

T H E I L I A D , A N
A F F A I R O F H O N O R



S T E V E N B . S M I T H

*It's still the same old story,
A fight for love and glory,
A case of do or die.*

— “As Time Goes By”

What is a hero and why should we praise heroes, if there are any? This was once the theme of a great literature, Plutarch's *Lives* serving as the model for centuries. But for better or worse, the subject of heroes and heroism has fallen out of fashion. Plutarch's "moralizing" biographies are simply too far removed from our experience to be useful, and nothing comparable has since served to fill the void. There is of course a popular genre of history and biography that celebrates the accomplishments — good or bad — of extraordinary individuals. Think of the works by historians, like Robert Caro's massive study of Lyndon Johnson or David McCullough's books on Harry Truman and Teddy Roosevelt. There are even occasional books like Paul Johnson's *Heroes* that celebrate the lives of famous men and women from biblical to modern times. But the scholarly treatment of the hero has virtually disappeared.

There are a number of reasons for this, some good, some not. The study of heroes – Thomas Carlyle’s famous *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* is the paradigm case – is too often bound up with hero worship. Lurking directly behind the celebration of the hero is the experience of a range of modern cults of personality and “charismatic” leaders from Lenin, Hitler, and Mao to Castro, Khomeini, and Chávez. At the same time, modern history and social science tend to be increasingly quantitative and data-driven, dealing more with the average than with outsized individuals. We are more apt to explain events in terms of general causes – think of the triad of class, race, and gender – than look to the exceptional qualities of certain rare individuals.

The study of heroes has something old-fashioned, if not elitist, about it. In a democratic age even a cat can look at a king. When we do to turn to the study of heroes, it is too often with a subversive intent. We are less likely to see heroes as larger-than-life figures than as people like ourselves who simply find themselves in extraordinary circumstances. “No man is a hero to his valet,” the proverb says. There is also the sense that the case for heroes diminishes our capacities for autonomy and self-direction. Consider Bertolt Brecht’s *Galileo*. Galileo is clearly a heroic figure for championing the cause of reason, science, and progress. Yet he is forced to recant his views by a church that sees science as a challenge to its authority. As Galileo’s pupil, Andrea, says to him, “Unhappy is the land that breeds no hero,” to which Galileo replies, “No Andrea, unhappy is the land that needs a hero.” Written at the time of the Nazis’ ascendancy, *Galileo* is suggesting that the world needs a hero, at least a hero of intellectual and moral integrity, who can stand up to power. Yet even we – as Brecht himself seems to admit – cannot entirely do without heroes, and democracies have boasted a long list of them.

Who Was Homer?

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the *Iliad* stands at the beginning of a long tradition of heroic narrative. The importance of Homer in the formation of the Western tradition is not a modern invention. Something very much like it was held by the Greeks

themselves. In Plato's *Ion*, Socrates calls Homer "the best and the most divine of the poets," and in *The Republic* he is referred to as "the acknowledged educator of Hellas." And yet, while Homer was appreciated by Plato as an educator, he was also regarded by him as a deeply problematical figure. Large parts of *The Republic* are given over to the censorship and reform of Homeric poetry on the grounds that it is unfit for young people to hear. Who but Plato would have had the philosophical chutzpah to undertake such a reform?

The view of Homer as a problematic teacher of moral and heroic narrative has been the norm ever since. Even as we speak, a debate rages in the academy over the meaning and influence of Homer. Were he and the Greeks at the foundation of our modern ideas of rationality, moral responsibility, and human agency or were they teachers of hierarchy, elitism, and gender inequality? Is the *Iliad* a celebration of war and the virtues of a warrior society or a critique of those very values? I will consider some of these questions later on.

The two great Homeric poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, are sometimes referred to as the Bible of Greece. And like the Bible, they have given rise to their own fundamentalisms. They are the closest thing that the Greek world possessed to an authoritative account of the gods and their relation to the human world. When Shelley said that poets were the unacknowledged legislators for humanity, he was no doubt thinking of the sway of Homer over the Greeks. The poets were taken with the utmost seriousness as the interpreters of the ways of the gods to men, and they provided the Greeks with their models of heroic excellence. Poetry was not for them a branch of art and literature, but a form of moral education aimed to shape the very souls and characters of its listeners through the narration of the deeds of heroic individuals. The names of Achilles, Odysseus, Agamemnon, Ajax, Hector, and Patroclus were as familiar to them as the biblical heroes Abraham, David, Solomon, and Jesus are to us.

The Homeric epics provided the closest thing possessed by the Greek world to a comprehensive cosmology, or world order. Socrates had it more or less right when he asks Ion, the greatest singer of Homeric poetry, what the poems are about and answers his own question:

Didn't [Homer] tell about war for the most part, and about the associations with one another of good human beings and bad ones, and private ones and those in public works, and about gods' associating with one another and with human beings – how they associate – and about the events in the heavens and those in Hades and the begetting of both gods and heroes? Are not these the things about which Homer made his poetry?

