* 17.126–131 when Telemachus reports to his mother Penelope what he learned on his journey). In this simile, the mother not only does not protect her children, but directly puts them in danger, making the doe the opposite of every other mother we see in these similes. In the other instance, Odysseus’ heart growls within him at the actions of the suitors like a mother dog standing guard over her pups growls at and is ready to fight a stranger (*Odyssey* 20.13–16). In this case we see the fiercely protective nature of the mother, but the action at this point is strictly internal in Odysseus’ thoughts.

16. Sebastian Junger, the co-creator of *Restrepo*, recently wrote an editorial that reminds us of the grief that modern soldiers can feel over the deaths they have caused among the enemy, and especially among civilians (<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/17/opinion/sunday/17junger.html>; see also Junger’s recently published book *War* [2011]). Homeric similes also express that emotional connection, such as the simile that compares Odysseus’ weeping to that of a woman being taken captive after her husband is killed in war (*Odyssey* 8.521–531, see Dué 2002:7–8).

17. A discussion of the complexities of the Homeric narrator is beyond the scope of this paper. But as Dwight Reynolds (2005) and other scholars have explored, a merger occurs between the performer of an oral epic poem and the characters that he embodies wherever there is direct speech. The merger is so complete that at times the third-person narrator addresses the characters as if they were before his eyes (Bakker 2005 [especially chapters 4 and 7], Martin 1989:xiv, Reynolds 1995:207, and Nagy 2002:26), an example of which we saw above when Menelaos, being protected by his “mother” Athena, is addressed in the second person by the narrator. This phenomenon seems to occur at particularly emotional or dramatic points in the narrative, such as when Patroklos embarks on his fatal impersonation of Achilles (*Iliad* 16.20), or just before Hektor kills him: “Then, Patroklos, the end of death appeared for you” (ἐνθ’ ἄρα τοι Πάτροκλε φάνη βιότιοιο τελευτή; *Iliad* 16.687). (Note in that line that both ἄρα and τοι are visual particles, as discussed in Bakker 2005, chapter 7.) A particularly fascinating extension of this principle occurs in *Odyssey* 9–12 in which Odysseus, as a character within the epic, becomes an epic poet himself, and tell his own tale in his own words, starting at the point where he departs from Troy, the last place anyone ever saw him. Odysseus becomes the poet of his own *nostos* (that is, his song of homecoming):

Odyssey 9.16-38: “Firstly, then, I will tell you my name that you too may know it, and that one day, if I outlive this time of sorrow, I may become a guest-friend to you, though I live so far away from all of you. I am Odysseus son of Laertes, renowned among humankind for all manner of subtlety, so that my fame [kleos] ascends to heaven... Now, however, I will tell you of the many hazardous adventures which by Zeus’ will I met with on my return [nostos] from Troy.”

Odysseus is not represented as exactly singing as he tells his tale. But because he is speaking within an epic poem—in other words, because the narrator of the outer story is singing an epic poem—then Odysseus within that song has to also be singing (in the poem’s meter, dactylic hexameter), with the result that a merger happens between the performer of the *Odyssey* as a whole and the character who speaks in first person within the poem. By means of this merger of identities, Odysseus becomes an epic poet and the epic poet conversely becomes Odysseus, while Odysseus narrates his own adventures.

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