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Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming

Jonathan Shay, *Odysseus in America : combat trauma and the trials of homecoming*. New York: Scribner, 2002. xvi, 329 pages ; 24 cm. ISBN 0743211561 \$25.00.

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In the 1949 film classic *White Heat*, Fred Clark remarks to Jimmy Cagney: “We might all profit from a closer study of classical literature.” Jonathan Shay has taken this advice to heart in writing *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*. The book is a sequel to his bestseller *Achilles in Vietnam*. Both works use of Homer’s writings to address Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or as the author would rather call it, combat trauma, particularly among Vietnam Veterans. In *Odysseus in America*, Shay uses the *Odyssey* to explore the issues of the reintegration of combat soldiers into civilian life. Shay is not, nor does he pretend to be, an expert on Homer. He is a staff psychiatrist at the Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic in Boston, and the book is not an academic, or even a popular, study of *Odysseus* or Homer or Greek epic. As a working psychologist his interest is in the treatment and prevention of psychological injury to military personnel. He has used the *Odyssey*, as he did the *Iliad* in his previous work, unabashedly as a therapeutic tool.

Only the first third of the book specifically deals with the *Odyssey*. Much of this section is taken up in rehearsing the narrative: Shay’s commentary uses the text primarily as a hook to deal with the issue of combat trauma. The author has read widely in the scholarly literature and has had the assistance (which he readily acknowledges) of some of today’s leading Homerists. Scholars, though, will find little new from the perspective of textual criticism. Indeed, casually glancing at this book, a classicist might be tempted to pass it by. But Shay’s book is a *tour de force* that should be read by everyone in the field. His psychological interpretation of the text is sophisticated and thought-provoking. His use of the text to explore questions of the mind, and of character, are not at all dilettantish; indeed they are true to the tradition of the text. Shay is trained in the modern psychological neuroscience (no Freudian he) and yet uses classical literature and the modern academic commentary on it to great effect. Classicists, while they recognize the didactic element of the texts they study, often treat them as if they had no relevance to the modern experience. Shay’s book is a powerful example of how specialist literature, in the hands of an intelligent and curious writer, can inform an essay in an apparently unrelated field.

Odysseus in America is divided into three parts. As noted above, only the first, entitled ‘Unhealed Wounds,’ deals explicitly with the Odyssey. Aimed at those who have not read the text, this section narrates Odysseus’ story in simple, at times colloquial, terms. Shay divides the story into segments, each being used to illustrate, and elucidate, some element of the veteran’s return to civilian life from war. For example, “Odysseus Among the Rich Civilians” (i.e. the Phaeacians) discusses the instant tension between those who fought and those who didn’t. “Lotus Land: The Flight from Pain” addresses drug abuse and “What was the Siren’s Song?: Truth As Deadly Addiction,” is about the problems of memory and remembrance. While Shay’s view of the text is not deep in the scholarly sense, it is broad. For example, Shay’s notes that the “siren’s song” was not about sex, or homecoming, but was about “everything that the Achaeans and Trojans did and suffered in wide Troy” (12:184). Shay broadens this theme — the seductive nature of the search for truth — using the Odyssey effectively to illustrate an important theme for returning veterans. He frequently uses personal stories and literature, as well as his own ideas about war and therapy, to comment on the story. The Odyssey is a jumping-off point for a very wide-ranging and fascinating discussion of human nature and war.

Shay draws on the experiences of his patients (and others) for stories of combat trauma and its impact on homecoming. Since Shay has spent the last several decades treating Vietnam veterans this population is naturally his main focus. Yet he universalizes the experiences of modern veterans, drawing on the experience of returning American soldiers from the American Revolution and Civil War, both World Wars, Korea and the (first) Gulf War, as well as Vietnam. Some of his most moving and compelling evidence comes from two books written by World War I veterans, Willard Wallers, *The Veteran Comes Back* and Erich Maria Remarque’s *The Road Back*, the sequel to *All Quiet on the Western Front*. As in his earlier work, *Achilles in Vietnam*, Shay makes a compelling case that the Homeric epics can, and do, speak to the experiences of the modern soldier at war. If for no other reason, this is an important contribution to the modern understanding of Homer.

The second and third parts of the book, ‘Restoration’ and ‘Prevention’ concern themselves less directly with the Odyssey, yet Homer and classical authors, such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Plato and Aristotle, are cited throughout these portions of the book. For example, Shay notes the importance of rituals of return for soldiers in ridding the psyche of violent emotion, discussing the Roman *lustratio* as well as Aristotle’s idea of *katharsis*. Shay effectively brings in other Greek ideas, such as the contrast between *bia* (force) and *metis* (cunning), both in a military and in a psychological context. Indeed, one of Shay’s most important points is the way in which Greek and Latin terminology can be used to talk about concepts and feelings difficult to express in English. This is a point long understood by classicists, but it is worth explaining to a general audience. His exposition of the term *philos*, in contrast to “friend,” “buddy” or “pal” is an excellent case in point.