I do not believe that this definition has ever been improved upon.

Of course, to make these claims is already to swim in shark-infested waters. There has been a long-standing debate among classicists as to whether there really was a Homer at all and, if so, whether he was the single author of the poems traditionally attributed to him. The so-called Homeric Question that has dominated debate since the nineteenth century has called into doubt the idea that Homer was a single author, rather than a convenient shorthand for the many anonymous redactors and compilers who assembled the ancient epics. It is very much like the now generally discredited debate over who wrote the plays of William Shakespeare. In his inaugural lecture at the University of Basel in 1869, a young German philologist by the name of Friedrich Nietzsche argued that the two great Homeric epics could not have issued from a single pen. "The design of an epic such as the *Iliad*," he declared, "is not an entire *whole*, not an organism; but a number of pieces strung together." Consequently, Nietzsche denied Homeric authorship. "We believe in a great poet as the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*," he announced at the end of his lecture, "but not that Homer was this poet."

The best evidence for the existence of the historical Homer as the author of both texts is the testimony of the ancient writers themselves. Herodotus refers to Homer by name and puts his probable lifetime at around four hundred years before Herodotus's own time. This would date Homer to somewhere around the eighth century BCE. But at the same time that the historical Homer has been called into question, so have the events that he sought to narrate. Was Homer a reliable historian or an epic myth-maker? Heinrich Schliemann's discoveries have given a great deal of historical credibility to Homer's account. And once again, if

Herodotus can be believed, the Trojan War took place approximately eight centuries before his own time, which would place it sometime around the year 1250 BCE. To give some idea of the time span involved, the era of the Trojan War was as far away from the great age of Periclean Athens as we are today from the time of the Crusades.

The Homeric poems sing the virtues of a Mycenaean civilization that had disappeared even long before the time of Homer. Thanks to the investigations of the American classicist Milman Parry, we know that these poems were sung long before they were written down. In the 1930s, Parry had the idea of going to Yugoslavia, as it then was, where there was still a bardic tradition of oral poetry, and he discovered that there were still rhapsodes who had committed to memory thousands of lines of verse commemorating epic events of their own past. These Yugoslav bards convinced Parry that the author – or authors – of the *Iliad* was not a poet in the modern sense; rather, the work formed part of an oral tradition kept alive by bards and minstrels who performed the poems for whoever would listen. They were forms of popular entertainment, not (as they are today) subjects of scholarly research. These poems were chanted, and eventually prizes were given to those who were the best interpreters of his verse. Thus, when Plato turns to the reform of poetry in *The Republic*, he includes it under the term *mousike*, or musical education, because of its hypnotic, even hallucinatory power. It is the rhythm and cadence of the poet that are responsible for shaping the minds and taste of his audience.

An Affair of Honor

The question of who is a hero is the animating single question behind the entire *Iliad*. An uncommonly perceptive ancient commentator asked why Homer named his poem the *Iliad* after the city of Troy instead of the “Achilleid” after Achilles, its leading figure. He answered himself: “Homer wished to show us not only Achilles but also, in a way, all heroes and what sort of men they were.” Unlike the *Odyssey*, where there really is only one hero, the many-sided Odysseus, the *Iliad* presents Achilles as a hero in a world of heroes. He may be “the best of the Achaeans,” but that is

only because his excellence is the sum of the excellences of all those around him. He is the first among equals in a world dominated by the single-minded pursuit of honor and glory.

The *Iliad* is both a story in its own right and a story within a larger story. It is part of the larger story of the city of Troy. The action of that story starts almost ten years before the *Iliad* proper begins, when Paris, a Trojan prince, insults the Spartan king, Menelaos, by running off with Helen, Menelaos's wife. It was to be the first skirmish in the battle between East and West that would be the subject of Herodotus's great *History*. An armada of ships is then assembled by Menelaos's brother Agamemnon to invade Troy and avenge the insult. For nearly ten years the invading force has been frustrated and has been reduced to plundering the area around the outskirts of Troy. It is not until this point in the war with Troy that the action of the *Iliad* begins.

The *Iliad* is the story of Achilles' quarrel with Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks, who insults Achilles by stealing his mistress (and prize of war), Briseis. The background of the quarrel is as follows. At the outset of the poem, the Achaeans have been suffering from a plague brought upon them by Apollo for Agamemnon's refusal to give up his concubine, who is a daughter of a priest of Apollo. The priest had come to the Greek camp to ransom back his daughter, but Agamemnon had treated him badly and sent him away empty-handed. The priest then prayed to Apollo, who sent the plague. After nine days, Achilles calls an assembly to discover the cause of their suffering. A prophet, Calchas, interprets the cause as Agamemnon's refusal to return his concubine to her father. Agamemnon reluctantly agrees to do so, but only if he is compensated in return for his loss. When Agamemnon decides to seize Briseis in exchange, Achilles is filled with anger at the slight, and "within / his shaggy breast the heart was divided two ways, pondering / whether to draw from beside his thigh the sharp sword, . . . and kill the son of Atreus, / or else to check the spleen within him" (1.188–92). (All quotations from the *Iliad* are from Richmond Lattimore's translation.) A goddess appears and convinces Achilles to stay his hand, but he withdraws himself and his troops from the expedition and little is heard of him for the next nine books of the poem.

