WAR TRAUMA:
STORIES OF AJAX, PHILOCTETES, AND VIETNAM VETERANS

By
AILEEN NG

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To my grandfather, whose memory will continue to inspire
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The stories of soldiers and veterans are valuable narratives in our social history because their accounts serve as constant reminders of the devastating cost of war. Despite suffering the most damaging kinds of psychological trauma, soldiers and veterans must be recognized and supported to be able to reintegrate into society as valuable and productive members. Immortalized in the canon of classical Greek plays are two tragedies, Ajax and Philoctetes, that propel to the forefront the issues of the traumatized soldier’s role in society. These heroes’ physical and psychological trauma is stigmatized and prevents them from serving their community as functional members. In recent history, the soldiers of the Vietnam War faced similar problems of reintegration when public dissent against the war escalated. Unconventional warfare, the unprecedented publicizing of war atrocities, and the hostile reception of returning soldiers were factors that exacerbated the psychological damage that veterans had suffered. Ultimately, the efforts of the Vietnam war veterans to raise awareness about mental trauma in the 1970s spurred the development of posttraumatic stress disorder as a serious medical affliction. However, the struggle continues. Stigma surrounding psychological trauma still exists as evidenced by the dismissal of PTSD within the
military (Operation Recovery Campaign) and by the Pentagon’s refusal to award the Purple Heart Medal to mentally wounded soldiers. Whether shared in ancient dramatic festivals or modern televised media, the stories of Ajax, Philoctetes, and Vietnam war veterans warn against disregard for unseen wounds and urge for a better understanding of psychological trauma.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, Notebook E

When I presented a version of the first chapter of this research project at a local conference, a Professor, sitting in the audience, mentioned to me that he could hear the influence of Jonathan Shay’s book in the eight-page paper. The book to which he was referring was, of course, *Achilles in Vietnam*. Shay deals with Homer’s epic poem, the *Iliad*, but presents the work “as the tragedy of Achilles.”¹ I find his treatment of the famous epic in the tragic genre suitable because the dramatic medium enables audiences to consider paradoxical issues that cannot be easily resolved in the non-dramatic world. I am of a similar mind when he states that he “will not glorify Vietnam combat veterans by linking them to a prestigious ‘classic’ nor attempt to justify a study of the *Iliad* by making it sexy, exciting, modern, or ‘relevant.’”² I also do not present the ancient works beside the contemporary stories of modern veterans as justification for this study. The ancient works have been shown to have a profound influence on modern soldiers and veterans, demonstrated in Bryan Doerries’ Theater of War program. Nevertheless, this relationship between the ancient tales and the modern warrior needs to be explored further. Shay’s book inspired much of the research in this project but what truly made a lasting impression on me and my pursuits were the vivid testimonials recorded in the book. The Vietnam combat veterans gave powerful, candid messages

¹ Shay 1994, xx.
that were a call for help and understanding. Their stories are the motivations behind this research.

War has been an inseparable part of human history. It produces generations of wounded communities, both in the civilian and military realms. The civilian is a bystander upon whom the destruction of war has made a deep impact. The soldier, however, is the active force that causes destruction upon other people (enemies and civilians), villages, and communities. The soldier acts within a system that mandates the individual to become such a destructive force. However, the system also demands that the soldier give up his/her destructive role in order to reenter the “permanent” state of society, that is, the peaceful civilized world. But war is not a “temporary” state, neither is the soldiering profession.

My concern lies with the members of society who are expected to internalize shifting identities to adapt to the needs of the community. Civilian-soldiers represent the members of society who experience the most extreme shifts in identities. In the pre-war state they are civilians, in the military they are soldiers, but in the post-war stage they cannot simply return to being civilians, but they become veterans. Their status as veterans occupies a unique position in society because they are the only civilians who have ventured outside of the civilized world and have returned. They alone have experienced the antithesis of civilization which can both elevate and stigmatize their identity within society.

Theater in ancient Greece also functioned as an antithesis to daily life. The City Dionysia, which celebrated the god Dionysus, gave license to members to revel in and to explore disorderly, illogical, and emotional sides of human nature through tragedies,
comedies, and satyr plays. This tradition of such entertainment has traveled down to our
generations through a variety of media. However, the essence of such liberal vehicles of
communication remains. Sophocles’ Ajax and Philoctetes present unconventional
heroes who must cope with unjust acts committed against them in the military.۳ I chose
these tragedies for the psychological issues that lie at the heart of the plays: those that
concern the warrior who has suffered a traumatic experience. Aeschylus’ Agamemnon
and Euripides’ Heracles are other two tragedies that portray the unfortunate end of
warriors who return home from war; these plays are also important to consider in the
study of the soldier’s reception in society. Furthermore, Agamemnon and Heracles are
perhaps more suitable candidates for the title of “veteran” since they actually complete
their journey home. Although Ajax and Philoctetes are neither on a battlefield nor at
home from war, I chose Sophocles’ two tragedies because the unconventional soldier is
arguably the central focus of each play. Through Ajax’ and Philoctetes’ speeches, they
reveal the psychological trauma that hinders their ability to associate with their
community again. The psychological issues of Ajax and Philoctetes appear to stem from
an unwillingness of their military society (embodied by the sons of Atreus and
Odysseus) to comprehend and to fix the flaws within the military system. This is a
situation that echoes among modern veterans.

This study aims to present an analytical reading of Sophocles’ plays, the Ajax and
Philoctetes, alongside the stories as told by modern Vietnam war veterans. Although
their stories are thousands of years apart, the stories are not so dissimilar that readers

۳ Haubold (2000, 6) and Clarke (2004, 78-79) have pointed out the semantic differences that exist for the
term ‘hero.’ I use this term to refer to persons from a specific generation in the remote past who are the
central characters of the respective plays.
cannot relate one with the other. Doerries’ successful inclusion of both of these plays in
the Theatre of War production is evidence of their importance to the modern military
community. By introducing these plays to new audience members, especially to those in
the military, we not only continue the tradition of transmitting stories from one
generation to the next, but we also strive to gain new insights into the world of the
ancient Greeks, as well as ours. Then, we can persevere in our efforts to understand
the human experience.

In the first chapter, I discuss Ajax’ madness as triggered by the loss of the ultimate
prize, Achilles’ armor. Ajax faces the realization that his worth in society is less than
what he imagined. After dedicating all aspects of his life to becoming the ideal member
of society, he is left out of the winner’s circle. I examine the function of rewards in the
military society and analyze how prizes motivate soldiers to commit murders on the
battlefield and how they alleviate the pollution of such deeds that are considered crimes
in civilized company. The rewards also signify the soldier’s attachment to physical
manifestations of value and honor. Without it, the soldier cannot function within the
heroic code of conduct.  

The second chapter discusses Philoctetes as an anomaly to the military
community. His presence as a disabled soldier threatens to burden society with his
incurable disease. This contentious subject matter made such an impact when it was
staged that it won first prize at the City Dionysia in 409 BCE. So popular was
Philoctetes' myth that Aeschylus and Euripides also dramatized this tale, although

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4 In reference to Odysseus’ world in the Odyssey, Finley (1954, 113) writes, “the heroic code was
complete and unambiguous, so much so that neither the poet nor his characters ever had occasion to
debate it.”
neither one of their plays survived. Philoctetes’ plight sheds light on the expectations of the individual’s participation in society. It also reveals how unforgiving such a system can be if one is no longer capable of fulfilling these obligations. The anxiety of shouldering another’s burden stems from the belief that each member of society should ideally work in conjunction toward the common goal and collective cause. Individuals are required to perpetuate their community through great deeds and works, rather than to restrain society’s progress because of their disability. As a result, men like Philoctetes are discarded as non-members of society.

The third chapter contains short narratives of modern veterans’ personal stories because I feel it is important to differentiate the voices that make up this distinguished population of Vietnam war veterans. Each veteran’s story is different. In each one’s respective statement, the personal perspective on the war rings loud and clear. So strong was this community’s voice that it left a strong impression on how we view veterans and the Vietnam War today. In this chapter, I focus on their efforts to defy authorities and to raise awareness of the soldiering profession in Vietnam through protests and other counter-culture events. The Return of the Medals event is particularly fitting in this study because the process of rewarding in the military is exposed as an unsuccessful technique to quell unsettling sentiments among veterans. The individual is socialized to perceive the rewards as worthy prizes to obtain; in addition to awarding purposes, the prizes are meant to alleviate the stress of warfare. It is also supposed to function as a proud display of honor, courage, and sacrifice on behalf of the recipient. However, the rewards are not enough to account for the human suffering that warfare produces, as shown by this poignant event.
CHAPTER 2
THE LOSS OF ACHILLES’ ARMS

Sophocles’ Ajax depicts both a troubling and a troubled hero who discovers, at every turn of the military society that nurtured him, that there is no place for a soldier whose services are no longer needed. In the midst of the Trojan War, Ajax finds his familiar surroundings becoming more hostile to him than the land of Troy and its inhabitants. His perspective on the war changes after the sons of Atreus award Achilles’ highly-coveted armor to Odysseus, his rival for the title of “second-best of the Achaeans.” Consequently, Ajax feels so humiliated that he distances himself from his comrades to plot against them, and retreats within the confines of his crumbling mental state. Regardless of whether the mighty, and not the eloquent, truly deserved the prize as second-best of the Achaeans, Ajax shows how quickly a mighty soldier can become disillusioned by the flaws existing within the hierarchy of the army. In losing the Judgment of Arms, Ajax questions what it means to be the ideal soldier, as well as his motivations for participating in warfare. With the loss of the prize, Ajax directs his anger at the immediate perpetrators, Odysseus and the sons of Atreus. But his anger is misdirected because Ajax comes to the realization that he is not simply deprived of honor, glory, and reputation, but that he has lost his purpose for killing as well as for living. The prize of the arms becomes a significant part in the process of war because it acts as the material-medium through which Ajax can justify his killings in war.

