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COMBAT TRAUMA AND THE ANCIENT GREEKS
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INTRODUCTION

Combat Trauma: The Missing Diagnosis in Ancient Greece?

David Konstan

I was not quite five years old when World War II came to an end with the surrender of Japan on August 15, 1945. At the time, we were staying in a rooming house in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains, where many families—that is to say, mothers and their children—spent summers to avoid the heat and the danger of contagious polio (as it was imagined) in New York City; the husbands worked in the city and drove out to join their families on weekends. I still recall vividly the response to the announcement of the end of hostilities. The women collected pots and pans—which had a symbolic value, since metal was recycled and scarce during the war—and marched around the central building, clashing them like cymbals or banging on them with spoons and ladles. This wasn’t ancient Greece: there was no image of a god to lead the procession, much less a giant phallus, like the one that Dicaeopolis carries after he negotiates a private truce with the Spartans in Aristophanes’ comedy, The Acharnians. But the spirit of joy was not so very different, I imagine.

It was shortly after this that the son of one of the other couples arrived, right at the end of the summer. He was about 20, and seemed old to me, not only because he was a grown-up, but because he was very withdrawn, barely speaking to other people; he seemed to spend the greater part of the day throwing a bowie knife at the ground, which invariably landed blade down despite the twirl he gave it. I asked my mother at one point why he was so strange, and she explained that he had been in the war and seen things he couldn’t talk about. I think I intuitively understood what she meant; in any case, the episode has stayed with me until today.

This was my first experience, indirect as it was, of what is today called combat trauma, but was then, I think, still known as shell shock. Years later, after an aborted career plan as an astronaut and a professional degree in classics, I found myself studying up close two cultures—ancient Greece and Rome—in which war was a permanent condition of life, and virtually
no citizen escaped the duty of military service. Like most of my peers, I was impressed by the depth and beauty of classical literature and philosophy, and didn’t wonder at the connection this might have with the unremitting violence they experienced at firsthand. I had read, for example, the passage in Plato’s *Republic*, in which he recognizes how difficult it will be to train the guardians of his ideal state to be aggressive toward strangers and yet mild toward their own people. Socrates asks his interlocutor Glaucon, who in real life was one of Plato’s brothers, how people who have such fierce characters will “not be savage toward each other and their fellow citizens?” “It won’t be easy,” Glaucon replies. “And yet,” Socrates says, “they must be gentle toward their own, but rough toward their enemies. Otherwise, they won’t wait for others to destroy them but will do it first themselves” (*Republic* 2, 375B5–C6). Plato’s answer is to adduce the example of guard dogs, which can be trained to protect their own but attack anyone they don’t recognize. It never occurred to me, or, it seems, to Plato, to wonder whether war itself might brutalize these guardians—a nicely sanitized word for what was in fact a military caste—and increase the danger that they might turn their belligerence against their own families upon returning home.

It is remarkable, and has indeed been remarked, that the Greeks and Romans seem never to have identified the pathology of combat trauma explicitly.¹ Not that they were alone in having this blind spot: it was really only with World War I that such effects of battle began to be observed and identified as a disorder, and more recently still that post-traumatic stress in general has been classified as a medical condition. When I first read the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in Greek, in graduate school, it was during the heyday of the New Criticism, and we were attuned to finding deep meanings in the texts we admired. No longer did we view Homer as a primitive poet; his epics touched on grand themes of fate and freedom, collective identity versus individualism. We—or some of us—interpreted Achilles’ refusal to fight after he had been insulted by Agamemnon, and his declaration that his honor came not from the king but from Zeus, as a sign of a new conception of personal autonomy, an internalization of values that was the harbinger of a modern sense of morality and responsibility. We puzzled over how characters could assign to Zeus' scales the outcome of a battle between warriors, and wondered whether this was merely a metaphor or an indication of a pre-moral fatalism. Even then, I recall thinking that a tendency to see the hand of destiny behind life-and-death events was not foreign even today, and that in time of war men and women seeking to brace themselves for battle often say things like “if that bullet has my name on it,” or imagine that there is a day appointed for their death and there’s no avoiding it when it comes, but till then they are safe. But these thoughts were marginal to my appreciation of the poem as an exploration of ethics and human consciousness.