When Achilles next appears, he is seen in his tent "delighting

his heart” and “singing the famous deeds of men” (9.185–90). By this time, the war has begun to go badly for the Greeks, and Agamemnon is anxious to make peace in order to win back his greatest fighter. An embassy is sent to Achilles promising gifts and full restitution for the insult if he will forget his anger and return to the battle. Achilles is not ready to return, however, but he allows his friend Patroclus to go in his place. Patroclus is killed by Hector, the greatest of the Trojan warriors. It is only in book 18 that Achilles returns to battle, to avenge the death of his friend. Achilles pursues and kills Hector, whose body he then mutilates and defiles. In the final book Priam, Hector’s father and king of Troy, goes to the Achaean camp to plead for the return of his son’s body. The two men, Achilles and Priam, establish a certain bond of friendship born of mutual sorrow. The poem that began with the rage of Achilles ends with the burial of Hector, the breaker of horses. The reader does not hear about the subsequent death of Achilles and the sack of Troy.

The world depicted by Homer is a world devoted to “the famous deeds of men” (*klea andron*). Achilles sings of these famous deeds while sitting in his tent brooding over his humiliation, and Homer, the poet, sings of the famous deeds of both Greek and Trojan heroes. The first words of the *Iliad* – “Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilleus” – suggest that it is only the poet who can confer true immortality on events. From the beginning, Achilles knows that he has a choice between a short life but a glorious one if he goes to Troy or a long but undistinguished one if remains home with his family (9.410–16). Achilles’ choice of the former is the only choice befitting a Greek hero. Phoenix, an “aged horseman,” tells Achilles that he has been sent along on the mission by Peleus, Achilles’ father, “to make you a speaker of words and one who [is] accomplished in action” (9.443).

The *Iliad* presents a world whose leading figures eat, drink, and live for fame (*kleos*). The word *hero* originally applied to the offspring of gods who had fallen in love with mortals. These figures retained some of the divine longing for immortality that can be achieved only through conflict or war. War alone can confer immortality, at least through the songs and poems that are written about it. What distinguishes a hero is, above all else, the desire for fame – that is, what is said about him after he is gone. A person’s

kleos is his reputation. It is the closest thing to immortality that a man is allowed in the Homeric universe. In what, then, does a hero's kleos consist?

In the first place, the Homeric term for hero signifies a definite social stratum. It applies to a kind of governing class of aristocratic warriors. The leading quality of this class is courage, especially the kind of courage displayed in times of war. To be courageous in battle is to distinguish oneself from other men. The ancients had a word to describe men and women collectively – *anthropoi* (the root of our word *anthropology*). This was not a term of distinction. To be *anthropos* was to be undistinguished, part of a faceless crowd of mediocrities. An individual is either *aner* or *gyne*, “man” or “woman,” but not a human being in the abstract. As Nestor, counselor to the Greeks, challenges the Achaeans: “Dear friends, be men [*aneres*]; let shame be in your hearts and discipline / in the sight of other men [*anthropoi*], and each one of you remember / his children and his wife, his property and his parents” (15.661–63). Only someone who had distinguished himself through acts of conspicuous bravery could be considered *aner andrea*, a hero in the true sense. Achilles' own early death is foretold in book 1, but it is not until much later that he declares his choice to be a short life with glory at Troy to a life without honor at home. He chooses glory with full awareness of what he is doing. A short life but a glorious one seems to be his motto.

A hero's courage is bound up with his sense of honor (*time*), what he is due. A person who accepts less than his due cannot be a real man. It is the desire for fame that unites the hero's virtue with ambition. The *Iliad* begins with a slight to Achilles' sense of honor, but it is the anger or spiritedness produced by this slight that is the spur to the action of the epic. It is the “wrath of Achilles” that moves the entire narrative. The poet is clearly drawing a connection between the anger of Achilles and his sense of honor. The honor of a hero is his sense of worth, not unlike what we call a sense of self-respect. Moreover, a person's honor is exclusive. “Glory is like honor,” Thomas Hobbes wrote in *De Cive*, “if all men have it, no man hath it.” Honor cannot be shared with others without being diminished. It is the same as one's status or one's place in the social order, and any effort to interfere with honor is likely to incur wrath.