The soldier’s role in the world of Homer can be gleaned from Ajax’ speech in the tragedy. Ajax’ words reveal how he perceives the ideal soldier as a functioning member of society. Words illustrating laughter such as “γέλωτος” (367), “πολύν γέλωθ” (382),

1 Iliad 2.768-769.
and “ἐπεγγελῶσιν” (454) appear in Ajax' speech to indicate that mockery dismantles the image of the ideal soldier. More plainly, the social death of the ideal soldier derives from being dishonored (ἄτιμος, 426 and 440), dishonored. Faced with mockery and dishonor, Ajax is shamed. The shame which Ajax bears for losing the prize sheds light on an understanding of the traits and characteristics that Ajax strives to achieve. His humiliation points to the importance of others' judgment and evaluation. For example, Ajax perceives his father through a filtered lens that continues to remind him that his father was truly the ideal soldier, an ideal that Ajax has failed to achieve. Given that they both fought on the same land in their respective generations, the comparison is inevitable (434-440):

I, whose father came home from this land of Ida having won the army's first prize for valor, and bringing home every kind of fame. But I, his son, having come to the same place, Troy, with no less strong a force and having performed with my own hand no lesser deeds, am thus perishing, dishonored by the Argives.²

Ajax' constant anxiety over other men's perception of him, particularly his father, demonstrates that the concept of the ideal soldier is inseparable from that of the ideal son and ideal man. A father's identity plays a significant role in his son's life particularly in a society in which citizenship is determined by the father's status.³ Therefore, traits and characteristics of the father are expected to be handed down onto the son. However, this father-son relationship is reciprocal. The achievements and reputation of

² All translations of Sophocles' works by Lloyd-Jones (1994).
³ The notion of citizenship in 5th century BCE Athens is transposed to Homer's mythical world.
the father are closely tied to those of the son, which could in turn reflect back onto the father in a negative way, bringing shame to both father and son.\textsuperscript{4}

The notion of the ideal soldier is inextricably linked with that of the ideal son and man. In each of these roles, Ajax’ objective is to win the title of ‘second-best of the Achaeans’ from his comrades (as the ideal soldier), his father’s praise (as the ideal son), and his own justification of self-worth by means of the prize (as the ideal man). His purpose in life revolves around being an honorable soldier, son, and man all at once. The military society, in which he was born and socialized,\textsuperscript{5} dictates that the value of the individual be the three-part role of soldier, son, and man. The noble man can achieve honor in these three roles within the ranks of the army where he can win individual success. Without validation of his self-worth from his society in all three roles, his life is not worth living: “The noble man must live with honor or be honorably dead; you have heard all I have to say” (479-480). Therefore, his concern over the perceptions that other societal members (such as his father and fellow-comrades) have about him is a serious issue. However, in this play, his peers and leaders hold immediate influence over his personal value, or self-worth, factors that govern Ajax’ behavior in life.

Although Ajax experiences the pressure of becoming a man on a par with his father’s perceived expectations, he, too, continues this societal cycle of transferrable status by demanding that his son inherit his admirable (or disgraceful) qualities: “You [Tecmessa] must begin now to break him in by his father’s harsh rules and make his nature like mine” (548-549). Ajax perpetuates this cycle of inherited characteristics

\textsuperscript{4} Hesk 2003, 61.

\textsuperscript{5} While the concept of “socialization” varies across time and place, I follow Morgan’s general assumption of “socialization” to mean an “education [that] aims to equip the young in some way to function in their society” (2011, 504-505).
without regard to the unbearable suffering he experiences himself. In the middle of the carnage, Ajax declares that his son must follow suit after him, perhaps suggesting that it is proper for a man to commit suicide to disprove any allegations of cowardice. Thus he implies that he expects his son, if ever placed in a similar situation, to commit the same act. In this way, everyone will know that he is truly Ajax’ son: “He will not be frightened to look on this newly spilled blood, if he is truly my son…Boy, may you be luckier than your father, but in all other ways resemble him! Then you will be no coward” (545-551). With the fearlessness of Ajax in defending his honor, Eurysaces (Ajax’ son) would prove his paternity.

The compensation for living a short life is honor; life without honor is worthless.\(^6\) The concept of “ἂτιμος” (426, 440), the stripping of honor from an individual, is the ultimate humiliation of a man in Ajax’ eyes. This sentiment is echoed throughout Ajax’ speech as he attempts to cope with the fact that his honor can no longer be restored: “That cannot be! I must think of some action that will prove to my aged father that I his son was born no coward” (470-472). When his honor is stripped, Ajax decides that death is the right and honorable action to take, perhaps hoping that recognition of his humiliation would win him some favor after death (479-480). Remembering that he is also the son of an aged and reputable father, Ajax specifically identifies his father’s presumed disappointment as the primary motivation for his suicide. However, Ajax’ projection of his father may not be as true to what he imagines. Ajax’ anxiety over his father’s reaction reveals three important attitudes about his own expectations and standards. First, Ajax expects his own son to gain honor as a sign of respect for Ajax’

\(^6\) Dutta 2001, 3.
reputation. Secondly, he views his disaster in a public arena where other men are given the opportunity to judge his actions and say shameful things about him (382, 440-444, 458-480, 462-465). Lastly, he insists on being treated the same way as he would surely treat others. By imagining the mockery and shame directed towards him, Ajax presents his own view on the treatment of men who fail to achieve honor. According to these three standards, an individual is judged and measured with regards to one’s birth and behavior in all spheres of social interaction. Ajax sees every one of his relationships as an opportunity to prove his worth and value, whether it is with his father, son, or comrades. This commitment to honor illustrates the extreme measures to which an individual may pursue this distinction, especially when one chooses to sacrifice one’s own life to obtain this elusive value.

If Ajax believed that he was striving to be the ideal soldier, son, and man (before the Judgment), then Odysseus’ wily behavior must have been considered to be the opposite: the deeply flawed soldier, son, and man. Although Sophocles portrays Odysseus as the non-villain in this play, Ajax is unable to view Odysseus as anything but the villain. Odysseus’ unconventional crafts and skills, which run contrary to Ajax’ code of behavior, stole the prize. Ajax is at a loss to explain how Odysseus won the arms over him; he finds it so unbelievable that he immediately becomes suspicious, a move which falls more in line with Odysseus’ methods. Ajax assumes that the Judgment was a conspiracy between the sons of Atreus and Odysseus to dishonor a great soldier (98). Several times, Ajax refers to Odysseus as the “filthiest trickster of the army” (381)

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7 Hesk 2003, 55.
8 Hesk 2003, 58.
and “the craftiest of all, the trickster that I detest” (388-389), which shows that he views Odysseus as a dangerous and undetectable threat to the code of honor by which heroes live. Odysseus thrives while breaking all the rules that are used to govern the conduct of the ideal soldier; for this reason, Ajax cannot accept that Odysseus is given more honors than he. Ajax’ heightened awareness of his own conduct, ironically, blinds him to the perceptions that other men have of him and to the favorable view that they have of Odysseus. In a military community where the opinions of other men determine a soldier’s honor and worth, Ajax fails to see that he aggrandized his judgment of himself to suit his own view of greatness. This is, perhaps, his tragic flaw.

Since Ajax views himself as the soldier most worthy of the reward, he can arrogantly claim that “if Achilles were alive and were to award the prize of valor in a contest for his own arms, no other would receive them but I” (442-444). His hubristic claim is, perhaps, an attempt to compensate for the slight but it mars whatever good character he may have had before. This prideful personality has emerged before as Sophocles introduces new evidence that points to Ajax’ previous acts of hubris. The Messenger begins with a prophecy that suggests that Ajax was too ambitious and had overreached his limits as a mere mortal (758-761):

When men grow to a size too great for them, the prophet said, they are brought down by cruel misfortunes sent by the gods, yes, each one who has human nature but refuses to think only human thoughts.

To illustrate Ajax’ boldness during times prior to the Judgment, the Messenger also reports two pieces of evidence that, according to Calchas, Athena brings against Ajax to account for his current sufferings (764-769, 774-775). Ajax is illustrated to be an individual, full of hubris, who observed unrealistic and superhuman standards with which to govern his life. Thus the reason for Ajax’ loss of the arms becomes more
intelligible. He was blinded by his own brilliant self-image. Although Athena presents Ajax to be an arrogant soldier who tends to belittle the opinions of his comrades, leaders, and gods, the severity of Ajax’ plight is still questioned because he suffers in a society that socialized him to become such an extreme type of soldier.

Ajax is unable to achieve his goals of regaining honor via one extreme approach (i.e., fighting with brawn and living honestly) and switches to the opposite tactic, one borrowed from his enemy Odysseus. He devises revenge on the sons of Atreus and Odysseus with a plan that adopts characteristics from the latter’s famed wily methods. In launching a night attack against his comrades, Ajax’ behavior is reminiscent of the night raid led by Odysseus and Diomedes against the Thracians in Book 10 of the *Iliad*. These two heroes were chosen for the task because their personalities were well suited to the cunning nature of the assault; but it was Athena’s patronage that contributed to their success. Ajax would, most likely, not want to take part in such a charge nor would he actually be effective, as evidenced by Athena’s intervention to prevent his night assault on Odysseus and the sons of Atreus.

A useful comparison of the different strategies that Odysseus and Ajax employ for the same task can be found in the Embassy to Achilles in Book 9 of the *Iliad*: Odysseus, Phoenix, and Ajax are sent by Agamemnon to persuade Achilles to give up his anger and to rejoin the war effort (225-642). Odysseus repeats the speech that Agamemnon offers to Achilles, almost verbatim, but diplomatically leaves out Agamemnon’s last lines: that Achilles “should submit to [Agamemnon] since [Agamemnon] is more of a king” (160). Ajax, on the other hand, views the situation with an objective eye and gives a brief farewell speech when he sees that Achilles has hardened his heart against his
friends. Ajax, a straightforward and honest man, states the facts candidly. Wisely, Achilles sees through Odysseus' double speech and Achilles openly declares his hatred for men "who says one thing and thinks another" (313). But he tells Ajax that his short speech is most in line with his own heart (645). Based on Achilles’ judgment of the two speeches, Odysseus is exposed as one who fiddles with tricks while Ajax presents himself as a truthful and upright man. In this regard, Ajax is most akin to Achilles and perhaps most deserving of the famed armor. However, when the outcome of the Judgment of Arms reflects a reversal of “what’s right”9 in Ajax' mind, he becomes mad and is desperate to regain some dignity. The realization that Odyssean methods are, perhaps, what win prizes strengthens the paradox that Ajax must resort to his enemy’s strategies in an effort to restore his honor.10

Ajax fails to see the quality that truly distinguishes Odysseus as an exceptional soldier: his ability to adapt to any situation. Ajax' character is traditionally rigid and unchanging, which are customarily good qualities, but Odysseus is “endowed with a generosity of spirit which Ajax is incapable of perceiving.”11 Poe is generous with his description of Odysseus' “spirit” and he is justified to do so because Odysseus, as mentioned earlier, is carefully presented as the non-villain in this tragedy. From the beginning of the play, Athena sadistically goads Odysseus to mock and laugh at Ajax’ blind insanity (79), but Odysseus refuses. He identifies with Ajax’ insanity and pessimistically states, “I see that all of us who live are nothing but ghosts, or a fleeting shadow” (125-126). He reflects on the limits and the mortality to which mortals are

9 Shay 1994, 3.
11 Poe 1987, 28.
subjected, and whose fates have been predetermined and allotted. Hesk also uses the adjective, “generous,” to describe Odysseus’ unexpected sense of solidarity and reconciliation when he advises Agamemnon to allow Ajax’ body to be buried (1343-1345). Here, Odysseus’ adaptable personality allows him to perceive matters with an unbiased judgment that lends to his success as a soldier, even when following unconventional rules.