Then I encountered Jonathan Shay’s remarkable book, *Achilles in Vietnam.*² I confess it was a student who urged me to read it, since I might
have put off examining a volume with such a title. Shay, a psychiatrist who had worked with traumatized veterans of the war in Vietnam, saw a deep similarity between the experiences of his patients and that of Achilles, as narrated in the poem. Very summarily, Shay found there were two conditions that, in combination, were catalysts for combat trauma: first, a loss of faith in the commanding officer or other representative of the system, and hence in the justification for the war; and second, the death in battle of an especially close friend, invariably described as gentle or loving, however murderous he might have been on the battlefield. When Agamemnon humiliates Achilles by taking his war prize, the captured girl Briseis, he loses Achilles’ respect not only for his authority but also for the motive of the entire war, which was the theft, as the Greeks saw it, of Menelaus’ bride Helen. If Agamemnon, Menelaus’ brother and the leader of the expedition to recover Helen, can take away Achilles’ girl with impunity, why should Achilles risk his life to rescue his tramp of a sister-in-law? Then, as a result of Achilles’ abstention, his dearest friend Patroclus enters the battle in his stead, and is slain. The consequence of such a double whammy, Shay explained, is often a period of manic battle frenzy, in which the person feels unusually powerful and invulnerable, or at any event indifferent to death, and wreaks havoc upon the enemy, just as Achilles does, until he slays Hector, the man responsible for his comrade’s death. If he survives, he may then experience a range of post-traumatic symptoms, including flashbacks, trouble sleeping, and a generalized rage or hostility that may express itself in unmotivated aggression against others.

Of course, there is no indication that Achilles suffers from such a syndrome at the end of the *Iliad*. True, he senselessly abuses the body of Hector, but he eventually agrees to return it to Hector’s father for a whopping ransom; he remains his violent self, at one point threatening old Priam, but he is not represented as mentally disturbed in the aftermath. Shay was aware of this and suggested that the elaborate rituals by which Achilles honored his friend and committed his corpse to the pyre might have helped him to recover his sanity. In Vietnam, when a soldier was killed his body was often whisked away as quickly as possible and his mates were urged to get over their grief, and so found no healthy means of working it through. This is, I think, a weak point in Shay’s argument, for reasons I will indicate in a moment. But what I most took away from Shay’s book—and this changed my whole view of the epic—was the sense that Homer knew what war was about, and was writing for an audience who did as well. The *Iliad* is first and foremost a brilliant study in how people behave under the stress of battle. It is not a mere repository of traditional motifs, organized so as to tell a great story or to illustrate timeless ethical issues, though it is those things too, of course. But it is, above all, a poem of war.

Now, Achilles is not the only hero to go on a rampage. It happens all the time in the *Iliad*, and even has a technical name in Greek: it is an *aristeia*, deriving from the Greek word meaning “best.” Heroes, like...
athletes, have their sudden moments of perfect coordination and exhilaration, and for a while they are invincible. From the ancient Greek point of view, these episodes of elation are not signs of mental disorder, but the highest manifestation of a fighter's excellence. All the heroes can't all be suffering from combat trauma—or can they? Might it be that the Greeks and Romans did not isolate such a syndrome in their soldiers precisely because it was so common, so practically universal, that it didn't stand out? Can we speak of a culture of trauma?

Let me offer another example of a soldier who put his life at risk in what might seem an act of desperation. During the famous battle at Thermopylae, in which 300 Spartans perished defending a narrow pass against the invading Persians, a certain Aristodemus, Herodotus tells us (7.229–231), missed the fighting because of eye trouble. Upon returning alive to Sparta, he was the object of “reproach and dishonor” (oneidos, atimē) and was dubbed “he who trembled” (ho tresas, 231); indeed, another Spartan who also sat out the conflict for the same reason escaped such slander by committing suicide. Aristodemus, however, sought to remove the stigma by distinguishing himself subsequently at the battle of Plataea, where, Herodotus says (9.71), he proved himself to be far and away the bravest of all, and clearly the best candidate for the customary award for courage. The Spartans, however, declined to grant him this honor, because “he clearly desired to die on account of the censure that attached to him, and only by raging madly and leaving the battle formation did he demonstrate great deeds; Posidonius, however, was a commendable man although he did not wish to die, and precisely to this extent he was the better.” Now, Aristodemus is not described as having suffered from combat trauma; indeed, he was out of action at the time of his ostensible disgrace. It was just this chance occurrence that led to his foolhardy bravado in battle, in order to annul any suspicion that he had been shirking. Here is a man with a death wish, traumatized—if it is a trauma—by the shame attaching to his having missed the fatal skirmish. His motive is to restore his honor—falsely impugned—as a warrior in the eyes of his comrades, not doubts about the justice of the war or agony over the loss of a personal friend. His behavior is deliberate and oriented toward a goal. It does not seem in principle different from that of Achilles.