The central Homeric term for this disposition is *thymos*, an almost untranslatable word that is crucial to the psychology of the Homeric hero. *Thymos* is bound up with the passionate rage felt by Achilles, but also with his ability to keep his anger in check. The central text connecting the hero's *thymos* with a sense of anger and wounded pride occurs early in the *Iliad*, in the lines I have already quoted, when Achilles begins to react to Agamemnon's slight:

So he spoke. And the anger came on Peleus' son, and within
 his shaggy breast the heart was divided two ways, pondering
 whether to draw from beside his thigh the sharp sword,
 driving
 away all those who stood between and kill the son of Atreus,
 or else to check the spleen [*thymos*] within and keep down
 his anger.
 Now as he weighed in mind [*phrenes*] and spirit [*thymos*]
 these two courses
 and was drawing from its scabbard the great sword, Athene
 descended
 from the sky. [1.188–96]

It is extremely difficult, as we will see shortly, to make perfect sense of *thymos*. In the passage cited above, Lattimore translates *thymos* first as “spleen” and then as “spirit” to indicate a powerful affective source of action. *Thymos* is often associated with anger (*menos*) and the impulse to fight. Achilles is presented here as torn between alternating impulses of mind and spirit, words that sound suspiciously like our modern terminology of reason and inclination. Perhaps the closest equivalent is the Hebrew *ruach*, meaning “wind” or “breath,” to describe the source of the affections of anger, joy, and love. It is something like the breath of life.

Thymos is as well the central term in Plato's political and moral philosophy in *The Republic*. For Plato, *thymos* is the quality of soul most closely identified with the guardian class whose task is to preserve the city from foreign domination. These guards are compared to “noble dogs” who must be able to distinguish friend from enemy. *The Republic* tries to offer a strategy – perhaps we might even call it a therapy – for dealing with *thymos*, for submitting it to the control of reason and allowing us to achieve a level of

balance, self-control, and moderation. Taken together, Plato calls these qualities justice, which can be achieved only when reason is in control of our appetites and desires. Can such an ideal of justice ever be achieved? Can reason order and moderate our conflicting emotions and desires? The question the entire *Republic* asks is whether the quality of thymos can be directed toward public or communal ends or whether it is necessarily bound up with the individual's sense of status and honor.

At the same time that the thymos of Achilles is related to his capacity for anger, it is also the source of his great capacity for love and friendship. Thymos both contains the potential for the destruction of civilization and forms the basis for the constitution of friendship. Achilles' friendship with Patroclus means as much to him as the fame or kleos he will receive in battle. Although Achilles is said to have the thymos of a lion "who breaks men in battle," it is precisely this quality that is at the source of his capacity for love and friendship. The *Iliad* is as much a book about love as it is about war. The closest comparison known to me of the friendship of Achilles and Patroclus would be David and Jonathan's love for each other in the Bible. It is in his capacity as both lover and beloved, of both men and gods, that Achilles' thymos is on display.

The transformation of thymos is most vividly depicted in the final book of the *Iliad*. Here Achilles not only returns Hector's body to his father, Priam, but invites Priam into his tent, where they can eat, sleep, and mourn their losses together:

He took the old man's hand and pushed him
gently away, and the two remembered, as Priam sat huddled
at the feet of Achilleus and wept close for manslaughtering
Hektor
and Achilleus wept now for his own father, now again
for Patroklos. The sound of their mourning moved in the
house. [24.508–12]

Here Achilles' anger-filled thymos has been transmuted by pity, sympathy, and compassion. He has become a fuller and even a better human being than he was when his thymos was directed only to honor and prestige. He is variously described as tender and compassionate, qualities that are brought out at the end of the

story with his reconciliation with Priam. Achilles even agrees to a truce of twelve days during which time Priam can prepare the funeral of Hector. A pact of sorts has been declared. The two men share a meal, and our last glimpse of Achilles is his presiding over the feast and apportioning the sacrificial meal (24.626). This is not to say that Achilles and Priam have ceased to be enemies; rather, they have acknowledged their common mortality. It would be too strong to say that Homer is forcing the two opponents to recognize their common humanity, but they do achieve something like a brief friendship and reconciliation, similar to that between the Jets and Sharks at the end of *West Side Story*.

Homer and Us

The modern reader raised on a very different moral tradition is likely to read passages like the ones above and wonder at what might appear to be Achilles' childishness. Can't he just swallow his pride and suck it up for the good of the team? We are told that there's no "I" in *team*, but with Achilles it seems to be all "I," all the time. In many respects, Achilles acts like a spoiled child. When his captive slave girl has been taken from him, he walks offstage and sulks in his tent, allowing many of his comrades to be killed in the meantime. When he does return, it is not to avenge his fellow Achaeans but to assuage his rage at the death of his friend. Even then he is not satisfied until he has dragged Hector's corpse behind his chariot in truly horrifying fashion. Shouldn't a reader find in Achilles' actions more to despise than admire?