Although Odysseus had seen Ajax’ hatred for him in the opening of the play, Odysseus remains a proponent of Ajax’ funerary rites and adheres to the rules and traditions of the dead. But in other cases, such as in maintaining friendships, he explicitly states, “It is not my way to approve of a rigid mind” (1361). This remark illustrates Odysseus’ personal character and philosophy on how he believes one should ideally conduct oneself. By appreciating the ebb and flow of human nature, Odysseus can withstand unexpected obstacles because he adjusts his life accordingly. The character of Odysseus differs greatly from Tecmessa’s description of Ajax earlier in the play when she laments that Ajax is no longer the same person, even after he has returned from madness: “he at once lamented with dreadful cries…For he always used to teach that such weeping was the mark of a cowardly and spiritless man” (317-322). Ajax’ personal choice to live by a strict code of conduct intensifies his self-hatred since he has become the sort of person he despises. In stark contrast, Odysseus embraces the ever-changing methods of survival.

Garrison describes Ajax’ “excessive heroic morality” as a symptom of a decaying society that no longer holds by the same standards which he strives to embody, and

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12 Hesk 2003, 61.
she interprets Ajax’ suicide as the last attempt to perpetuate the morality of this bygone and strict social code. However, the proposition that Ajax fails to keep up with the social customs of his times seems rather inconsistent, especially when compared to Achilles’ similar behavior when Agamemnon takes away Chryseis, Achilles’ prize, in Book 1 of the *Iliad*. Ajax and Achilles react in like ways but receive different treatment from their peers and the gods; this show of favor provokes sentiments contrary to one’s sense of justice. As mentioned earlier, an Embassy was sent to assuage Achilles’ anger because the whole army (and the gods) recognized the outrage that Agamemnon committed against him. No such sentiment exists for Ajax’ loss of the arms. Sophocles makes no mention of it in the tragedy but Pindar reflects on a possible trick that cost Ajax his life (*Nemean Ode* 8.26-29):

> Truly, oblivion overwhelms many a man whose tongue is speechless, but heart is bold, in a grievous quarrel; and the greatest prize has been offered up to shifty falsehood. For with secret votes the Danaans favored Odysseus, while Ajax, stripped of the golden armor, wrestled with a gory death.¹⁴

This victory ode, surely to be sung at Panhellenic festivals, reveals that contests can be corrupted through deceit. Sometimes the injustice of the act goes unnoticed but sometimes it is observed. When Achilles and Ajax realize that their prizes have been taken away, they both plan to attack their leaders, prompting Athena to thwart their plans. However, Athena reacts differently to each: she reminds Achilles of his reason¹⁵ but spurs Ajax into madness. Ajax does not exactly fail to adjust his behavior to his

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¹³ Garrison 1995, 52.

¹⁴ All translations of Pindar by Race (1997).

¹⁵ *Iliad* 1.188-222.
society, but rather he did not foresee that the divine and the fates fluctuate in ways beyond mortal understanding.

The successful model for survival in this military society does not have room for a soldier who cannot adjust to the changing trends and sentiments of the community in which he lives. Even Agamemnon yields to the request that Ajax be given a proper burial (1373), but Ajax cannot endure the fact that his belief system simply failed him. Rather than conceding his loss of the arms to Odysseus, he makes the perpetrators the objects of his anger. His anger stems from the perceived injustice committed against him personally but the sons of Atreus and Odysseus are not the true targets. His anger is misdirected: Odysseus did not outwit Ajax in the Judgment nor did the sons of Atreus purposely seek to dishonor him, but Ajax desperately needed the affirmation of self-worth more so than Odysseus. As the second-best warrior of the Achaeans, Ajax cannot find a sufficient reason or a satisfactory resolution to the high number of casualties that he personally caused. The loss of reward acts to deflect Ajax’ own questions about participating in the war; without it, he must confront his actions and realize that he killed for a failed purpose.

Ajax’ uncharacteristic conduct was triggered first by his inability to reconcile personal failure and defeat (over losing the prize), secondly, by feelings of betrayal (by his “friends”), and thirdly, by the loss of material goods (Achilles’ arms) that would glorify his killings in war. Ajax’ extreme reactions hint at a complex relationship between ownership and the function of the arms. Not only do Achilles’ arms represent an honorable reward for the best (or second-best) warrior in the Greek army, but they also validate the crimes committed in war and present them as justified actions. In gaining
the arms of Achilles, Ajax would be relieved of the disturbing confrontation of his own actions in war. He can then reconcile his slaughter through material means by focusing on the worthy end-result, ignoring the manner in which he attains it. Without a device to exonerate his deadly attacks on the battlefield, he must negotiate his motivation for killing on his own.

Scarry’s argument that a person, in pain, can counter pain through objectification is appropriate for Ajax’ circumstances. The indiscriminate murders that Ajax committed in war must have caused a high level of inner pain to incite such a violent reaction against his comrades when he is denied the top prize. If he did receive the prize, all would be right. So why would the loss of the prize provoke an attempt to commit massive slaughters on his comrades? This extreme reaction is evidence that the prize must be worth more than what meets the eye. Ajax’ extreme anger and pain did not materialize simply from the loss of the arms, but already existed and would only have been mollified by the reward. Thus, the trophy would have objectified Ajax’ pain. By objectifying that pain into the material prize, the object would promote feelings of accomplishment, while at the same time deflecting any doubts about his killings. By objectifying pain, one can transport that pain from the internal to the external surfaces of the invisible world and render the pain within absent. In the case of Ajax and Odysseus, the owner of the prize may manipulate it to function as a self-serving medium through which to celebrate “sanctioned blood-letting.” The device of the

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17 Ibid.
18 Bourke 1999, 1.
prized arms enables the prize-holder to view bloodshed in accordance with societal codes, which also provides a justification to the individual who caused the bloodshed.

The Judgment of Arms, then, is a source of recognition that can either grant or divest one of great honor. Ajax is deprived of what he believes to be rightfully his: due acknowledgment, honor, and gratitude from the Greek army. Without possession of the arms, his anger rises to a conflicting mental state in which he struggles with the belief system that has guided his ambitions to become the ideal soldier, son, and man. When that system fails, his purpose for fighting/killing and subsequently living becomes void. Thus Ajax rejects his community, but he is only able to do so through death. Poe sympathizes with Ajax’ circumstances because what is “worse than the threat of death is the reality of exclusion from society. Ajax is acutely conscious of his dishonor” (367, 394-400, 426-427, 440). Exclusion from society is worse than death because his death is meaningless without membership in a society.

In an effort to release his anger and frustration, Ajax chooses to attack the sons of Atreus and Odysseus. Although he eventually launches his surprise-attack on a herd of cattle instead, this event strangely mirrors and reflects Ajax’ fear that his slaughter in war would be diminished to a foolish pursuit, especially since he does not achieve the desired outcome for either “battle.” While his true intention was to regain and enforce some recognition of superiority, as “the ultimate gesture of self-importance,” Athena thwarts his plan and causes him to accomplish the deed which he despised and feared the most (364-367, 403-409):

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19 Poe 1987, 39.
20 Poe 1987, 42.
Do you see that I, the bold, the valiant, the one who never trembled in battle among enemies, have done mighty deeds among beasts that frightened no one? Ah, the mockery! What an insult I have suffered!

If my great deeds perish, friends, near to these <slaughtered beasts>, and I have devoted myself to the pursuit of foolishly chosen game, and the whole army may with sword grasped in both hands strike me dead!

With two such laments over his fruitless slaughter, Ajax reveals how the denial of a reward (after much senseless slaughter) is so damaging to his pride that he scorns living any longer. This desperation for the reward evinces its true quality as understood by Ajax. It is a perceived sense of gratitude from others and a contrived sense of honor that he places upon himself. These notions would have enabled him to bypass the reflection and restitution necessary for one who committed such slaughters as the second-best warrior of the Achaeans. Although Ajax is conditioned to be dependent on this practice of achievement and reward, he is also forced to confront his reality without the distraction of the acclamation that the material prize would have granted. He understands the gravity of his acts when he says, “For I am no longer worthy to look upon the race of gods nor upon any among mortal men to any profit” (397-400), a statement that can refer to both the killings during the war and the slaughter of innocent cattle afterward.

Ajax realizes that Athena thwarted his plan to murder the sons of Atreus and Odysseus, but he does not regret attempting it (447-449). Their injustice against him was perceived as so psychologically destructive that he reacted in a manner that was contrary to the norm, both against them and against himself. Hesk questions whether Athena played a role in Ajax’ movement toward suicide because, he argues, Ajax might
never have returned to his right state of mind after Athena’s possession of him.\textsuperscript{21} Ajax does not appear to regain fully his own sense of self, but his choices are still his own decisions. Athena’s actions seem merely to reinforce Ajax’ intentions and fears (of committing senseless slaughter) which were entirely his own before Athena took possession of his mental state. The military society educated and socialized Ajax into becoming the ideal man, soldier, and son, but in Ajax’ most vulnerable hour, his community abandoned him, and left him without the means to rationalize his deadly acts. Stripped of the compensation that he believed he should have received in accordance with his heroic belief system, he stands bare and unprotected from the horror of his crimes. He cannot grasp holding himself responsible for his acts in war, so he places the blame on the three men who failed to recognize him and escapes from his community by killing himself.

When Ajax fails to reconcile those unjustifiable deeds, he is concerned with others’ perception of him and inflicts grief and suffering upon himself because the thought of showing his face is too shameful to bear (457-466):

\begin{quote}
Shall I cross the Aegean Sea, leaving behind the station of the ships and the sons of Atreus, and go home? And what kind of face shall I show to my father Telamon when I appear? How ever shall he bring himself to look at me when I appear empty-handed, without the prize of victory, when he himself won a great crown of fame? The thing is not to be endured!
\end{quote}

Instead of facing his father, Ajax chooses death to avoid this shameful confrontation. Accordingly, Poe finds that Ajax’ death is caused by haughtiness and pride: “Ajax is too proud to survive for a single day, just as he is too proud to face the outraged army with

\textsuperscript{21} Hesk 2003, 139.
Teucer. Ajax dies because he is disgraced before his enemies." While this interpretation does correspond with the traits that have been traditionally associated with Ajax, he is so troubled by the opinions of others around him that his own consideration for himself is significantly absent in this tragedy. Pindar remarks that Ajax was too trusting of those around him: "The great majority of men have a blind heart, for if they could have seen the truth, might Ajax, in anger over the arms, would not have planted in his chest the smooth sword" (*Nemean Ode* 7.24-27). The "truth" mentioned is in reference to Odysseus' adeptness at deceiving others with misleading tales. If only Ajax could have seen Odysseus' true nature from the beginning, he would not be so pained at the loss of the arms. This lack of foresight in other men and lack of self-evaluation seems to be the true motivation for directing his anger toward others, and finally toward himself.

