Homer in Contemporary Warfare

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of honor in the Homeric expression of battle presented in the *Iliad* and in contemporary warfare. Through the use of literary analysis and contemplation of social evolution, honor is examined and applied to the Homeric model of war still present today. In the *Iliad*, Homer presents themes of honor that we still see today when examining warfare. These themes range from the concept of arête or masculine excellence, the difference between the Greek concepts of honor (timê) and glory (kleos) from contemporary understanding of honor, and the dialectic nature of war. Using these themes, Homer is able to lay the foundations for warfare that we still use as a framework for analyzing battle today. Greeks believed that honor was gained by the prestigious through wealth, power, and strength, however in the *Iliad* Homer also developed themes of personal interest, loyalty, and empathy that we associate with honor today. As this paper will demonstrate, contemporary accounts of war still represent the Homeric concept of excellence in battle, but they are imbued with cultural perspectives which give contemporary warfare a divergence. However, despite this cultural divergence, the presence of honor among men in battle represented by the Homeric narrative will likely always remain.

Key Words: honor, warfare, Homer, dialectic nature, arête

The concept of Arête is one of the most prevalent in the *Iliad*, particularly because it is present within its main character, Achilles. Possessing arête is being the best you can be or reaching your highest human potential (Fuhrer). A person who possesses arête would not just have bloodlust in battle; they would have qualities of strength, bravery, wit, and honor to achieve their standing. The Trojan War transformed Achilles from a petulant teenager hinged on pride and vanity into a soldier.
who was could be admired by his comrades. The metamorphosis of Achilles through the *Iliad*, provides a stunning example of the achievement of obtaining arête through war.

The first book of the *Iliad* initially introduces Achilles as a boy on the cusp of manhood, still susceptible to prideful indulgence and ignorant wrath. His argument with Agamemnon, born from the unequal possession of wealth evolves into battle of pride. And Achilles, with his rage burning and pride damaged, abandons the Achaeans in a fit of selfishness with the declaration,

“By this staff I swear
A great oath that surely someday a desperate need
For Achilles shall come upon all the sons of Achaeans,
Nor will you be able to help them at all, no matter
How grieved you are, when man-killing Hector is cutting them
Down by the dozen. Then, I say, you’ll rend
Your heart with wrath and remorse for failing to honor
The best Achaean of all!”
(*Iliad*, I.278-85)

Soon the Achaeans are pushed back to the sea, panicked and grief stricken. Patroclus, Achilles closest companion, is moved with grief for those dying and begs Achilles to allow him and his troops to join battle. Achilles relents, and Patroclus himself enters the battle, rallying the Greek troops and filling them with courage. But total victory was not to be, and Patroclus was not to return to Achilles. He himself is cut down by great Hector’s spear, his armor stripped. Achilles is utterly distraught by the death of Patroclus, so much so that he had to be help back lest he take his own life (*Iliad*, XVII.37-38).

The death of his lover motivates him in ways that the riches offered him by Agamemnon could not. In mourning, and desperate to avenge Patroclus’ death, Achilles enters the battle, and it is here where he achieves arête. He is no longer the petulant child presented in book one, nor is his participation in battle hinged on glory or wealth; Achilles fights for Patroclus and he allows nothing to hold him back from avenging his partner. Achilles strikes down every Trojan soldier he can reach until he meets Hector and presents bravery, speed, and a feat of strength.
that he had not achieved before.

Even today in contemporary warfare, we see examples of arête. Though the idea of war transforming of boys to men has faded, there is a sense of hyper masculinity and excellence that prevails. The parts of battle remembered and applauded today are those stories of aristeia, where soldiers performed actions that seem superhuman, and those who performed these actions are the individuals that arise from the masses (“aristeia”).

Not only are these actions of aristeia and arête remembered today, but they are also formally recognized. Soldiers who act above and beyond the call of duty in battle can be rewarded with medals such as the medal of honor, the distinguished service cross, the silver star, the bronze star, and more (Sterner). These awards are examples of how we take Homer’s idea of arête and apply it to contemporary battle today. The soldiers awarded with recognition have performed their duties to their highest potential, which follows the Homeric model presented in the Iliad. The difference between the contemporary concept of arête and the Homeric concept of arête lies within the difference in actions. In the Iliad, Achilles achieves arête through actions motivated by love. Today, feats of arête are not achieved in the action of memorializing love, but to memorialize fearlessness that men present in the high stake situations of battle.

The second Homeric concept prevalent in the Iliad is that of timê (honor) and kleos (glory). Kleos is the idea of fame and eternal glory, or being immortalized by glorious deeds (Beck). It guarantees meaning to one’s life and it was obtained by acts of timê. Timê was the Greek concept of honor, though it was defined differently than it is today. The Greeks defined honor as the value attributed to a person or the public acknowledgement of one’s value. It was extremely subjective, because it was influenced by public performance and image (Cairns). The greater your performance in battle and the more material goods you owned, the more honors you received. Many Greek soldiers would perform outrageous acts in battle, hoping to achieve timê and therefore kleos.