These are legitimate questions, but they are not the questions that Homer is inclined to ask. To accept less than one's due is to be shamed or disgraced. In *The Greeks and the Irrational*, the classical scholar E. R. Dodds used the anthropological terms "shame culture" and "guilt culture" – taken from the anthropologist Ruth Benedict – to distinguish Homer's world from our own. Homer's was a shame culture because its moral code was entirely determined by the place one occupied in a social hierarchy and the fear of disgrace that follows from failing to attend to one's place in that hierarchy. The idea of "losing face" or failing to carry out one's duty was deemed socially unbearable. Shame is not simply an

individual but a collective attribute. To the question, Why should I risk my life?, the Homeric answer is that to do otherwise would bring shame on your house. It is to disgrace not only yourself, but your family, friends, and everyone around you. It is the fear of disgrace more than a sense of guilt or bad conscience that is the strongest moral imperative in the Homeric worldview.

As much as anyone in the *Iliad*, Hector embodies this ethos of pride and shame when he explains to his wife, Andromache, his motives for defending his city:

Yet I would feel deep shame
before the Trojans, and the Trojan women with trailing
garments,
if like a coward I were to shrink aside from the fighting;
and the spirit will not let me, since I have learned to be
valiant
and to fight always among the foremost ranks of the
Trojans,
winning for my own self great glory, and for my father.
[6.441–46]

This passage is deeply revealing. Nowhere does Homer or any of his characters make appeal to a sense of patriotism or public responsibility as a motive for action. This is because no such idea existed. Hector speaks of his fear of being thought a coward and of winning glory for himself and for his family as the only motives worth mentioning. In fact, the *Iliad* is notable for the absence of such key political terms as *city*, *citizen*, and *regime* that will be so central to Plato and Aristotle. Homer's world is in some sense pre-political. At most, one's obligations are to one's family and friends, never to anything as remote as a city or a nation.

"Be always among the bravest, and hold [your] head above others, / not shaming the generation of [your] fathers," is the advice that Glaukos gives to Diomedes (6.208–9). So when Achilles does finally return to the battle, it is to avenge the death of his friend. He could not care less about the rest of the Achaeans. There is never a reconciliation between Achilles and Agamemnon or any of the other Greek leaders. His obligations are to Patroclus, and once they have been discharged, his work is over. Homer's

world provides no sense of public service or responsibility to the community.

Does this absence of a notion of duty to anyone other than one's immediate family members mean that the Homeric hero lacks a conception of moral responsibility or civic duty? These are, again, our questions, not Homer's. For Homer, terms like "virtue" (*arete*) and "good" (*agathos*) are connected to others, like "glory" and "honor." It is not duty toward others but duty toward himself that defines the Homeric hero. The *arete* or virtue of a man is related to his capacity for strength, skill, and success in combat. These are the virtues of a warrior society and are unlikely to be valued, at least not quite so highly, outside that kind of world. The fact that in the world of the *Iliad* people are judged in terms of their prowess and success has led many scholars to conclude that Homer lacked any kind of moral sense. *Arete* does not denote a quality of moral goodness, but something like nobility of character, achievement, success, and reputation among members of an intensely competitive warrior aristocracy.

What is, then, the relation between Homer's moral universe and our own? In one view, perhaps the most widespread, the ancient Greeks possessed a primitive moral code that was gradually shaped and refined until after centuries it arrived at something approximating our form of moral self-awareness. This evolutionary or progressivist view is often expressed in the phrase that the archaic Greeks represented the "childhood" of humanity and that Homer expressed the kind of naive or aboriginal genius of primitive folk art. The *Iliad* is the product of a now bygone moral ethos that we can study almost the way a physiologist studies underdeveloped forms of life. As that great classicist Karl Marx asked in the *Grundrisse*: "Is Achilles possible with powder and lead? Or the *Iliad* with the printing press, not to mention the printing machine? Do not the song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the printer's bar, hence do not the necessary conditions of epic poetry vanish?"

The difficulty for Marx lies not in understanding that Greek epic is bound up with a certain level of social development. The difficulty, he freely admits, is in understanding why this form of art still exercises such a hold upon our moral imagination. How do the Greeks figure as a norm much less as "an unattainable model?"

Marx cannot explain this, except by ascribing to us, in very un-Marxian terms, a collective desire to recapture a lost childhood:

A man cannot become a child again or he becomes childish. But does he not find joy in the child's naiveté and must he himself not strive to reproduce its truth at a higher stage? Does not the true character of each epoch come alive in the nature of its children? Why should not the historic childhood of humanity, its most beautiful unfolding as a stage never to return, exercise an eternal charm? These are unruly children and precocious children. Many of the old peoples belong in this category. The Greeks were normal children. The charm of their art for us is not in contradiction to the undeveloped stage of society in which it grew. It is its result, rather, and is inextricably bound up, rather, with the fact that the unripe social conditions under which it arose, and could alone arise, can never return.

Marx wonders, and cannot fully explain, why this old poetry still continues to fascinate and “charm” despite the fact that it is bound up with an “undeveloped state of humanity.”