The most telling reason that Ajax gives for committing suicide is the speech concerning his father's perception and hypothetical reception of him (470-480). He continues to avoid perceiving himself in a reasonable manner, and instead offers up a solution to his problems that would most please his father and salvage the damaged honor of them both. Instead of reflecting on his own person, he concerns himself with the business of those whom he will leave behind: he seeks the gods' kindness and aid to voice his last words to his relatives and curses to his enemies (831-851). According to Hesk, Ajax utilizes his death as a purposeful and lasting vengeance against the sons of Atreus,23 but Poe sees no social significance in his death. Poe reads Ajax' death as a

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22 Poe 1987, 83.
23 Hesk 2003, 90.
wrong that harms his surviving relatives more than if he were alive, perhaps suggesting that he still selfishly sought glory, even in death. I maintain that Ajax’ death was the only means of escape from a system that provided no salvation from the pollution of slaughter, regardless of the fact that the killings were committed on the battlefield and thus sanctioned. No resolution existed for Ajax’ quest to find purpose and meaning in warfare. However, in his penultimate speech he was at least able to lay aside his strict principles to gain an understanding about the limited extent of friendship that is ever-changing whether in life or death (678-683):

For I have lately learned that our enemy must be hated as one who will sometimes become a friend and in helping a friend I shall aim to assist him as one assists a man who will not remain a friend forever, since for most mortals the harbor of friendship cannot be trusted.

Perhaps by accepting that some values are never static, Ajax hints that he may finally find consolation for his enemies and himself by specifically excluding Odysseus (and the curses against him) altogether in his very last speech.

A society so imbued with a heroic code of conduct as that of the Homeric world is disposed to urge its members into a conformity predetermined by its institutions. While the hero pursues personal goals of courage and bravery, as defined by the Homeric tradition, it is also important to note that “the hero lives in, and is molded by, a social system and a culture, and his actions are intelligible only by reference to them.” Ajax is one such example of an idealized soldier who strives to live in accordance with the prescribed code of conduct, but oversteps his mortal boundaries.

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24 Poe 1987, 83.

25 Finley 1954, 74.
CHAPTER 3
SOCIETY’S ONE-SIDED CONTRACT

As we saw in Sophocles’ *Ajax*, the heroic culture of Greek civilization is defined by the notion of an ideal soldier who contributes to his military society and who perpetuates the status of the institution through active participation in all spheres of that society.¹ Because societal norms dictate the behavior of its active members, the society becomes an institution that is only successful when its members comply with its expectations. The Homeric warrior seeks social validation from the collective, thus "martial excellence is part of a reciprocal contract" in which the warrior is honored by his people because he achieves *kleos*.² In turn, the people then become glorified and the process of elevating both individual and community perpetuates itself.

Both of Sophocles’ plays, *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, demonstrate the immediate response of society to exclude members who do not conform to society’s expectations. Ajax committed an outrageous act that led to his exclusion. This can be attributed to psychological trauma, while Philoctetes’ exclusion was due to physical wounds that hindered his participation in the war.³ The eponymous characters of the works are forced to leave the domain in which they lived because they no longer fit the mold that allows them to be useful members of society. This culturally constructed mold for individuals functioning within a system is what Edwards names the "community model" for understanding the varying degrees of physical disabilities: the degree of one’s

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¹ I follow Adkins’ lead to denote “society” as “any assemblage of persons which it is convenient or customary to treat as one assemblage” (1972, 2). I refer specifically to the society that exists in the Homeric tradition.

² Clarke 2004, 77.

³ This is mentioned in Book 2 of the Iliad: Philoctetes receives a wound by snake-bite and is exiled on Lemnos for ten years until the Greeks realize his participation is necessary for the fall of Troy.
physical ability or disability is determined by one’s ability to fulfill tasks of membership in the community. Particularly in the sphere of the military was a member’s duty the most important; his capacity to participate in the military culture was the ultimate measure of a Greek man’s worth.

In *Philoctetes*, the institution reveals that it is incapable of managing soldiers who have received physical wounds from warfare, or, in this case, during the expedition to the battle site. Since the importance of the military as a whole is placed above that of the individual soldier, personal issues and concerns are disregarded and overlooked. The active participants within the institution actually demonstrate their willingness to exclude invalid members, such as Philoctetes, when disabled members become a burdensome group on the community. The workings of Philoctetes’ society are such that the community is centered around inter-connected relationships with family and peers. Through these connections, a member can fortify his reputation to meet the expectations of the system. But if an unlucky member takes a wrong turn in this system that is heavily dependent on lasting markers of character weaknesses, the system is not readily willing to accept those who attempt to regain access to it. Philoctetes’ accident prompted an adverse reaction because no member wants to be associated with an individual who has erred so terribly.

Because an individual carefully builds his circle of relationships through his life, he would not jeopardize his reputation by associating with those whom he does not consider suitable to his company. However, the unfortunate do have a place in society, just not among elite soldiers and heroes. In a discussion about the behavior of elite

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individuals (*agathoi*) in co-operative relationships (in contrast to the competitive), Adkins considers how it would be *aischrotron* to violate these relationships: namely, bonds created with beggars, wanderers, suppliants and guests, all who stand in special need of protection and who are notably protected by Zeus. These particular members certainly do not belong to the elite class of warriors and heroes (whose birth has determined their status), but even they are cared for by society and are protected by the divine. Although Philoctetes is of noble birth, when he becomes a beggar and a suppliant, no one honors his pleas. His physical disability, then, is clearly what causes him to lose membership in his society.

Sophocles’ tragedy opens on the island of Lemnos, a liminal space between the realms of the *polis* and the battlefield, where the soldier, Philoctetes, is found still surviving alone on the island for ten years. Odysseus’ opening speech describes exactly what kind of place it is (1-11):

>This is the shore of the seagirt land of Lemnos, untrodden by mortals, not inhabited. Here it was…that I once put ashore the Malian, the son of Poeas—on the orders of those in command… since we could not pour libations or sacrifice in peace, but he filled the entire camp with savage and ill-omened cries, shouting and screaming.

Odysseus, the wily and useful servant of the institution, dares to dismiss the land as uninhabited, knowing well that he deserted a comrade there ten years earlier. The first eleven lines show the immediate reaction of Odysseus and “those in command” (6) to a soldier who was disruptive and a burden to the camp. Instead of considering the unfortunate circumstances that plagued Philoctetes, an otherwise valuable member of

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the society, the pressing need to wage war on Troy was more urgent than a single, wounded soldier. The rush with which “those in command” (6) handled the situation depicts the military expedition as an unstoppable force that must accomplish its task, despite the soldiers lost along the way. The serious consequence of this type of mentality is exposed in this play. The pain of abandonment by a member’s own society becomes more pronounced as Philoctetes, a representative of this traumatized population, speaks his thoughts to convince Neoptolemus of the wrong that their society committed against him. The damaging effects become more evident when Philoctetes declares that he no longer cares to be an active member of his military society. His words suggest that the sickness that has affected his physical exterior and has also permeated his mind and soul.7

How could Philoctetes not lose faith in such a society when he describes in detail the inhumanity that he endured for ten years? Not only did his comrades abandon him but Sophocles suggests all of civilization hold similar attitudes about shouldering the burden of Philoctetes’ wound. The burden would have rested on the family to care for a handicapped person but since Philoctetes has no means to convey himself home, he must rely on his community.8 Philoctetes, himself, states: “these people when they come show pity in what they say, and sometimes they have been sorry for me and have given me a little food, or some clothing; but one thing nobody will do, if I make mention of it, and that is to take me home” (306-311). Although there were some who were willing to provide him with food and clothing, they were not willing to risk close contact

7 Austin 2011, ix.

8 Edwards cites Margaret Louck (1993) to describe the dependency of individuals in the ancient Greek world: “Independence is a modern notion; ‘interdependence’ better describes the ancient relationship of an individual within the family and community” (Edwards 1997, 41).
with his wound. The visitors to the island refuse him the trip home for two reasons: first, because he would clearly be an inconvenience during the course of the journey (through his cries of pain), and secondly, because his services to the civilized world would not compensate for the cost of taking him home. Philoctetes realizes that he has no place in an uncaring society that actively prevents him from being a productive member: “I am a worthless nothing, long since dead!” (1030). The community offers no negotiation and no resolution to the issue of the traumatized soldier who cannot fulfill the roles that society expects of him. The problem is entirely ignored (by elimination) and the existence of these former members of society is simply erased.

The shunning of disqualified individuals illustrates how powerful the members’ trust in the institution is. The military institution is able to sustain its structure by capitalizing on the hero’s anxiety about being excluded from the community, as seen in the story of Ajax. Because the fear of abandonment and marginalization constantly governs the behaviors of societal members, the military structure maintains its influence. Philoctetes’ situation is, however, unusual: he has no anxiety over his dissociation from the community even when he is given the opportunity to rejoin the military. As a member who was cast out of society, he is actually privileged with the perspective of a non-member who has lived on the outskirts of society for ten years. His critical and sharpened view of his community has the potential to become a valuable asset for the future of his military community, which will encounter many more wounded soldiers. But for Philoctetes to rejoin society, he “must deny the validity of his own

9 Greengard 1987, 78.
feelings of outrage and renounce all claims to justice.\textsuperscript{10} This suppression of Philoctetes’ attitude is also problematic for the society because his silence will perpetuate the injustice of the sufferings he endured. His original conviction to reject his community cannot be easily forgotten. This initial reaction was a call for change in the military system.

Odysseus, anticipating Philoctetes’ refusal and therefore knowing full well that he wronged Philoctetes, was prepared to remind him of his duty to his fellow comrades and of the hierarchy of power that exists between that of man and institution. Whether Odysseus himself truly believes in this chain of command, given that he is not the epitome of the dutiful citizen-soldier in the Greek world, we cannot know.\textsuperscript{11} However, being an opportunist, perhaps Odysseus is determined to follow the demands of his society for personal gain. In his first attempt to retrieve Philoctetes, Odysseus recruits Neoptolemus to join him in winning Philoctetes over with guile (55-85). When Neoptolemus decides to deviate from Odysseus’ plan, Odysseus tries to stop them with unconvincing words. He spews out contradictory remarks that expose the shortcomings of their society and its ideology (994-998):

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{Odysseus}: But I say, yes! You must obey!
  \item \textbf{Philoctetes}: Alas for me! Clearly my father gave me life as a slave, not as a free man!
  \item \textbf{Odysseus}: No, as a peer of the chieftains with whom you are to take Troy and destroy it!
\end{itemize}

On the one hand, Odysseus is commanding Philoctetes to obey, and on the other, he tells Philoctetes that he will participate “as a peer” of the commanders in charge. This

\textsuperscript{10} Poe 1974, 47.

