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War and Literature: A Reciprocity

In the second book of *The Iliad*, Agamemnon, the supreme commander of the Greek forces, issues an order:

“Our work drags on, unfinished as always, hopeless—
The labor of war that brought us here to Troy.
So come, follow my orders. All obey me now.
Cut and run! Sail home to the fatherland we love!
We’ll never take the broad streets of Troy.”

This order contradicts not only the will of Zeus and the determination of fate (which decree the Greeks as ultimately victorious) but the desires of Agamemnon himself. We are told that he intends to “test” his men with this command, that he does not desire them to obey it and retreat. But they do retreat: “They cried in alarm and charged toward the ships.”¹ It takes the goddesses Hera and Athena and the hero Odysseus to set things right. Agamemnon has misjudged the morale of his troops. His command is an error in judgment, in leadership.

Such errors, as Homer knew and as we know, are common in warfare. But Agamemnon’s is not left as a simple misjudgment. It becomes retrospectively far more suggestive and more complicated in Book 9 when he actually does lose his nerve and gives the same order—this time meaning it to be taken straightforwardly and obeyed. He uses precisely the same words as he had in his earlier “test” of his soldiers:

“Obey me now, all you Argives.
Cut and run! Sail home to the fatherland we love!

We'll never take the broad streets of Troy.”²

This time however the command confuses troops who are prepared and willing to fight and it takes Diomedes and Odysseus to set things right again. Agamemnon has twice given the same command, but with opposite intentions. And on each occasion those under his command act in opposition to those intentions, retreating when he intended them to fight and fighting when he intended them to retreat.

At this point in a class on *The Iliad* I ask my second year cadets at the United States Air Force Academy what this gross inconsistency tells us about Agamemnon and what we can learn about leadership from it. Cadets respond with a variety of observations:

- It's absurd to give an order one doesn't want carried out.
- Agamemnon is a coward.
- Without captains like Diomedes and Odysseus he'd be toast.

And then they go deeper:

- Agamemnon has lost touch with his men.

Why?

- Because he has lost touch with himself. He's not a coward but something more dangerous: a commander whose ambition has led him to lose himself and so lose his command.

This final perception of Agamemnon's disastrous flaw—at which cadets in an introductory literature course invariably arrive without much guidance from me—comes very close to the Homeric judgment of him in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Homer's audience knew that Agamemnon—wealthy, ambitious, physically courageous—was ultimately a loser, that he had sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to his military ambition, and that he would return home to be murdered by his wife and her lover, thus initiating the events that Aeschylus would trace through the three plays of the *Oresteia*.

One of the reasons cadets spot this pattern quickly is that it fits with their current Academy Officer Development System (ODS) which outlines a progress from their first to their fourth year as developing leaders. The concentration in the first year is on Personal Leadership, in the second on Interpersonal Leadership, in the third on Team Leadership, and finally in the fourth on Organizational Leadership. The movement is obviously from oneself through smaller groups to the larger

organization. Successful accomplishment of each stage depends on comprehending and achieving the one preceding it. Cadets can apply this developmental model to the various degrees of leadership in *The Iliad* as embodied in the various hero kings who are the commanders, each of whom is highly individualized with his own strengths and liabilities. In our example they can see that Agamemnon can never be successful in the advanced, large, difficult understanding of supreme command (Organizational Leadership) because he has not realized the first necessary step: the development of “personal awareness” (Personal Leadership). He does not know who he is and so in the end he can know nothing, be nothing.

If I were required to compare the immediacy, power, and grace of the exploration of leadership in Homer with these qualities as they inhabit the Academy’s Officer Development System I would confess to a preference for Homer. But that sort of comparison is neither fair nor useful. What is fair and useful is to see how the very leadership qualities which our potential young officers work to acquire were celebrated and analyzed twenty-seven hundred years ago in the greatest of all war stories. The fact that Agamemnon of *The Iliad* can be fitted into this present-day grid illustrates the vast antiquity that the ordeal of leadership sustains and how literature permits us to preserve and analyze it.