What happened when these battle-hardened fighters returned home, and had now to adjust to peacetime life amidst their families? Were they able to make the transition easily, trained, like Plato’s guardians, to behave mildly toward their fellow citizens and relatives, despite their ferocity toward the enemy, or did they carry over some of the violence they exhibited on the battlefield into the domestic setting? There is one play in particular that would seem to constitute a reflection on this question. At the beginning of Euripides’ Heracles, Amphitryon, Heracles’ father, explains that he, his daughter-in-law Megara, and the children she has had with Heracles are to be killed by Lycus, the tyrant who has usurped power in
Thebes. Lycus’ motive is to destroy all the relatives of the former king so as to eliminate potential rivals for the throne. Heracles cannot help his family, since he has gone to Hades to capture Cerberus, the hound of hell. Just when the situation seems hopeless, Heracles appears, and when Lycus returns to kill his family, he slays Lycus instead. At this juncture, Iris, the messenger of the gods, and Lyssa, that is, “Madness” personified, descend and announce that, at Hera’s orders, they are going to drive Heracles mad. Heracles immediately begins foaming at the mouth and imagines that he has driven in a chariot to Argos, where he will take vengeance on Eurystheus, the king at whose orders he undertook his labors. Amphitryon asks in alarm: “My son, what is happening to you . . . ? Is the slaughter of the corpses whom you just now killed making you frenzied?” (965–7).

Under the impression, however, that he is in Eurystheus’ palace and that his father and children are those of Eurystheus, he kills his three sons and Megara as well, collapsing just before he manages to add Amphitryon to the carnage. When Heracles awakens and becomes aware of what he has done, he contemplates committing suicide, but at this point Theseus, whom Heracles had rescued from Hades, arrives with troops from Athens, for the purpose of driving out the tyrant Lycus. Heracles accepts Theseus’ offer of asylum and departs with him for Athens.

In his deluded condition, Heracles, the greatest mortal champion in Greek mythology, returns from his adventures and ends up slaughtering his own family—the very people he hoped to save from Lycus’ vengeance. Ever since Wilamowitz, the great German scholar who produced a three-volume edition of this tragedy, some have seen Heracles’ madness as a consequence of his own nature or actions. Most recently, for example, Robert Emmet Meagher states, “Lyssa is merely a prop, an empty mask, as it were. Herakles’ madness neither required then nor requires now any elaborate explanation for those who have taken part in the insane rampage of war”; his domestic violence is simply an extension of his martial savagery, and he is best understood as a “trauma victim.”3 Kathleen Riley, after surveying earlier views, arrives at exactly the opposite conclusion: “There is nothing in Euripides’ portrait of the sane hero to suggest that killing is attractive to him or that his normal use of violence is excessive,” and she takes the cause of his madness to be wholly external, that is, induced by Lyssa at Hera’s behest. On this view, brutality in the home and violence at war are neatly quarantined, with no suggestion that the two might be connected. But Riley also notes that “The madness of Herakles . . . is dramatized, paradoxically, in an extremely well-reasoned and orderly manner,” and that “Herakles’ hallucinatory exploits, which appear to the bystanders as crazed and haphazard, are, in his mind, one continuous and logical sequence of events.” Now, this kind of reason within madness is not foreign to the traumatized state: the sufferer imagines a threat and reacts accordingly. The disorder manifests itself not necessarily in a lack of calculation, but in mistaking friends for foes. Once we accept the misidentification, the rest of the behavior may be perfectly rational.
Are we, then, to see Heracles as an example—rare in classical literature—of combat trauma? He is certainly hallucinating: this is what Madness has done to him. He is not directing his violence consciously against his own family but against genuine enemies. Is his delusion, which in the play is ascribed to Hera’s hostility but is not otherwise motivated, best understood as a consequence of his ferocious campaigns? His father, after all, suggests that the sight of the corpses of Lycus and his men may be the cause: not war, precisely, but an analogous kind of violence. Has he lost the ability to distinguish between those dear to him and his adversaries, as Plato feared might happen to a poorly trained dog or guardian?