\textsuperscript{11} Hyginus (\textit{Fabulae} 95) records Odysseus' attempt to renege on the Oath of Tyndareus.
follows no logical reasoning as “πειστέον” cannot equate to “ὁμοίους τοῖς ἀριστεῦσιν”.

The exchange reflects Odysseus’ view about the duty of societal members and perhaps this was Philoctetes’ opinion too before his abandonment. But Philoctetes voices a bold, new perspective on his military society and he demonstrates that his views concerning his own identity and that of the society have changed after ten years. This significant exchange also reveals the indoctrinated beliefs that society imposes on its members. As an ideal soldier, he must systematically compromise his individuality for causes that concern matters beyond his personal sphere of interest. This inculcated agreement mandates that the individual sacrifice for the collective cause—this is the compact that Odysseus employs to constrain Philoctetes back into his role. However, a member’s contract with society becomes worthless if the community reneges from its duties to receive and care also for those who may suffer from physical or mental trauma.

Before the prophecy of Heracles, Philoctetes is presented as an anomaly, a kink, which threatens to disrupt the established structure of society. The disruption occurs not because of his physical wound per se, but rather because he depends on the community for survival. His existence does not bring profit or gain to the community, therefore the community reneges on its obligations to him. This line of reasoning is particularly revealing when we look at a 5th century BCE ceremony that took place at the City Dionysia, in which the children of slain soldiers were brought on stage to receive a full set of armor from the city. The political and social histories surrounding this ceremony are important to note. Events that took place in 5th c. Greece were particularly fundamental to the development of civic ideology: the Persian Wars strengthened the unity of the Greek peoples, but the Peloponnesian War increased patriotism within city-
states and fractured the union. Nonetheless, the wars augmented the sense of pride in each city-state because the wars call for the ultimate show of selflessness from the individual. Therefore the individual and community become connected by a compact that would be cemented by the blood drawn in war. The ceremony for the children of slain soldiers, then, honors and perpetuates this compact through generations. Drawing from Isocrates, *de Pace 82* and Aeschines, *Against Ctesiphon*, Goldhill notes that this aspect of the tragic festival was closely linked to the civic ideology of the Athenian *polis* in particular because the presentation of the armor established a bond between the orphaned child and the *polis* from an early age.\(^{12}\) The young men were to be "brought up and educated at the expense of and by the city and the herald proclaimed what the city had done for the boys and what as men they would do for the city."\(^{13}\) With no male parent, the orphans were immediately socialized to recognize the collective community as their *oikos*. However, the set of armor acts as the binding agreement that serves to remind the male child of his obligation to the community. This ceremony emphasizes the individual’s future contributions for the gain of the community—a potential objective that became unattainable for Philoctetes when he received his wound.

In addition to Philoctetes’ perceived inability to reciprocate the needs of his community, individuals were also less willing to aid others since the Greek community acts as an agonistic society that encourages men to seek rewards such as honor, glory, and excellence.\(^{14}\) These distinctions are meant to highlight the exceptional few, which

\(^{12}\) Goldhill 1987, 63.

\(^{13}\) Goldhill 1987, 64.

\(^{14}\) In addition to literary evidence of competition in late Bronze Age societies, the lavish burials and elaborate treatment of weapons (e.g., boar's tusk helmet) of the wealthy class suggest that competition was indeed apparent (Osborne 2004, 208). This occurs not only in war, but also in times of peace. The
renders the feud more competitive. The nature of honor must be exclusive, or at least hierarchic, because if honor is attained equally by all then there is no honor for anyone.\textsuperscript{15} Therefore the highest honor was the most competitive of them all; this was only obtained by individual combat on the battlefield. War was a productive element of society and a continuous way of life that perpetuated competitive virtues as necessary for survival.\textsuperscript{16} These rewards not only function to compel individuals to seek similar qualities so that they will adhere to and compete for the values condoned by the community, but they also limit expressions of individuality.

Neoptolemus is portrayed as a confident young man who dares to forgo the opportunity to win such personal rewards to do what he feels is morally right. So he defiantly decides to bring Philoctetes some solace. Neoptolemus disobeys military orders not because he disagrees with the ideals of the institution, but because he finds a cause higher than the state’s needs.\textsuperscript{17} He is then portrayed as the hero who is courageous enough to grant Philoctetes’ wish to return home (1402). As the son of Achilles, it is likely that the exceptional status of his father emboldened Neoptolemus to look past the conventional notions of homogeneity and to distinguish himself in a different way. By obeying moral rules that he believes to be just, he is able to acknowledge Philoctetes’ personal pain and to recognize the indignity that he suffers.

\footnotesize{competition shifts to athletic festivals, poetic and musical performances, and the political and cultural spheres of society (Austin 2011, 22).}

\textsuperscript{15} Finley 1954, 118.

\textsuperscript{16} Austin 2011, 21.

\textsuperscript{17} Mandel 1981, 115.
Philoctetes’ wound exposes the vulnerability of the physically disabled and reveals their dependency on society for survival. In the stasimon, the Chorus imagines the pitiful plight that Philoctetes experiences without the aid of civilization, but they also subtly hint at the burden that he would place upon his society (687-715):

Where he was alone, having no one walking near him, nor any inhabitant, a neighbor in his troubles, beside whom he could have lamented the sickness that cruelly devoured him, with groans inviting a response; nor any to lull to sleep with healing herbs…And he moved this way or that, crawling, like a child without a loving nurse, searching for his need to be supplied, when the plague that devoured his mind abated. He never gathered food from the sowing of the sacred earth, never the other things that we men who earn our living dispose of, except when with the winged arrows from his swift-shooting bow he could acquire the food he needed.

The Chorus expresses regret that there was no helping hand at a time when Philoctetes was lacking the basic necessities for survival, nor was there anyone to act as “a loving nurse” (703), but they imply that he, unlike other men, would never have been able to make a sustainable living on his own. Austin names this lack of personal aid as the sign of the ultimate alienation of the tragic hero, who is reduced not simply to the most primitive human condition but to an infantile state.\(^\text{18}\) His accidental trauma is surely no fault of his, but who is to shoulder the burden? Perhaps society would have cared for wounded individuals within the domestic realm, but this play exposes the conventional military agenda that rejects the care of severely wounded soldiers.\(^\text{19}\) The same attitude holds true among visitors who happened upon Philoctetes, as shown above (306-311). The Chorus’ reactions, exhibited in this play, are disconcerting because these existing attitudes pose a troubling problem to the community’s treatment

\(^{18}\) Austin 2011, 115.

\(^{19}\) Healers cared for wounds sustained in battle but Philoctetes’ wound was a divine affliction that could not be healed by mortal hands.
of wounded soldiers—war was an inseparable part of Greek life and produced generations of wounded communities. This issue remains unresolved even toward the end of the play: Philoctetes, a representative of this disabled population, must depend solely on the good-will of one magnanimous individual to come to his aid.

Neoptolemus inquires about the reason of Philoctetes’ abandonment when he was deemed no longer useful to the military: “But why have the sons of Atreus after so long a time taken so much trouble to secure one whom long ago they had thrown out?” (598-600). The Merchant does not respond but defers to the prophet’s message from the gods (606). Since the gods do not offer a satisfactory explanation (neither does Odysseus), this previously discarded member of the society must proceed compliantly (according to the Heracles’ divine intervention) with his participation in such a community. The concept of an individual’s allotted share in life is indisputable in the Homeric world: individuals must act according to their moira. To do otherwise would be considered wrong in the world of Homer; moira is not abstract at all. In a similar reading of a person’s destiny, Austin reminds readers that there are no accidents in tragedy, only coincidence, that is, kairos. Everything coincidental must be received as in accordance with the gods, even when divinities appear ruthless. Thus, Philoctetes must risk his dignity by reentering his society, while being well aware that the military community could easily turn hostile again. It is no wonder that Philoctetes prefers to continue enduring a social death (even if he should return home) and to remain a non-member of society, rather than to actively participate in the war to win honor (999-1000).

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20 Adkins 1972, 19.
21 Austin 2011, 85.
The last shred of dignity that he can preserve for himself is to refuse all association with those who deprived him of ten years of his life.\textsuperscript{22}

When Heracles steps in as the ultimate authority on the matter, he ends the debate and restores order among the Greeks. He sets the machinery of society in motion again by reminding Philoctetes that the individual is subordinate to the collective (1143-1144). Heracles demands that Philoctetes “relinquish his sense of personal injury, however deep or justified, and act toward the common goal” (1421-1422).\textsuperscript{23} This theme of personal sacrifice recurs throughout the course of the play but the circumstances in which Philoctetes is placed push the boundaries of the collective Greek mentality: how far can society go in asking its members to relinquish their individuality? Roisman finds the answer in Heracles’ speech: “the individual’s personal feelings must be subordinated to the common welfare, and moral rectitude cannot be divorced from practical considerations.”\textsuperscript{24} Despite the previous wrongs that Philoctetes endured, he must forgo his sense of justice for the sake of the community. Practical affairs must take precedence over the personal to allow for the proper functioning of a society in accordance with divine fate. The communal sense of devaluing the individual permits the emergence of an ideal homogenous group of people.

Society urges homogeneity because there would be fewer kinks in their well-oiled machine if all people were born the same and shared the same qualities and beliefs. Since this is not the case, societies place emphasis on the ability of its institutions to create productive and functioning communities through homogenization for the benefit

\textsuperscript{22} Poe 1974, 7.

\textsuperscript{23} Roisman 2005, 106.

\textsuperscript{24} 	extit{Ibid.}
of the people. The best assurance of a successful society rests in an institution that employs shame-culture in conjunction with result-culture. The practice of shaming involves the participation of peers to provoke a response to do good for the collective. Result-culture functions in the same manner in that it rewards those who work towards tangible success. It is not by good intentions that the community continues to exist, but by the results that are achieved by its individuals.\textsuperscript{25} Sophocles illustrates this kind of society by emphasizing Philoctetes’ important story to his audience. Philoctetes’ plight certainly draws conflicting emotions in readers today because audiences can sympathize with his unfortunate situation, but only to a certain extent. For such attitudes of result-culture are present in today’s competitive and capitalistic society, where only the fittest thrive.

Acting under Heracles’ exhortation, Philoctetes returns to the military. The society and institution are then able to resume their authority over their members, although the sufferings of the past remain. Heracles’ consolation prize for Philoctetes is both the honor and benefit from participation that would compensate for the wrongs he suffered (1422). While \textit{kleos} gained in war is certainly appealing, Poe views Philoctetes’ opportunity to reenter his society as the most significant incentive to take up Odysseus’ offer: Philoctetes’ successful reintegration into his community would clearly bring him greater benefits than \textit{kleos} would bring him.\textsuperscript{26} Pragmatically, Philoctetes would only stand to gain if he reentered the war effort; however, the same cannot be stated of his internal sense of justice, with or without \textit{kleos}. If Heracles had not commanded

\textsuperscript{25} Adkins 1972, 13.

