

Casey Dué and Mary Ebbott

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

**I**n 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

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.

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 Believing that he has been disrespected and stripped of honor by Agamemnon, he has withdrawn from battle.<sup>2</sup> The Greeks, now losing without him, beg him to return. He says (*Iliad* 9.323–327):

μὲν γὰρ ὅτε τις ἄνηρ ἴδῃ  
 πρὸς τὸν ἄρσενος ἀπὸ τοῦ βίου  
 ἄρσενος ἄρσενος ἀπὸ τοῦ βίου  
 ἄρσενος ἀπὸ τοῦ βίου  
 ἄρσενος ἀπὸ τοῦ βίου

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):

μ , / , μ μ / μ /  
 / , / , μ μ / /  
 μ , / < > , μ , / μ μ /  
 / μ μ / μ μ / μ

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 edglings screams, so I will lead o 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.<sup>3</sup> 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 ghting 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

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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).<sup>5</sup>

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

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):

is 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.<sup>oacp</sup>

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*.  
*Iliad*

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 ( μῆνην / , *Iliad* 17.4–5).<sup>13</sup>

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):

μῆνην  
 ,  
 μῆνην .



μ μ  
, μ ,  
.

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

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. These 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.

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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> When a character laments in Homeric poetry, for example, the performer/narrator also laments. That permeable

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. (His 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 Rouble, 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 Rouble’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 does from the end/TD

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

In the past Abbott 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*

## 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 (  $\mu$  ) as a motivation for Achilles' withdrawal see *I. a.*, 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 *Wa*, 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, *A. a* 40-71 and *O. r*, 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  $\mu$  in the opening lines of the *O. r*, (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 *I. a.*, 9.14-16, Sophocles, *A. t.* 828–832, and Euripides, *A. r. ac.*<sup>1</sup> 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 *I. a.* 16.7–11 now should be included among them, and adduces also *I. a.* 17.133–137 where Ajax protects the body of Patroklos like a lion its cub and *I. a.* 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 *I. a.* 11.113–121, which compares the Trojans watching Agamemnon.

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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





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