Such an interpretation is possible, but I should like to step back, for a moment, from Heracles’ manifest delirium and consider what he imagines he is accomplishing. His intention is to slay not just Eurystheus, the tyrannical and jealous king who sent Heracles on his all but impossible missions, but his entire family, wife and children included. Is this plan also a function of his frenzy, or are the effects of Lyssa’s intervention limited to the confusion of identities between Eurystheus’ family and his own? If his altered mental condition is responsible for his entire action, not just his delusion but also his desire to wipe out Eurystheus’ family, then we might conclude that, under normal circumstances, Heracles does not massacre women and children; he is a warrior, yes, but not a butcher, and we must attribute his extraordinary brutality to his madness—his combat trauma, if you like. But what if we are meant to see his attack, as he imagines it, against Eurystheus’ family as a perfectly sane thing to do? The problem here is that such an act does not seem to be different, in principle, from what the tyrant Lycus was planning for Heracles’ own family. With this, the moral distinction between Heracles and Lycus—whose name, let us recall, is Greek for “wolf”—is blurred if not altogether eradicated. Shall we say, then, that this kind of barbaric behavior is consistent with Greek ideas of vengeance, or rather that both Heracles and Lycus manifest symptoms of a kind of war madness? The tragedy itself does not call attention to the analogy between Heracles’ and Lycus’ intentions, but that may reinforce the point: good guys and bad guys alike are prone to extreme acts of retribution, and in a world beset by war and civil strife, it may be hard to tell who is crazy and who is not. Everyone bears scars.

Now, you may be thinking I am in danger of reading too much into a tragedy that is really about how we human beings are playthings in the hands of the gods—“they kill us for their sport,” as Gloucester says in King Lear—and not about war trauma at all; after all, Heracles was most recently in Hades, not on the battlefield, and what do we know about Lycus’ activities? Recently, I came across the following words of caution:

If there is anything pleasant in life, it is doing what we aren’t meant to do. If there is anything pleasant in criticism, it is finding out what we aren’t meant to find out. It is the method by which we treat as significant what the author did not mean to be significant, by which
we single out as essential what the author regarded as incidental. Thus, if one brings out a book on turnips, the modern scholar tries to discover from it whether the author was on good terms with his wife; if a poet writes on buttercups, every word he says may be used as evidence against him at an inquest of his views on a future existence. On this fascinating principle, we delight to extort economic evidence from Aristophanes, because Aristophanes knew nothing of economics.

Though this sounds like a critique of postmodern over subtlety, it actually dates to the year 1911, when Monsignor Ronald A. Knox opened in this way his lecture on “Studies in the Literature of Sherlock Holmes,” delivered before the Gryphon Club at Trinity College, Oxford (published in The Blue Book Magazine 1912, and again Essays in Satire in 1928). The lecture was a send-up of hyper-ingenious criticism, like that which argued that there were really two Dr. Watsons, not just one (this idea too was, of course, an invention of Monsignor Knox). But let us take the Monsignor’s reference to Aristophanes as a reminder that this poet, at least, was most certainly on the side of peace, and wrote three comedies in its favor: Acharnians, which I mentioned above; Peace, in celebration of a truce with Sparta; and the unforgettable Lysistrata, in which the women organize a sex strike to induce their husbands to terminate the war. Surely this testifies to an opposition to warfare and is a sign that not everyone in Athens was traumatized.