\textsuperscript{26} Poe 1972, 45.
Philoctetes to rejoin the military, he would have remained a disabled non-member of society, but he conforms because it was necessary for society to continue its course in war. Philoctetes' return will also keep the institution guilt-free of any unjustified actions. By regaining full membership to his society, Philoctetes will be esteemed as a war hero whose honor (gained from the fall of Troy) will atone for the sufferings he experienced. But as Philoctetes tries to exclaim to all who listen, trauma does not simply disappear through substitution (1352-1361):

But am I to give in?...It is not the pain of the past that stings me, but the sufferings still in store for me at their hands that I seem to foresee; for when men's mind has once become the mother of evil deeds, it begets yet more evil.

These lines in Philoctetes' last monologue, before the *deus ex machina*, reveal his fear of being submissive again to men who can commit such outrageous deeds. He has seen the worse of such men and refuses to join in their knavery. After ten years of isolation, he is no longer so naïve to believe that his community will not abandon him again. Even if his reintegration means a cure for his foot, he would rather not be betrayed for a second time. Ironically, Philoctetes is most traumatized not by the opposing enemy, nor by his ailing foot, but by the mental stress of desertion from his own military community. The treachery committed by his comrades runs deeper than the physical wounds. Philoctetes reveals himself to be, like Ajax, a mentally wounded man who realizes that he can no longer fit into the mold of his society. Therefore it is difficult to imagine that Philoctetes would be satisfied with Heracles' oracle because his return only benefits his community, not necessarily himself. The healing of his physical wound is also more of a benefit to society rather than to him—others will no longer be burdened with his disease. Philoctetes’ mental wounds are the most pressing: he
pleads to live with his wound, away from the military society. Instead, he is healed and rewarded by the community. From this perspective, he truly does not have a voice to express his needs and opinions. He also probably did not have a voice ten years ago either; and perhaps this can be extended to all members of their society. Philoctetes and others are merely workhorses, which he recognizes when he calls himself a slave (996) in his own society.
CHAPTER 4
VIETNAM VETERANS: IDENTITY IN MEDALS

The ancient Greek heroes of Sophocles’ plays continue to hold emotional resonance for war veterans today; his stories have transcended time because the tales of war and warriors are nothing new. As long as warfare is employed by societies as a political device to ensure safety and to achieve state goals, the characters of Ajax and Philoctetes will remain relevant. These two heroes seek to reinterpret war and the military society—because they did not succeed within the system—and they pose questions to the legitimacy of warfare. They present real inquiries into the process of war and attempt to redefine the prescribed formula of making war (i.e., gaining an understanding of war through socialization). Perhaps their actions can be described as a form of protest: Ajax commits suicide to escape his war-centric community, while Philoctetes rejects the honors of kleos (fame and glory) to decry his abandonment by the military. Their disillusionment with the military society comes across so strongly in the plays that modern soldiers can identify with these emotions today.

Like the Sophoclean heroes, soldiers of the Vietnam War returned home disenchanted with the smoke and mirrors of idealized heroism. The unusual circumstances surrounding the Vietnam War provoked an unprecedented call by Vietnam veterans and the American public for termination of the war while it was still ongoing. The public displays of opposition culminated when approximately 800 veterans lined up at the steps of the U.S. Capitol and threw back their ribbons and medals of distinction.¹ This powerful act revealed the complex identity of these particular veterans: they are former soldiers who deny and condemn their service to the military but retain

¹ Nicosia 2001, 141.
their unique status as veterans in society. This uncertain status is reminiscent of Ajax' and Philoctetes’ struggle to locate their worth in society. These veterans, honored with rewards for their sacrifice, publicly denied their accolades and accomplishments. In doing so, they disrupted the social code of the military and the functional value of the medals as a lifelong compensation for their patriotism. The medals, like Achilles’ armor, serve as physical evidence of the soldier’s honor, but they also serve to mollify—or attempt to mollify—his/her traumatic experience. By divesting themselves of this honor and mollification, the veterans confront their deepest fears: atrocities committed in war, feelings of betrayal within their own ranks, and psychological issues (posttraumatic stress disorder). This study aims to understand why this population of Vietnam veterans was able to defy the socialization process of the military (by rejecting their medals) and to address their wrongdoing and the wrongness of warfare.

Anxiety over the reintegration of World War II soldiers into the social order was already a serious concern among the American people. Their reintegration was fairly successful, owing to nationalistic pride that surfaced in the clear defeat of fascism. However, the anxiety lay in the veteran’s ability to upset social order and to pose a threat to political stability, particularly through their training as fighters. Re-socialization from military to civilian life is a necessary process for the successful reintegration of soldiers because this process must undo a similar program of brutal socialization that the military employs to transform the individual from civilian to soldier. Through military training, the individual must accept the temporary rules and regulations of the military

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2 Gerber 1994, 546.
3 Scott 2004, 246.
model in order to be successful in war. This enables the former civilian to commit acts previously taboo, that is, killing other humans.

In his study, Gerald Nicosia encounters one veteran by the name of Phil Gioia who is able to switch roles between civilian and soldier with ease. He, seemingly, has no problems with reintegration: he had a proudly-displayed collection of war-time awards, was elected mayor of his town, and was CEO of a computer software company.\(^4\) Gioia emphasizes that soldiering is a profession; soldiers must don a mask that permits them to switch identities. A professional soldier must learn to see the world “as pretty black and white” and cannot dwell on the grays areas of the meaning of loss.\(^5\) But for many other soldiers, that same mask is a form of self-protection against the horrors of combat and it may be difficult for one so traumatized to drop. The readjustment period after the Vietnam War proved to be more difficult than the period following World War II because communities were unable to provide the necessary aid.\(^6\) As evidenced in John Kerry’s passionate speech in front of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on April 22, 1971, the statistics revealed demonstrate that the war was still not over in the minds of many veterans: “[The President had not] given a thought to the astounding fact that 57 percent of all those entering the VA hospitals talked of suicide, and 27 percent admitted having tried.”\(^7\) Like Ajax, soldiers who witness or commit acts of atrocity discover that

\(^5\) Nicosia 2001, 11.
\(^6\) Some reasons for this discrepancy include a higher number of disabilities due to advanced technology, unconventional techniques in warfare (such as using harmful chemicals), and the lack of direction and purpose for the war. In the wake of defeat, the public consciousness was divided about institutional support for Vietnam veterans. Benefits for Vietnam era veterans were less than those enjoyed by service men of World War II, as evidenced by the Vietnam Era Veterans’ Readjustment Assistance Act of 1974 that was passed to provide further aid.
\(^7\) Nicosia 2001, 137.
they can no longer fit into comfortable social positions. They find other means of escape, such as alcohol or drugs, or even suicide, because that would produce the same end result that they were prepared to accept.

Based on the criterion that a disability prevents an individual from fulfilling obligations to civilian and military duties, the obvious wound of physical impairment also stigmatizes the veteran as an outside member of society. As a result, physical disabilities confine one to economic and physical dependence. Philoctetes is the embodiment of this excluded member. In addition to the years of abandonment, he is humiliated and repulsed by the mere fact that no one wishes to bear the burden of bringing a wounded soldier home. Most significantly, his story is characterized by the civilian and military communities’ blatant disregard of his plight. Both civilian and military communities keep him in silence for ten years. Similarly in the 1960s and 1970s, the traumatic experiences of war were largely hidden from mainstream view until images from the Vietnam War were televised for the first time. The increased awareness of the realities of war prompted, on the one hand, admiration and pity for the plight of soldiers, and on the other, resentment and disgust.

Although the release of such knowledge about the extent of death and traumatic injury experienced by the troops created a divided consciousness, “the disabled veteran hero as warrior hero has served as a particularly potent symbol for inspiring war efforts.” The sight of such a veteran is sufficient to arouse emotions of admiration and wonder at the obvious sacrifice the soldier made. The disabled veteran becomes a

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8 Edwards 1997, 35.
fixture that validates the sentiment that American democracy is worth fighting for. This physically marked veteran holds a unique place in society because veterans with war-related disabilities are perceived as innocent sufferers on behalf of the community.\textsuperscript{10} This notion affords them an elevated status among their peers.

One example of this special treatment occurred in Operation Dewey Canyon III, a protest which lasted from April 19 through 23 of 1971. The protest was so named after policymakers had authorized a search and destroy incursion into Cambodia and Laos titled Operation Dewey Canyon II.\textsuperscript{11} While taking part in the protest, members of Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) were arrested for obstructing the pathways of the Supreme Court building. More than one hundred veterans were taken in by the police, but Metropolitan Police Chief, Jerry Wilson, ordered his men not to arrest the disabled veterans who were present, including two legless veterans in wheelchairs, Bill Henschel and Bill Wyman. But they both immediately complained about “discrimination” and declared that they wished to be arrested with their “brothers.”\textsuperscript{12} In this instance, the disabled veterans downplay their physical disability in order to be treated equally. This episode also depicts disabled veterans as conscious individuals who understand the impact of their physical impairment in the public eye, especially if they should be arrested. They are especially poignant figures to represent VVAW because their objectively perceived trauma (i.e., physical wound) is illustrative of many other veterans who suffer from unseen ailments.

\textsuperscript{10} Gerber 2000, 7.
\textsuperscript{11} Scott 2004, 20.
\textsuperscript{12} Nicosia 2001, 135.
This reversal of discrimination can be applied to Philoctetes’ position on Lemnos when he becomes necessary to the war effort again. The leaders of the army point to his physical wound as evidence of his inability and uselessness to them; but when they find him necessary, they again point to his wound as a reason for his return. The hypocrisy of the discrimination lies in the community’s perception of physical wounds. Police Chief Wilson refuses to arrest Henschel and Wyman because he understands the consequence of public opinion if he arrested the disabled veterans. In Philoctetes’ case, Odysseus preys upon his vulnerability as a wounded man to entice him to return. Philoctetes understands that discrimination will not end if he returns home; however, the motive that was used for abandoning him is now used to persuade him.

The provocative status of veterans spurs a constantly changing understanding of their identities, in their own perception and as perceived by others. Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* remains an important play that has an impact on veterans today. This is only one reason why Bryan Doerries selected the *Philoctetes* as one of the staples in his Theater of War program. He understood that the story of the wounded soldier would continue to attract members of the military population.