A related view is associated with Nietzsche, who also understands the Homeric world as very different from our own, but in many respects as a better, healthier moral climate. According to Nietzsche, who loved the Greeks as only a German could, the heroes of the *Iliad* were said to lack our modern notions of the inner self, of guilt and moral responsibility, but rather than denoting a negative, this was for him a positive. The Homeric hero simply knew who he was and what to do and didn't require complex mental and moral gymnastics to arrive at self-understanding. Achilles doesn't have to engage in painful, Hamlet-like reflections over what to do. This characteristic constituted his rudimentary strength and vigor of soul. It is also what constituted his superiority to the doubt-ridden, anguished anti-heroes of modernity. The Homeric hero has no inner depths or secrets: he simply is what he is, and this makes him whole.

To be sure, Achilles and the entire assemblage of Greek and Trojan heroes seem to be the textbook case for Nietzsche's *Herrenmoral*, a morality based on power and mastery alone. For Nietzsche, all our moral notions are expressions of egoism. Morality in

its most revealing sense means the claims of a tribe or a caste to rule. The morality of the ruling caste meant its ability to establish orders of rank or a “pathos of distance.” Moral terms like *good* and *evil* originally applied to the powerful and the powerless. The question that plagues all of Nietzsche’s thought is, How did this original Herrenmoral based on honor, rank, and nobility give rise to its antithesis, the *Sklavenmoral*, based on our ideas of sin, guilt, responsibility, and care? The answer, in a word, is Christianity, although this does not by itself explain how Christianity was able to conquer the pagan master morality.

Nietzsche did not believe that a return to the ancient morality of the masters was either possible or desirable. Achilles would be as out of place in our world as we would be in his. Our distance from the Greeks both temporally and psychologically is too vast to bridge. But as with Marx, this chasm cannot stop us from appreciating this primitive warrior ethic for its hardness, its egoism, and its sense of honor, all the things that we, as moderns, seem to lack. As Nietzsche writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

Everything it knows as part of itself it honors: such a morality is self-glorification. In the foreground there is the feeling of fullness, of power that seeks to overflow, the happiness of high tension, the consciousness of wealth that would give and bestow: the noble human being, too, helps the unfortunate, but not, or almost not, from pity, but prompted more by an urge begotten by excess of power. The noble human being honors himself as one who is powerful, and also as one who has power over himself.

Nietzsche has a point about the nature of the Homeric hero, but he also distorts what he wants to illuminate. Far from lacking the inward quality of moral self-reflection, Achilles, among all the heroes of the *Iliad*, seems to exhibit it. Consider the scene in which Achilles is approached by an embassy consisting of Odysseus, Ajax, and Phoenix that has been sent to beseech him to rejoin the fight. Achilles responds to their importuning:

All the other prizes of honour [Agamemnon] gave to the
great men and the princes
are held fast by them, but from me alone of all the
Achaeans

he has taken and keeps the bride of my heart. Let him lie
 beside her
 and be happy. Yet why must the Argives fight with the
 Trojans?
 And why was it the son of Atreus assembled and led here
 these people? Was it not for the sake of lovely-haired Helen?
 Are the sons of Atreus alone among mortal men the ones
 who love their wives? Since any who is a good man, and
 careful,
 loves her who is his own and cares for her, even as I now
 loved this one from my heart, though it was my spear that
 won her.
 Now that he has deceived me and taken from my hands my
 prize of honour,
 let him try me no more. I know him well. He will not
 persuade me. [9.334–45]

Achilles' final statement that he will not be persuaded by Agamemnon and his entourage suggests that the book is about more than irrational thymos; it is also concerned with reflective deliberation and debate. Achilles not only rejects the gifts that the embassy has brought but, more important, he rejects the reasons they use to convince him. His words reveal not so much anger as a deep sense of moral self-awareness. Here Achilles asks a series of deeply reflective questions that go to the heart of book. What are we fighting for? Are the risk and sacrifice for the sake of honor worthwhile? What difference will the war ultimately make? Further, his description of Briseis as "the bride of my heart" suggests that his quarrel with Agamemnon is not simply a case of wounded vanity; it displays Achilles' true feelings of love and capacity for pain.

But there is another, virtually opposite, conception of the Homeric epic and Greek tragedy that regards it as providing the fundamental groundwork for all later moral thought. On this account, there is more common ground between Homer and us than we often realize. In one of the most profound studies on Homer ever written, Simone Weil used the *Iliad* to expose the brutality of war and the costs of heroism. In "The *Iliad*; or, The Poem of Force," she used Homer to lay bare the essence of force and its ability to turn a human being into a thing. Weil was a

Christian socialist who had converted from Judaism, and she wrote her essay in Nazi-occupied France. She looked to Homer to reveal the true spirituality of the individual as triumphing over a world dominated by violence and death.