But let us take a closer look. In Aristophanes’ Acharnians, Dicaeopolis seeks to persuade charcoal sellers from the deme of Acharnae, who form the chorus of the play, that the war with Sparta is a blunder (497–556). As he explains it, Aspasia, a former courtesan from Miletus who was now Pericles’ concubine, pushed Pericles into declaring an embargo against the nearby town of Megara. It all began, he says, when some drunken Athenian youngsters carried off a whore named Simaetha from Megara. In return, the Megarians stole two of Aspasia’s own girls. The Megarians, reduced to starvation, appealed to Sparta for help, and so the war began. 5

Now, this is a pretty silly reason for initiating a major war, which went on to last almost 30 years, but Dicaeopolis does not leave it at that. He argues rather that the Megarian reaction is understandable, since if a Spartan had stolen so much as a puppy from one of their own allies, the Athenians would have sent a fleet of 300 ships to avenge it (541–556). In other words, it is not just Pericles’ fault: the Athenians as a whole are hotheads, which is why they are in favor of continuing the war. If they feel they have been slighted, never mind how trivial the offense, they rise to the occasion, and to do otherwise would violate their sense of manliness. A disposition to anger or indignation was conceived of as the hallmark of free citizens, who did not take insults lying down. 6 A quick temper, in particular, was characteristic of the great fighters at Marathon, who repelled the Persian invasion and were ready to fight at a moment’s notice. 7 It is not an accident
that Dicaeopolis puts his head on a chopping block before offering his arguments. These men have a sting in their tails—indeed, the chorus in another of Aristophanes’ comedies are dressed as wasps; if you wish to reason with people who carry a chip on their shoulders, you had best assume a humble posture.

It is one thing to be hot-tempered and to think this is a virtue, another thing to be traumatized by the horrors that one has witnessed, and even committed, in battle. I do not mean for a moment to minimize or trivialize the psychological problems that have afflicted veterans of modern wars. I am trying to explain rather why ancient Greeks and Romans, who fought almost continually in vicious hand-to-hand engagements, seem not to have recognized such a syndrome. The cause, I think, may lie in a valorization of irascibility, or a disposition to pugnaciousness, which was nourished by combat experience and which in turn inclined them to fight whenever they thought their honor had been challenged. Of course, some men emerged from battle more scarred than others, less able to function in civil society. But rather than label such people as damaged, one might prize them as fierce warriors and send them back to the front. In Aristophanes’ *Birds*, two Athenians establish a utopian empire among the birds. At one point, a young sociopath turns up, inspired by the birds’ own declaration earlier in the play (757–758) that in their new city boys will be allowed to beat their fathers—the worst offense against the family that an ordinary Greek could imagine. It turns out that the laws in Birdland will in fact require him to tend his father in old age. But Peisthetaerus, who is now the leader of state, tells the boy: “Don’t beat your father” (1363–1364), then dresses him up as a fighting cock and urges him to find employment as a soldier: “Since you are so warlike (*makhimos*), fly off to Thrace and fight there” (1368–1369).

My object in these introductory remarks has been to call attention to a problem—the apparent absence of a concern with combat trauma among people almost continually at war—not to provide a definite answer or set of answers. Much more might be said, and is said in the chapters that follow, in relation both to the evidence for combat trauma in antiquity, which is by no means exhausted in my brief survey, and to the reasons why it was so rarely singled out as a consequence of war. Perhaps the most basic cause of this blind spot was the pervasive glorification of militarism, and the idea that it was a necessary condition for survival in a world where enemies might always attack and defeat might well mean annihilation. Under such conditions, any acknowledgment of the negative consequences of war was repressed beneath the dominant celebration of valor and duty.

In the first chapter, Kurt Raaflaub provides a chillingly comprehensive overview of the nature of war in archaic and classical Greece and its impact on civil society, including such matters as care for the dead, treatment of the injured, and the effects of war on the noncombatant population. Following this, William Race offers an original interpretation of
the reception of Odysseus in the land of the Phaeacians, showing how carefully and sensitively King Alcinous guides Odysseus in the process of facing the horrors of the war in Troy, thereby enabling him to overcome his crippling relation to the past and prepare himself for the trials that face him at home—where he will have to act again with uncompromising brutality. Corinne Pache, in turn, argues that women’s experience of war is also in evidence in Homer’s Odyssey: it is no accident that Penelope, Odysseus’ long-suffering wife, is compared to a lioness, an analogy usually reserved for male warriors. Pache examines the connection with the experiences of a troop of women who saw action in Iraq, and who were called, not without subtle ironies, Team Lioness. Each moment of women’s endurance illuminates the other and helps bring the role of gender in war into sharp focus.