Dwight Johnson was one such veteran who shocked the nation when he was killed on April 30, 1971 in an attempt to rob a Detroit liquor store at gunpoint. Only two and a half years earlier, he had received the Congressional Medal of Honor, an award placed around his neck by President Lyndon B. Johnson. His robbery attempt and subsequent death were news that disturbed the minds of the American public and the military community alike. Most importantly, this tragedy showed how difficult it was to be a hero
in an unpopular war.\textsuperscript{13} We expect veterans, who receive the nation’s highest award for heroism in combat, to be infallible human beings. A hero who risks his life in combat for his comrades and is able to survive to tell the story is regarded with the utmost admiration. His death, especially during a robbery, shatters any illusions of grandeur for soldiers whose main occupation is to kill. We learn that Johnson received his medal for acts of courage, selflessness, and massive killing. When ambushed by the North Vietnamese army, he witnessed a tank that caught fire and exploded with all of his crew inside. This prompted a rampage in which he almost singlehandedly broke the ambush and subdued the enemy. He was so enraged that he had to be restrained and anesthetized afterwards.\textsuperscript{14}

A few days after the event, Johnson returned home to the States, where he received his Medal of Honor and was lauded for his bravery. With more information about his reaction upon the death of his comrades, it is apparent that Johnson was clearly not in his right mind during the rampage, but we still honor this act as heroism. Herein lies the problem which Jonathan Shay would term “the berserk state.”\textsuperscript{15} Johnson’s reaction is reminiscent of Achilles’ mindless rage upon the Trojan ranks when he learns of the death of Patroclus. Likewise, in Sophocles’ play, Ajax feels ambushed, or rather attacked (figuratively) by his comrades, when deprived of the arms he believed he earned. The injustice Ajax feels prompts his furious slaughter on the cattle. In both of these cases, the community failed to comprehend the immediate needs of the traumatized soldier. Ajax was dependent on the prize for his psyche’s stability, and as it

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Scott 2004, 42.
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Shay 1994, 81.
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turns out, for his life. Johnson’s community reacts in the opposite manner: although the public recognizes his trauma, it misread his condition.

Johnson went “berserk” after the loss of his comrades and yet the military gave him the highest honors for those deaths. Johnson’s death calls for a developed understanding of the psychology of soldiers who face severe traumatic experiences. The medal may superficially alleviate questions concerning the integrity of his mindless actions, but it does not elevate the experience to an act of heroism. Society assumes that human character remains the same over time: “a selfless hero who survived an ambush could not have robbed a liquor store, for it would not be in his character,” as one reasoning might go. But Johnson’s criminal act stirs the public to view his behavior and identity somewhere between the spectrum of disbelief and fear. The unpredictability of veterans’ behavior disrupts the aggrandized notions of their honor and service. Despite such incidents, veterans continue to attract public attention and are actively sought out as public figures for political causes.

Scott Olsen, an ex-Marine Iraq veteran, was dubbed the “face” of the Occupy movement on October 25, 2011 when a policeman, with aims to subdue the protest, shot a tear-gas canister into the crowd in Oakland, California. Olsen was hit by the projectile which fractured his skull. His bloodied face went viral on the Internet and he became a rallying figure for the Occupy movement. Although many other individual protesters suffered injuries from contact with the police force, Olsen was unanimously taken up by the public as a poster child for its cause. His unique status as a war veteran lends power to the political cause because of the ironic circumstances: he risked his life

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16 Basu 2011.
to serve in the Marines and returned only to be injured by his own countrymen. This sense of injustice was likely to be shared universally. With his injury, Olsen captured the attention of the public and drew much criticism to the policemen who employed dangerous tactics on peaceful crowds.

One reason for the respect that the veteran status commands is the notion that the veterans willingly chose death on behalf of their country. Military groups are the only kinds of organizations that require one to die for the organization. Soldiers risk their lives altruistically, knowing that the society cannot easily repay them for this demand. Their rewards and compensation (in forms of money, benefits, and education) serve not only to alleviate the stresses of war, but also to recognize their altruism. These rewards may "stand as visible symbols of collective gratitude and even guilt."\(^{17}\) The public realizes that there is no “market value” for a soldier’s patriotism and that the available resources to compensate them for their services are finite.\(^ {18}\) Therefore, the highest degree of respect and reverence is bestowed upon veterans, who have dedicated their lives to the country, in lieu of financial support.

The identity of veterans, then, becomes a powerful force that can legitimately question the authority of their government. Their views can be considered most valid precisely because they participated in the actual undertakings that significantly affected their own lives. In a fervent anti-war protest, VVAW participated in Operation RAW (Rapid American Withdrawal) on Labor Day weekend in 1970. They performed guerrilla theater to give visual expression to the realities of warfare to the American public. On a

\(^{17}\) Scott 2004, 249.

\(^{18}\) Scott 2004, 250.
march from Morristown, New Jersey to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, they dressed in jungle fatigues and carried toy M-16 rifles to simulate war atrocities that their government sanctioned.¹⁹ In case the message was not clear enough, a flyer accompanied their acts:

If you had been Vietnamese—we might have burned your house, we might have shot your dog, we might have shot you, we might have raped your wife and your daughter…Help us to end the war before they turn your son into a butcher or a corpse.²⁰

Not only are veterans permitted to voice their opinions about the war, but they are able to reenact the exact actions that the military trained them to do.

To take their protest against the war further, the VVAW planned a five-day protest, the aforementioned Operation Dewey Canyon III, at the Capitol. The week was full of “evocative VVAW demonstrations” but the fitting climax was the Return of Medals on the final day.²¹ This event exposed the struggles that Vietnam veterans face every day from the horror and atrocities they witnessed in war. Instead of being treated for their experiences, the veterans are given medals and are called heroes, a gross perversion of the definition of heroism. The return of the medals also reveals their inner turmoil with their identity and status in a society. On the one hand, their society rewards them with medals for their deeds, but on the other, condemns them as “baby-killers.” The returning of the medals presents an opportunity for veterans to actively declare their sentiments about the war and to reaffirm their own beliefs of justice in the moral context of the war. They received medals and ribbons for acts that they believed were morally wrong; for

²⁰ Nicosia 2011, 61.
²¹ Small 2002, 140.
some, this realization came during their tours in Vietnam, and for others, it was registered after the fact. They fought in a war that, in hindsight, was misguided on all levels. Lastly, the occasion allowed them to throw out their “symbols of shame” onto the Capitol lawn and to dedicate this emotional action to fallen comrades whose deaths may have contributed to the rewarding.\textsuperscript{22} The event marked a dramatic and poignant moment in time that epitomized the dedicated passions of the Vietnam veterans.

John Kerry, the spokesman of the VVAW and future senator of Massachusetts, had a difficult time returning his Purple Heart Medal. But as one of the prominent members of VVAW, he felt pressured to set an example. Ultimately, he decided to throw back the purple ribbon but to keep the medallion.\textsuperscript{23} His hesitancy to throw away the prized reward suggests that the medal still held a significant amount of value for him. Specifically, the Purple Heart is a medal awarded to soldiers wounded in combat. It is a physical manifestation of the wounds suffered in acts of war. By keeping the object, the wounds (though healed) remain a reminder of the pain that the soldier once suffered for the country. At the same time, the medal serves as a source of pride for the soldier because the pain of the wound is supposed to be compensated through this honorable award. Although Kerry calls for an end to wars, he cannot deny his former status as a soldier.

Jack Smith, the first veteran to throw his medals across the lawn, describes the medals as “a symbol of dishonor, shame and inhumanity”; after his dedication, he offered their return as a kind of apology to the Vietnamese people, “whose hearts were

\textsuperscript{22} Small 2002, 140.

\textsuperscript{23} Nicosia 2001, 142.
broken, not won” by acts of “genocide, racism, and atrocity.”24 From a different interview, Smith goes on to say:

I mean, it was probably the most powerful moment of my life. Because we knew how much those medals meant to us... You know, I can still hear the dings of those medals, the Bronze Stars and the Silver Stars bouncing off the statue of [fourth chief justice of the Supreme Court] John Marshall, [and] the Purple Hearts, behind the barricades.25

Ron Ferrizzi, another veteran, explains his emotions: “So many people are dead, like they don’t exist anymore, and they give me a fucking medal. That’s supposed to make everything okay again.”26 The idea that they should receive rewards for the loss of so many lives, comrades and Vietnamese alike, is unsettling to live with. The act of giving back the medals was the beginning of a catharsis that allowed the veterans to express their sense of injustice at a system that blindly dictated the lives of soldiers and many innocent lives.

Ajax and Philoctetes never truly had cathartic moments in which they could cope with the emotional trauma of their experiences. Ajax’ only escape was through death; but perhaps his short time in solitude on the shores of Troy granted him the strength to make peace with his turmoil. In this sense, his rejection of life is his plea and protest against the injustices of society. Philoctetes also makes a stand against outrages of the military community by rejecting everything that should be considered dear to him by society’s standards. Only by shunning the cure for his foot and his opportunity to win kleos can he regain his personal sense of honor and dignity.

24 Nicosia 2001, 141.
25 Scott 2004, 23.
26 Nicosia 2001, 141.
Because the outpouring of resentment against the Vietnam War readily increased, many veterans felt confused and ashamed of their service. The strong identities that they cultivated in the military began to appear repulsive to the public and to themselves. Whether they committed war crimes or witnessed them, the veterans were able to confront their experiences and to discuss them in the Winter Soldier Investigation. The testimonies revealed the atrocities that occurred in Vietnam and the socialization process that they endured in order to commit such slaughter on the Vietnamese. Through their speech, the veterans felt urged to expose these secrets because they understood the gravity of their behavior and wanted to affect change in the situation. However, by giving testimony, they risked their honor and integrity by admitting their association with the acts. Bill Crandell, a participant, describes his own mixed reaction to the veterans who gave testimony:

I had this sort of conflict between loving these guys and hating what they had been involved in. And I had to put myself superior to them or share the guilt with them. And I chose the latter. And that was very hard. In a lot of ways, I took on some guilt that wasn’t mine and became very depressed. 27

While sharing in the conversation, Crandell could not condemn nor condone the behavior of these men. His conflicting thoughts on the rightness and wrongness of the veterans perhaps reflect back on his inability to pinpoint his own feelings about his brutal actions.

When the Vietnam veterans returned home, the public reception was lukewarm at best and did nothing to help these former soldiers make sense of their experiences. This lack of acknowledgment posed many problems for the veterans because their

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sacrifice was being reduced to nothing more than a mistake. Consequently, many veterans felt isolated by their community.²⁸

Social acceptance plays a significant role in aiding the veteran through the reintegration process. Being received favorably into society, the traumatized veteran can regain understanding of the norms of social conduct that belong exclusively in a civilian community. After experiencing a different set of brutal codes that exist in the military, a major adjustment is necessary to ease the soldier back into the civilian role. The soldier is not trained to take up a civilian occupation immediately, so he must be nurtured back into societal customs. When a veteran is listed as an “unskilled laborer,” as defined by the state employment bureau, he remains a marginalized member of society despite surviving the war to return home. His newly listed occupation adds to the hurt and bitterness that the once-skilled infantryman already feels.²⁹ This example demonstrates that there are no roles for the returning veteran to fill. They appear to have no place in society. Since their military skills essentially become worthless among civilians, their occupational status becomes a source of shame and disappointment.