For Weil, the *Iliad* was not a heroic narrative but an exposé of the dehumanizing effects of power on the victors and the vanquished alike. “The true hero, the true subject, the center of the *Iliad* is force,” she wrote in the essay’s famous opening sentence. By “force” she meant “that *x* that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing.” The logic of force falls with a kind of “geometrical rigor” on all who are subject to it. Homer describes the deaths of both Achaeans and Trojans with the same sense of equanimity. Tragedy falls on all alike. “One is barely aware that the poet is a Greek and not a Trojan,” she writes. It is precisely this sense of logic or rigor that elicits the most irrational and brutal aspects of war. It is the ubiquity – the randomness – of force that eventually makes possible a sense of justice, that all are subject to the same inhuman conditions. “Such is the nature of force. Its power of converting a man into a thing is a double one, and its application double-edged. To the same degree, though in different fashions, those who use it and those who endure it are turned to stone.”

The *Iliad* is thus presented as foreshadowing the truth of the Christian Gospels, namely, that all are subject to the same fate and in need of the same sense of divine forgiveness. The poem reveals the futility of the quest for heroic glory and makes us appreciate those tender moments of conjugal love, of the love of parents for their children, and of the friendship of comrades-in-arms. “The moments of grace are rare in the *Iliad*,” Weil admits, “but they are enough to make us feel with sharp regret what it is that violence has killed and will kill again.” It is this bleak and unforgiving awareness of the harshness and fragility of life that makes the *Iliad* “the only true epic the Occident possesses”:

The Gospels are the last marvelous expression of the Greek genius, as the *Iliad* is the first: here the Greek spirit reveals itself not only in the injunction given mankind to seek above all other goods, “the kingdom of justice of our Heavenly Father,” but also in the fact that human suffering is laid bare, and we see it in a being who is at once divine and human.

The accounts of the Passion show that a divine spirit, incarnate, is changed by misfortune, trembles before suffering and death, feels itself, in the depths of agony, to be cut off from God. This sense of human misery gives the Gospels that accent of simplicity that is the mark of the Greek genius, and that endows Greek tragedy and the *Iliad* with all their value.

There is more than enough evidence to support Weil's thesis. Homer never shies away from depicting the horror and brutality of war. The work is hardly a celebration of the qualities of cruelty and slaughter for their own sake. He continually evokes the sentiments of sorrow and pity for the victims of Achilles' rage. Homer sings the rage of Achilles, but he also hymns the domestic virtues of peace and the sweetness of friendship. It is sometimes hard to believe that the author of the *Iliad* could have found the capacities of the warrior as the highest human virtue.

Weil's argument that the *Iliad* is in fact the first great antiwar epic was neither the first nor the last effort to make Homer fit into our moral frameworks. If Weil sees the message of the *Iliad* through the lens of the Christian Gospels, others see the Greeks as part of a more secular moral tradition. In his book *Shame and Necessity*, the Oxford philosopher Bernard Williams argues that in matters of morality "we rely on much the same conceptions as the Greeks but do not acknowledge the extent to which we do." Underlying certain differences between their moral vocabulary and ours "lies a complex net of concepts in terms of which particular actions are explained, and this net was the same for Homer as it is for us." In the crucial areas of human agency, moral responsibility, and shame, there is greater similarity than difference between our cultures.

The two sets of opinions considered above are virtually mirror images of each other. Marx and Nietzsche's image of the Greek heroes is so removed from our modern conceptions of agency and moral responsibility as to make them not fully human. Their Homer is too separated from us by large chasms of time to learn anything. Revealing his own indebtedness to German Grecophiles like Johann Winkelmann and Friedrich Schiller, Marx claims that it is only by becoming "naive" and "childish" again that we can appreciate the ancient Greeks. He does not explain why this art

that he likens to the childhood of humanity should continue to have a grip on those of us who come so much later or even why it was confined to Greece and cannot be found elsewhere. For him, the Greek heroes have nothing to say to us today.

Weil and Williams, on the other hand, make the archaic hero sound too morally familiar, almost like one of our contemporaries. The force of Weil's essay is that it turns the *Iliad* into the first great antiwar epic. For Williams, the Homeric thymos operates in the same way as our modern conceptions of desire, belief, and intention. Both of these views are flawed. If the historicism of Marx and Nietzsche deprives the hero of certain essential characteristics of humanity, Weil and Williams lack a sufficient appreciation of history in their attempt to make the ancients sound too much like ourselves. If they are already just like us, what is the incentive for studying them? In neither case is there sufficient room for a dialogue between the ancients and the moderns, either because the gulf is too wide to bridge or because it doesn't exist at all.

The Obsolescence of a Concept?

The difficulty we have in entering Homer's world has to do with the singular concept of honor. Homer's is the morality of a warrior society for which the principle of honor is paramount. Today, of course, *honor* has an obsolete sound. "Honor," as Peter Berger has written in a classic essay, "The Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor," "occupies about the same place in contemporary usage as chastity," that is, as "ideological leftovers in the consciousness of obsolete classes, such as military officers or ethnic grandmothers." This is a slight – but only a slight – exaggeration. While "affairs of honor," as they are quaintly called, seem to belong to a distant and benighted past, there are still organizations like the military and military academies that take honor quite seriously. Many colleges and universities still abide by an "honor code," but Berger is right to note that motives of honor no longer have standing in American courts of law where concepts like "loss of face" seem increasingly archaic.