Lawrence Tritle brings to his discussion of ancient combat stress his personal experience of war in Vietnam, with which he, like Shay, sees clear analogies. He argues forcefully that post-traumatic stress disorder can be clearly recognized in the reports of ancient warfare that come down to us. Jason Crowley, in turn, places more emphasis on the relative lack of testimony to such trauma in our sources, and explains it as a consequence of the differences between ancient and modern warfare—a little like the way Shay accounted for the reintegration of Achilles into the Greek community as a result of the ritual burial of his slain friend. Crowley argues that the communal support for warfare as a source of glory, and the conditions of direct combat, which offered the chance to react immediately to threats (not to mention that periods of service were relatively brief), contributed to diminishing the risk of the kind of trauma experienced by troops today. We may see something of this ready transition from war to peace in Sara Monoson’s account of Socrates’ war experience, as recorded by Plato; Socrates, like his fellows, seems to have moved effortlessly between the battlefield and civilian life. And yet Socrates is also characterized as exceptional in this regard, which casts indirect light on the experiences of more ordinary soldiers. But technical factors too might have affected the way war was seen—or not seen. Juan Sebastian de Vivo argues that the chaos of battle may well have been exacerbated by the construction of the military helmet, which imposed a severe limitation on vision, and that one function of the victory monument or “trophy” that was set up after a battle was to impose some shape or order on the indescribable and terrifying experience of war.

Nancy Rabinowitz examines how Greek tragedy represented the effect of war on women—women as victims now, not Team Lioness fighters (though they were victims, too). Women, as she observes, suffered their own kind of combat trauma, thanks to the madness of men, and they too can act in monstrous ways, when sufficiently tormented and oppressed. The plays are not “antiwar,” but rather revelatory of what war does, to combatants and noncombatants alike.
Nancy Sherman takes up the problem of trust under conditions of war, particularly in connection with a betrayal or abuse on the part of those in command—one of the two causes that Shay identified as leading to post-traumatic stress disorder. War invites suspicion, whether of comrades who fail to fulfill their end of the bargain or of those back home, who may seem smug when they speak from their position of relative safety to returning veterans who have experienced unutterable things. How does one learn to have confidence in others, after a loss of faith? Sherman offers an analysis of trust as an emotion and shows how an ancient Greek tragedy, Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*, reveals how trust can be restored.

Alan Sommerstein looks rather at comedy and shows that the horrors of war are systematically avoided. Generals may be mentioned and sometimes appear on stage, but they are figures of fun and ridicule; scenes of slaughter may be described, but there is a dispassionate quality about the accounts. Even Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* limits the effects of war to what we might call discomfort—there are no men to sleep with—rather than truly traumatic experiences; death is kept at arm’s length. We see that, even in the so-called antiwar comedies, war was in some way sanitized in the genre. Sharon James, however, focuses on one of the comedies of Menander (who wrote a century or so after Aristophanes) and treats his play, “The Shield” (*Aspis*, in Greek), as a kind of cathartic experience, in which survivor’s guilt, family trauma, and combat stress are constantly on exhibit but resolved through a fantasy of rescue and reunion. The indirection, the ellipses, and avoidances that Sommerstein documents have a function, for they allow grief to give way to healing, and comedy wins out.

Thomas Palaima contrasts the unsentimental acceptance of war, in classical antiquity, as the natural condition of mankind, with the idealistic (which is not to say thoughtless) optimism of some modern politicians and intellectuals who have expected to see an end to war for all time. It is not that the ancients liked war, or at least no more than moderns do (some do, after all), but because they described accurately its horrors, its traumas we might say, their poems and plays still speak to soldiers and veterans. Some of our contemporaries capture war in this way—Palaima cites songs by Johnny Cash and by Bruce Springsteen, among others—but it takes a special talent: Homer had it, as did Euripides. Finally, Paul Woodruff looks at the representation, also by Sophocles, of a woman—Electra—who cannot forget or forgive; but this is theater, and theater, he explains, offers possibilities of safe identification and closure. Finally, Woodruff offers in illustration a play of his own, written on his return from Vietnam, drawing inspiration from Homer’s *Odyssey*. The moving scene in which Odysseus and Penelope, here in modern and much altered guise, are reunited concludes his essay and this volume.