A key part of Shay’s argument is that combat trauma ought not only to be treated, but also, insofar as is possible in modern war, prevented. In this context, he is outspoken in his criticism of the individual rotation system used by the U.S. Army, which he identifies

as a major element in the prevalence of PTSD among modern veterans. Shay argues cogently that rotating units, and not individuals, both helps the soldiers cope better with the terrible psychological effects of modern war and improves their combat effectiveness. As it appears that American troops will be occupying Iraq for a considerable period, and quite possibly be involved in a lengthy guerrilla war, this discussion is timely and relevant. The U.S. military is still wedded to the rotation system that did so much psychological, and military, damage in Vietnam. In this case too, while this issue might seem distant from the interests of classicists, there is an important connection. Greco-Roman antiquity provides examples of almost every way of organizing a military force: warrior aristocrats, citizen militia, hereditary military castes and professional soldiers. While certainly we cannot, nor ought to, recreate past models, they can be quite useful in furthering modern debates, in this case the role and treatment of soldiers in civilian society.

An interesting element of Shay's books, particularly for classicists, is his discussion of the term *thumos*. This literally means "soul" or "spirit," but Shay defines it variously as "fighting spirit," "noble fighting heart" and, citing Amelie Rorty, "the energy of spirited honor," and argues that it is closely allied to the English word "character." An understanding of the modern American idea of the good soldier, and especially the good officer, is important in seeing what Shay is getting at. The ideal officer needs to be "great souled," in a sense, to accommodate psychologically the extraordinary contradictions in his or her role. The officer needs both to accomplish a mission, risking the lives of soldiers, and at the same time to protect those troops from harm. He or she must both obey orders as part of a larger military team and disobey orders when changing circumstances make it necessary in order to accomplish the mission, or, more importantly, when they violate military law or human rights. The officer, particularly the junior officer, often stands in the crux between the ordered regulation of any civilized institution—including an army—and the irrational savagery of war. The officer is motivated both by personal striving for honor, glory and recognition and by the need for self-sacrifice in the interest of duty. *Thumos* is the moral courage or firmness of soul that allows an individual both to serve honorably as a soldier when called upon, and to return successfully to civilian life.

Shay notes Odysseus' remarkable lack of *thumos* in this sense — particularly his selfish lack of concern for the well being of his crew. This is emphasized in his chapter entitled "Odysseus As a Military Leader" in which the hero is seen as the antithesis of the 'good officer.' Indeed, Shay literally draws up an indictment for court-martial of "Captain Odysseus." While the legalism is perhaps a bit silly, Shay is making an important point about human character. From the point of view of classics, there are two important issues here. The first is that ancient literature is still relevant in psychological analysis—even, or especially, in the age of neuroscience. The second is the reminder that the *Odyssey*, no less than the *Iliad*, is a story about warriors. The military themes of the *Odyssey* are subtle but by no means insignificant, as shown by the resonance that Odysseus' story holds for soldiers and veterans.

Shay's book is not without problems or errors. He occasionally treats the text as if it were a sort of autobiography of an actual Odysseus. Although this can be seen as a rhetorical device, it may be confusing to those very readers — the ones with no background — whom Shay is anxious to educate. More significantly, he sometimes imposes his metaphors on the text. He refers to the lotus, eaten in the Land of the Lotus Eaters, as an addictive drug. Homer never suggests that the plant caused dependence, only that it had amnesiacal qualities. Shay's idea that Homer's audience was made up of both "aristocrats" and "veterans" is overly imaginative, and his reconstruction of a Homeric society divided between stodgy hierarchs and vigorous meritocrats reveals a singularly American view of Archaic Greece. These are, however, mere quibbles.

Academe has always been isolated, to some extent, from what even scholars call "the real world." Of course, this is not a hard and fast rule, particularly when war is concerned: there is a long tradition of classicists going to war and of soldiers becoming classicists. Still, most of us who study the ancient world are blessedly ignorant of the horrors of war. Yet, war and warfare is one of the central subjects of ancient art and literature, and, to be true to our discipline, we must face this fact squarely. Shay's book can serve as a guide and introduction. In addition, Shay has done classics a great service by showing how the study of Homer, informed by scholarship, can be a vital part of a national conversation. He makes the point that soldiers, and particularly officers, need ethical and moral training, in addition to technical expertise. Here the classics community can play an important role, by translating (in every sense of the word) the rich ethical and moral traditions of antiquity into modern terms, both for soldiers and civilians. Greek literature in particular focuses both on the individual experience of war and the effect of warfare on the community. In this time of war, the academic community has a responsibility to take part in the national, and international, dialogue on its nature, purpose and effects. In this regard Shay's book makes a vital contribution.