Without a comprehensive understanding of the veteran’s psyche, the veteran can become increasingly more distrusting of the society to which he returns.³⁰ While the experiences of war may jeopardize the veteran’s ability to build social trust, the community must also work to rebuild a sense of communal justice for the veteran. Shay claims that an important part of the reintegration process is largely absent from modern

²⁸ Kleber et al. 1995, 3.
³⁰ Shay 2002, 150.
cultures, that is, the purification rituals that cleanse the soldier/killer of blood pollution.\(^{31}\) This is an important process that helps to define the veteran’s status in society. As a person who has killed another human being, the veteran needs to be redefined within the community. The soldier is permitted to kill, indeed, trained to kill, but the civilian is neither permitted nor trained to do so. This identity shift is the source of distress within the veteran’s mind. Veterans participate in "peacetime" affairs as well as "wartime" affairs, but the former soldiers must adjust to a different set of rules that govern each role of civilian and soldier. Shay writes that "unhealed combat trauma devastates the civic and political life of the returning veteran" because the societal "democratic process embodies the apparent contradiction of safe struggle," therefore struggling metaphorically appears to be a "hollow charade."\(^{32}\) Thus it is important that the veteran assumes his identity as a civilian in order to participate as a member of society without the violence to which he is accustomed.

The unique circumstances of the Vietnam War correlate to the underwhelming number of Vietnam veterans who actively participate in veteran organizations. More than two million of the twelve million veterans of World War II joined the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, and by 1948, ninety-two veterans of that war (almost 20 percent of the combined House and Senate) were in Congress. By contrast, less than 100,000 of the nine million Vietnam veterans joined these organizations in the 1970’s.\(^{33}\) These statistics reveal the underrepresentation of Vietnam veterans in the public sphere. However, this is likely due to the severe trauma suffered by soldiers of

\(^{31}\) Shay 2002, 152.

\(^{32}\) Shay 1994, 180.

\(^{33}\) Scott 2004, 8.
the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War was unlike any previous war and it produced a new kind of trauma that was difficult for both the public and experts to understand. A misunderstanding of these kinds of trauma still exists today.

In November of 2008, the Pentagon decided not to make the Purple Heart Medal eligible for veterans who suffer from posttraumatic stress disorder because they do not consider mental wounds as a serious form of injury that can be objectively observed.\textsuperscript{34} Despite this setback for those who suffer from PTSD, the Pentagon left open the possibility that this decision may be changed. In September of 2011, the Pentagon revised the criteria for the Medal to include those who suffer battlefield concussions and, as a result, also suffer from PTSD.\textsuperscript{35} Some have seen this development as a victory for the recognition of psychological trauma but the physical wound of a concussion is still the most important criterion for the reward; the psychological trauma of PTSD is secondary. Furthermore, PTSD does not necessarily develop from a concussion. Again, the identity of the veteran is questioned, except through the objectification of his injuries. In this case, the military community continues to deny the legitimacy of mental trauma, perpetuating the problems still echoed by the characters of Ajax and Philoctetes.

Some veterans yearn for a prize for their deeds in war, such as Ajax, while others reject it, such as Philoctetes. This longing for and refusal of the prize becomes a contentious subject that provokes more controversy than its well-intended purpose. The prize can be seen, then, as a man-made creation that caters to the sufferings of the

\textsuperscript{34} Alvarez and Eckholm 2009, A1.

\textsuperscript{35} Baker 2011.
wounded, but it has been seen to fail as an effective appeasement for the military community. Those who see past the prize's superficial function, realize that it is not worth the human sacrifice. They understand that it cannot compensate for bloodshed in war. Others who desire such a prize, wish for it because their wounds remain unsettled in their minds. Perhaps if they were to receive the reward they may find that the prize does not fulfill their needs, much as the Vietnam war veterans have discovered. What this conflicting mentality reveals is that the manufactured prize is not sufficient to compensate for bloodshed. It is not comparable to human life. The emergence of anti-war organizations founded by veterans, such as the VVAW, Iraq Veterans Against the War, and Veterans for Peace, is a testament to this contrived and imagined sense of restitution for the experiences of war.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

The war does not end when you come home. It lives on in the memories of your fellow soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines who gave their lives. It endures in the wound that is slow to heal, the disability that isn’t going away, the dream that wakes you at night, or the stiffening in your spine when a car backfires down the street.

—President Barack Obama, 2-27-2009

The stories of soldiers are powerful: they are filled with accounts of extraordinary experiences that the average civilian will probably never fully comprehend. We can only stand back in awe at the trials that humans can endure. Ajax and Philoctetes are exceptional soldiers who cast new light upon their military community, but they also show to what extent the human psyche can suffer. Ajax is one of the few characters in ancient Greek tragedy that effectively engages the audience with the inner workings of the psyche. The audience gets a glimpse into the psyche of Ajax, a warrior who feels so much inner torment that viewers actually see a picture of his mental anguish when he commits suicide on stage. Philoctetes also makes a profound impact on the audience when he refuses the cure for his foot. His rejection of the cure and of society is especially unfathomable when the audience senses firsthand the pain he is suffering and hears the terrible effects of the disease that force him to react so pitifully. Philoctetes pleads and cries aloud in his moments of torture, forcing the audience to experience the physical and mental torments of the illness that he has had to endure for ten years.

While these enacted moments create a lasting impression of the heroes’ sufferings, Ajax’ and Philoctetes’ stories continue to fascinate because many questions
are left unresolved. We will never know how the votes were cast in the Judgment of Arms, nor will we know Philoctetes’ true thoughts about rejoining his betrayers. Likewise, the stories of Vietnam war veterans are not quite yet over. The reason for such on-going discussions is due, in large part, to society’s inability to pinpoint a definition for psychological trauma. There is still much to be learned about the workings of the human mind; unfortunately, much of our knowledge about the stressors of the human mind is owed to the traumatic experiences that soldiers face.

The diagnosis for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) did not formally enter the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) until 1980, approximately seven years after the U.S. halted its involvement in the Vietnam War. The criteria for PTSD were altered three more times by the American Psychiatric Association until it reached its current form, which dates to 2000. Interestingly, it has been twelve years since the diagnosis was last updated; I question the dearth of new alterations. It is not likely that the criteria, dating to 2000, have been formed so adequately so as to encompass a sufficient number of symptoms to match the current developments of soldiers who suffer from traumatic experiences. But rather the disorder is perhaps now so commonly identified that military authorities are inclined to dismiss the diagnosis in an effort to retain soldiers in the ranks, as Iraq Veterans Against the War claims in their Operation Recovery Campaign. Because of this fear and anxiety over false claims of PTSD, the Pentagon also refuses to recognize PTSD as a legitimate form of trauma by denying the Purple Heart Medal to mentally wounded soldiers.

This is an unfortunate lack of insight on the part of military authorities in our society because there are many former service men and women who would benefit
from such an accolade, much as Ajax would. If the sons of Atreus recognized Ajax’
desperate need for validation of his work through the rewarding of the arms of Achilles,
they would have prevented an otherwise honorable warrior from suicide. On one of my
volunteer trips to the Malcolm Randall VA Center in Gainesville, FL, I encountered one
such hospitalized individual who clearly displayed symptoms of the disorder, and who
knew that he suffered from it. Of all the patients whom I met at the VA, I remember him
most vividly because our meeting was disastrous in some ways, but most of all,
provoking.

He was a homeless man who knew that his stay at the VA hospital was limited:
after treatment, he would live out on the streets again. As much as I sympathized with
him, I could not offer him a home, nor did I know of a shelter that would take him in.
Many questions crossed my mind when he revealed he was a homeless man: How did
he know that VA services were available to him? How did he provide proof of his
veteran status? How did he recognize his ailments so as to seek help from the VA? But
before I could strike up a conversation, his demeanor changed in a moment from
friendly to belligerent. When he realized that he was, once again, speaking with
someone who would listen to him but was unable to actually produce any effective
change, he no longer wanted me to be in his presence. So he turned his words against
me. From the words of his tirade, I learned more about him than I have about many
other patients I met:

Art projects? Wait a minute, I need something that no one here in the
hospital, neither the nurses or the staff, has been able to help me with. Do
you think you can help me? I need something for a homeless man, a place
to live, a home. Do you have that? Well if you can’t help me then get out of
here! You look like you’re from Cambodia, are you? Do you have anything
for PTSD? You can’t help me, so get out! I’m calling the nurses to kick you out of my room! Get out!

Between the shouting and the racist assumption, I am reminded of Philoctetes’ plight and feelings of hopelessness. In his eyes, the world, both civilian and military, seemed cold and indifferent. This man, who was likely a Vietnam war veteran, recognized his disorder and wanted to seek help. However, his reaction tells me that he has tried unsuccessfully to seek appropriate aid before. His homelessness does not do him any favors either. The society that he and I live in has lost his trust and has seemingly done little to regain his confidence, but more importantly, to welcome him into our community.

With efforts to help veterans live longer and healthier lives, the Department of Veterans Affairs researchers found that aging veterans, with or without PTSD, who received the Purple Heart Medal showed significantly lower mortality rates compared with those who had not received the reward.¹ This ten-year study brings to light the importance of military rewards and their function: that rewards do make a difference in the lives of veterans. In a study of 10,255 World War II and Korean war veterans of age 65 or older, Purple Heart holders were twice as likely to be alive than those who did not receive the medal. The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of resilience factors that can contribute to the betterment of veterans’ lives after experiencing war. Evidently, the Purple Heart award is a major contributing factor. So perhaps it is not so incredible that Philoctetes survived for ten years with a debilitating disease alone; after all, he earned and wielded Heracles’ famed bow as a renowned prize for lighting Heracles’ funeral pyre. From this viewpoint, Philoctetes belongs among the group of veterans, in the study, who were Purple Heart holders and who ultimately

¹ Kimbrell et al. 2011.
lived twice as long as those who did not hold the reward. Falling under the statistics of the other group of veterans who did not receive the reward and who lived shorter lives would be, of course, Ajax.

While the parallel between Sophocles’ heroes and this recent study is imprecise, Sophocles’ understanding of soldiers do not differ much from what is shown scientifically today. Ajax and Philoctetes were two ancient heroes whose stories resonated among ancient audiences but their popularity among modern audiences, particularly with that of the military community, demonstrates a profound need for a deeper connection to such characters. There is more to the stories of veterans than what doctors and researchers have explained. These characters stand in for the unspoken and inexpressible emotions that are shared by ancient and modern audiences, and ancient and modern soldiers. As long as war is a part of our reality, Ajax and Philoctetes will remain mythical soldiers through whom we can discuss past, current, and unrecognized issues of veterans.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Aileen Ng received her Master of Arts in Classics from the University of Florida and her Bachelor of Arts in Classics from the University of Southern California. She was born in Boston, Massachusetts where she attended Boston Latin School and began cultivating her interests in the field of Classics.