Reviewing the contents of this work, it seems to me that the greatest danger that traumatized veterans pose to civil society lies, perhaps, in the area of domestic violence, the effects of trauma precisely on the
noncombatants, and so, by reflex, on the damaged soldiers themselves. I may be permitted, then, to conclude this introduction with a rather chilling passage from a later time and another society, but a world not wholly different, perhaps, from classical Athens. St. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, describes his sainted mother Monica, whom he adored throughout his life, as follows:

When she reached marriageable age, she was given to a man and served him as her master (*domino*). . . . She bore with his infidelities and never had any quarrel with her husband on this account. . . . He was, moreover, as exceptional for his quick temper (*ira fervidus*) as for his kindness. She knew that an angry (*irato*) husband should not be opposed, not merely by anything she did, but even by a word. Once she saw that he had become calm and quiet, and that the occasion was opportune, she would explain the reason for her action, in case perhaps he had reacted without sufficient consideration. Indeed, many wives married to gentler (*mansuetiores*) husbands bore the marks of blows and suffered disfigurement to their faces. In conversation together they used to complain about their husbands’ behavior. Monica, speaking as if in jest but offering serious advice, used to blame their tongues. She would say that since the day when they heard the so-called matrimonial contract read out to them, they should reckon them to be legally binding documents by which they had become slaves (*ancillae*). She thought they should remember their condition and not proudly withstand their masters (*dominos*). The wives were astounded, knowing what a violent (*ferocem*) husband she had to put up with. Yet it was unheard of, nor was there ever a mark to show, that Patricius [Monica’s husband] had beaten his wife or that a domestic quarrel had caused dissenion between them for even a single day.⁸

St. Augustine is extolling his mother’s forbearance and perhaps exaggerating the brutality of other husbands. I am deeply conscious of the hazards of drawing conclusions about real life behavior from literary texts, however devout and self-revealing. But suppose that such household cruelty was not uncommon in the classical world—and I have not mentioned the beating of slaves, which, as Augustine goes on to say, even Monica approved of as a way of discouraging them from causing friction by their gossip between herself and her domineering mother-in-law. Of course, some people were more volatile than others, more troubled and tense, more given to sudden rages; the Greeks recognized that such temperaments were unbalanced, and Aristotle defined virtue as the mean between extremes of excess and deficiency. But in a society where the average level violence may have been more like that in a frontier town than in a modern city (though I wouldn’t want to underestimate the incidence of aggression there), and where there was a premium on channeling animosity into
militarism rather than disarming it entirely, the dividing line between irritability and pathology may have been blurrier than it is today, even to the point of disappearing altogether.

Notes

1. For a similar absence of what we regard as a clinical condition, see John T. Fitzgerald, “Paul, Wine in the Ancient Mediterranean World, and the Problem of Intoxication” (Paper delivered on 18 July 2013 at the 62nd annual conference of the Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense; cited by permission of the author): “although ancient writers did not operate with the modern conception of alcoholism, some were well aware of the difference between someone who was drunk on a particular occasion and someone who was habitually intoxicated. Seneca, for instance, says, ‘You will surely agree that there is a big difference between a person who is drunk (ebrius) and a drunkard (ebriosus). He who is actually drunk may be in this state for the first time and may not have the habit, while the drunkard is often free from drunkenness’ (Ep. 83.11). In a similar way Posidonius argued that the word ‘drunk’ (ebrius) was used in two different ways: ‘In the one case it is used of a man who is loaded with wine and has no control over himself (that is, “drunk”); in the other it refers to a man who is accustomed to get drunk, and is a slave to drink (that is, a “drunkard”)’ (apud Seneca, Ep. 83.10).’ Fitzgerald cites the medical historian Jacques Jouanna: ‘It is striking to note that the medical writings of the Hippocratic Corpus never condemn intoxication’ (Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers, trans. Neil Allies [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2012] p. 176). Fitzgerald notes further: ‘The basic medical premise, as Plato has the physician Eryximachus say in the Symposium, is simply that ‘drunkenness is harmful to man’’ (176c-d), namely, by causing sickness (cf. Jouanna 2012: 177).


5. MacDowell (1995, 65–6) notes that Thucydides assigns the Megarian Decree some role in bringing on hostilities and argues (66) that ‘Dikaiopolis’ account . . . is not inconsistent with the account given by Thucydides; it is not illogical or incredible; and I see no reason why it should not be essentially true.”


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