If we turn from Agamemnon to Hector we can find another archetype of leadership and its corruption and decline. Hector begins as a complete human being: husband, father, general, warrior; he shows himself to be ethical, loyal, loving, and valiant. But as the war moves on he too yields to its embrace: he gives himself over to the act of killing, finishing off an already wounded and dying Patroclus, ignoring the bird sign from Zeus to withdraw the Trojan attack and so over-extending his army—until he finds himself alone before the walls of Troy to face Achilles and Athena. The lesson is one in the executive essential to maintain balance, proportion, breadth of view in triumph as well as in defeat. It led one of my most able cadets to write a strong paper on what he called “demoralization and war.”

In more contemporary terms, the protagonist of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* undergoes a different sort of dissociation from his duty as an officer. Early in the novel when Frederick Henry is wounded he thinks first of his men; then when he discovers his serious injuries he immediately attempts to ignore them and continues to try to locate his people. He’s a good officer. But after he falls in love with Catherine this changes. The war goes badly and becomes a retreat and Lt. Henry’s actions in it become more clouded and ambivalent, reflective of the disorder surrounding him. Finally he permits one of his men to execute a wounded deserter whom he himself has shot. Shortly after that the executing soldier deserts and then so does Henry, with some lethal encouragement from military police looking for scapegoats. So I ask my students what is happening. Does Henry’s

failure as an officer have anything to do with being in love? Is his personal life irrelevant? Has his love for Catherine somehow separated him from his duty or somehow qualified it in his own eyes? Hector chooses duty over Andromache; Lt. Henry chooses Catherine over duty. Compare the results.

Of course what conclusions cadets come to on such questions matter less than the serious awareness that the questions exist, have always existed, and will exist for them as officers. And it matters to me as their teacher that they learn to value literature as vivid, specific, universal application of real questions. Literature is a medium for representing and thinking about the hard stuff: How well do I know myself? Are my values mutually supporting or in conflict? Am I still able to see and consider the contexts of my actions? Executive hard stuff. Officer hard stuff.

But I have called the relation of literature and war a reciprocity. So far I have tried to suggest how literature helps with war—and of course my colleagues teach this too. But less well acknowledged is that war helps with literature. How does it do this? I have space for only two brief examples.

In *Hamlet* Ophelia witnesses what she takes to be her lover's decline into madness and she laments her loss of the complete prince, "The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's, eye, tongue, sword . . ." And at the very end of the play Fortinbras commands:

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage,
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royal; and for his passage,
The soldiers' music and the rite of war
Speak loudly for him.

What might it mean to read *Hamlet* as a soldier's tale, as *Othello* has been read? *Hamlet* has most often been considered a drama about a philosophic youth, a contemplative man mired in a wicked stew of family desire, fratricide, and ambition. And yet there are many indications that a complete picture of Hamlet would include his role as soldier—as Ophelia and Fortinbras consider him. We might start from the perspective of Denmark as a "warlike state,"³ move to Hamlet's explicit admiration for the profession of arms—including his mastery with a sword—and emerge with quite a different character, the character of a tragically foiled warrior king.

Sophocles' Antigone gives her life to bury a brother fallen in battle. I ask my cadets if this makes any kind of sense: "I mean, who does that?" They respond with "We do." The idea of putting themselves in harm's way to retrieve and honor the body of a dead brother or sister is far from arbitrary to them. On the contrary, to leave no comrade behind is to these prospective officers perfectly natural and

right, just as it is to Antigone and for many of the same reasons, and it requires no rational defense. We might find that perceiving the tragedy from the perspective of warrior aspirations and values, through what we might call the lens of war, opens it, reopens it, to our richer understanding.

Notes

1. 1. Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1998), 104 (2.161-165, 174).
2. 2. *The Iliad*, 252 (9. 30-32).
3. 3. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 1982), 284 (3.1.153), 418 (5.2.400-405), 179 (1.2.9).

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