There is a related aspect to the concept of honor that makes it

difficult, but by no means impossible, to enter into Homer's world. This is the fact that honor belongs to hierarchical and undemocratic forms of society. Honor concerns one's place in a social hierarchy. At the beginning of the *Iliad* when Achilles suffers an insult through the loss of his concubine, it is not just a personal affront; it is a slight to his social status. He has been shamed in the eyes of those around him and consequently has suffered a loss of status as a member of the warrior aristocracy of which he is a part. Today we are more likely to think of such slights as an affront to our dignity. Dignity, in contrast to honor, is an eminently democratic concept that is at the basis of our idea of human rights. Our dignity is not felt to be the result of certain accomplishments or our place in society; it is thought to be constitutive of our very humanity. All have dignity by virtue of their humanity alone, while honor belongs to a person by virtue of specific outstanding accomplishments.

The centrality of honor is one feature – albeit hardly the only one – that distinguishes premodern from modern societies. Honor remains linked not only to status but to the fulfillment of one's office or institutional role, whereas modern men and women typically think of themselves as “free agents,” independent of a particular role or an ascribed identity. Indeed, modern literature is full of examples of how ancient or medieval chivalric codes of behavior have become out of place in a world that no longer recognizes the caste distinctions that sustain them. “Don Quixote,” Marx wrote, “long ago paid the penalty for wrongly imagining that knight errantry was compatible with all economic forms of society.”

Montesquieu, the most astute expositor of honor under the old regime in France, even spoke and approved of “false honor” – honor detached from moral virtue – as necessary for the survival of a monarchical regime. Montesquieu's greatest disciple, Alexis de Tocqueville, may also serve as a prescient guide. Far from glorifying honor, Tocqueville understands it as “nothing other than that particular rule, founded on a particular state, with the aid of which a people or a class distributes blame or praise.” Nevertheless, it is this peculiar species of aristocratic honor “born in the bosom of feudal society” that remains one of the most “bizarre notions” ever to have been conceived by the human mind.

Does this mean that Tocqueville, like Marx and Nietzsche, finds the ancient ideal of an aristocratic code of honor and its medieval successor to be too remote from the modern world to make sense? Not necessarily. Tocqueville finds a number of honor substitutes in modern democratic societies that still make the concept important. Americans, he believes – I think mistakenly – may not honor military exploits as they used to in the past, but honor is still accorded to a range of commercial undertakings. Honor is almost exclusively a matter of business transactions. To engage in commerce, to risk loss, to weather competition takes a special form of courage. It is not the warrior but the entrepreneur who is prepared to risk all on new undertakings who is the model of democratic honor. Commerce may not be a risk to life and limb, it may not confer status and rank as in the old aristocracies, but it requires a kind of fearlessness that seems appropriate for commercial societies. “Americans,” Tocqueville remarks, “who make a sort of virtue of commercial recklessness, cannot in any case stigmatize the reckless.”

Tocqueville’s account of a culture of honor in aristocratic and democratic societies is the best reading we have of what separates Homer from us. We are both like and unlike one another in a variety of ways. Tocqueville does not despair entirely about the future of honor. All societies, he believes, even modern democratic ones, retain some notion, however attenuated, of honor. Tocqueville associated democratic honor with fidelity to contracts and other bourgeois commercial practices, but there is more to honor than this. The signers of the Declaration of Independence pledged “our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor” to the cause of independence. More recently, it has been argued that a reinvigorated sense of honor is necessary as an incentive to moral courage to resist injustice and struggle against oppression. Honor, in this account, can be associated with ideas of courage and resistance – consider the examples of Rosa Parks and Nelson Mandela – but does not require comprehensive and questionable doctrines of human perfection.

If we need one further example of why the Homeric ideas of honor are not entirely passé, there are many parts of the world today, especially in Asia and the Middle East, where honor still means something like respect or loyalty to the “honor group,” the

family, tribe, clan, or religious sect. To attack or insult any member of the group is tantamount to an attack on the group as a whole. Thus we often hear of “honor killings” when someone is believed to have brought shame or disgrace upon the family or village. Terrorists who are willing to kill themselves as well as others often appear to be fighting less for some tangible good than to redress what is deemed a sense of insult or humiliation to the group. These incentives for action can appear as opaque or barbaric only so long as we fail to comprehend the place of honor in our moral psychology. The political scientist Pierre Hassner has described this as “the dialectic between the barbarian and the bourgeois”: that is, a struggle between the modern West with its largely pacified and satisfied citizen bodies and those still premodern areas that are prepared to use the instruments of violence and terror to respond to humiliation and contempt. Unless we in the West learn to appreciate the role that honor still continues to play in societies other than our own, so long will we remain disarmed in attempting to understand them. The best antidote to our current lack of understanding is a serious engagement with the *Iliad*.