In the Iliad, Homer often showed his heroes in situations where they had to choose between achieving kleos or staying with their loved ones. The contrast can be observed in the differences between brothers Hector and Priam. Andromache pleaded with Hector that he remain at home instead of fighting
the Argives, and she uses both her own fate and the fate of their child if Hector would die in battle in attempting to persuade Hector away from the fighting. But Hector in reply says:

“But how could I face the men of Troy, or their wives
Of the trailing gowns, if I were to skulk like a coward
And stay away from battle? Nor does my own spirit
Urge me to do so, since I have learned to be valiant
Always and fight mid the foremost champions of Troy,
To win and uphold the King my father’s glory
As well as my own.”
(Iliad, VI.486-92)

Unlike Hector, who understood both the honor in attaining kleos and the honor of defending his family and his people, Paris has no concept of timê. He spends much of the Iliad with Helen, rather than on the battle field defending the people whom his actions thrust into battle. His preference for comfort rather than glory is often scorned by the other Trojans, who perceive his acts to be dishonorable. As Hector puts it, “You are powerful enough when you want to be, but too often you let yourself go and don’t seem to care.” (Iliad, VI.576-78). This is why the soldiers of Troy respect and honor Hector, but scorn Paris. Hector’s willingness to go out into battle and fight for his glory is seen as more honorable when compared to Paris’ preference to play lover to Helen.

Today, social evolution and different cultural values have changed the Homeric sense of honor and glory. Instead of focusing honor around singular points of battle and masculine excellence as the Greeks did, we add more depth to the concept of timê, and make it something unmaterialistic. We give honor to connotations such as selflessness, valor, empathy, and compassion in spite of danger and destruction. However the tendency of soldiers to risk their lives in high stake situations to selflessly save others can fit into the Homeric framework that represented Greek soldiers who would perform outrageous acts in battle in attempt to achieve kleos.

The actions soldiers perform in contemporary battle are acts of honor that reflect values of selflessness and courage in high stake situations. For example, in 2005 Lance Cpl. Joshua R. Mooi attacked an enemy at close range to personally recover
four wounded Marines who had been injured in the kill zone. (McCall). Similarly, Cpl. Javier Alvarez led a squad of men one hundred meters through an enemy kill zone to reinforce an embattled squad. He later proceeded to risk his own life to throw away an enemy grenade that had landed amongst his men, saving many from potential injury and death. (McCall). Though the emphasis of honor has changed from glory to selflessness, there is still a reverence and respect that soldiers gain through performing acts of honor and bravery in battle.

The third Homeric concept examined is the nature of battle. Perhaps the best description of war, both in Homer’s *Iliad* and in contemporary society is dialectical in nature. There is a ferocity in war that makes the actions performed by soldiers brutal and terrifying. No one can deny that the bloody sacrifices made and the crushing destruction that affects both soldiers and citizens alike is a terrible thing. However as Homer describes in the *Iliad*, there is a primal beauty among men who fight and give their lives for a higher cause. There is a beauty in the bond between soldiers, and though the relationship within today’s military personal is often not romantic as Achilles and Patroclus’ was, there is still a sense of camaraderie that binds soldiers who served together for life.

This dialectical nature is perhaps the cornerstone for Homer’s *Iliad*. The characters are placed in obscene circumstances, and the descriptions of battle are gruesome and yet readers have since the 8th century found themselves fascinated with not just the story, but the relationships and actions that Homer creates. We find ourselves smiling at the truce between Diomedes and Glaucus, we can relate to the familiar affection between Hector, Andromache, and Astyanax, and we find ourselves mourning with Achilles after Patroclus’ death. Homer created a sense of humanity in the *Iliad* that allows us to see both the horrors of battle and the honor among the soldiers.

Similarly in battle today, we abhor the death and destruction that follows war. Those directly involved bear scars, both physical and psychological. When soldiers return from war, they are often plagued with night terrors, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, injury, and loss. The vast binary between warfare and civilian life often causes soldiers to remember the horrors of war that soldiers and civilians directly involved in battle have to carry with them for their entire lives, but we who have never
seen battle cannot comprehend. Soldiers never forget battle. Yet beyond the trauma of war, there is a sense of light. Families and citizens who have never met band together to support troops overseas, soldiers voluntarily sacrifice everything to protect the people they love, and amidst it all there is a sense of hope for a better future. While war is terrible, it teaches us about not only the resilience of humanity, but also about the connection between brothers, the fierce protection for those we love, and above all, the honor that humanity can still possess even in our darkest hours.

The themes used by Homer in the Iliad are able to lay the foundations for warfare that we still use as a framework for analyzing battle today. By observing the events that lead to the attaining of arête, investigating the cultural alteration of the Greek themes timê and kleos, and understanding the dialectical nature of war one cannot deny the connections between the two models. And though there is a cultural divergence between the two models, it is undeniable that the honor presented by Homer in the Iliad is still prevalent among the soldiers who fight today.

Works Cited