Masculinity and The Warrior Culture of *The Iliad*

Posted by Nicole Smith, Dec 6, 2011

Throughout *The Iliad* by Homer, one of the most important aspects of society is warfare. In fact, not only are the ongoing wars at the center of the plot and action in the text, but warfare itself is one of the strongest social forces detectable. For men who shun the warrior culture or for some reason do not fully engage with it, they face being criticized or even ostracized. Being a coward or declining an opportunity to engage in war or battles in the society portrayed in *The Iliad* is one of the worst possible ways for any man to be as it goes against much of what notions of masculinity is defined by. Generally speaking, throughout the text, there are a range of events and interactions between characters that reveal the expectations of this masculine warrior culture and these passages also reflect the importance of adhering to these societal expectations.

The warrior culture presented in *The Iliad* revolves around masculine ideas of duty, honor, and bravery. In such a society, there is no greater glory that can come to a man than if he dies in battle or for a noble cause, especially if the cause concerns the defense of one’s homeland or family. In a particularly succinct statement by Diomedes as he attempts to rally his fellow fighters, he offers the wisdom in one of the important quotes from *The Iliad*, “I know only cowards depart from battle. / A real warrior stands his ground / whether he is hit or hits another” (11.432-435). In many ways this quote defines the entire warrior culture presented in the text.

First of all, being a coward in the society presented in the poem is one of the worst possible labels a man can bear. Additionally, tied to the idea of cowardice versus bravery, being a “real warrior” is something that is hailed as an incredibly important trait in this warrior society. Being a trait tied to the men in this book (aside from female goddesses there are no women that appear as combatants with expectations of bravery placed upon them) the message is that to be a “real warrior” is tantamount to being a real man. Furthermore, it should also be noted that there is a certain degree of fatalism tied into this statement as it expresses the idea that “whether he is hit or hits another” everyone eventually faces death and the best one can do is simply remain engaged in combat, for better or for worse. The notions of masculinity and bravery, along with the idea of fatalism (in terms of how men will eventually die, so they should be brave and fight with all their gusto) shape several encounters and events in the text and define several characters as either “weak” or heroic.

There are several examples of characters who struggle with the societal expectations that men engage in combat to preserve their honor, one of which is Paris. Although he is a “masculine” character in *The Iliad*, especially as proved through his act of stealing Helen away from Menelaus, he ends up being afraid to fight as his aggressor approaches. As explained in one of the important quotes from *The Iliad*, “But when Paris caught sight of him [Hector] / emerging from the ranks, his heart misgave, / and he recoiled on his companions, not / to incur the deadly clash” (3.35-38). Interestingly, he is not recoiling because he does not agree with fighting or warfare, but because he does not wish to become mortally wounded. Even though it is evidenced throughout the
text that it is an honorable cause to die in battle or warfare, the fear of dying prevents Paris from following through. This refusal to engage with the masculine warrior culture, however, provokes a response from Hector, who in turn begins to insult his manhood and honor. After witnessing Paris back down from the fight, Hector scornfully says, “Paris, the great lover, a gallant sight! / You should have had no seed and died unmarried. / Would to god you had! / Better than living this way in dishonor, / in everyone’s contempt” (3.45-49). This response from Hector is noteworthy because he not only addresses the fact that in this culture he will suffer contempt and dishonor for not being willing and ready to die in battle, but also because he directly attacks his manhood, suggesting that he is not worthy to bear children. When Hector remarks upon Paris’ status as a “great lover” and a “gallant sight” he is subtly mocking this soft trait in a man and grouping his characteristic as a lover (as opposed to strong fighter such as himself or Achilles) in with cowardice or weakness. In short, this event and Hector’s response sums up a great deal about the warrior culture present in The Iliad.

The expectations of the warrior culture presented in The Iliad and its associated relation to gender (masculine) expectations is also apparent in the dealings with **women and families by male characters in The Iliad**. While it is noble and heroic to defend one’s honor and family at all costs, women are expected to support the male-centered warrior culture and allow men to adhere to their ideas of dying in battle if necessary. For example, as Andromache, Hector’s wife, pleads with her husband not to get off into war since certain horrible things awaited him, he tries to soothe her. Instead of offering her gentle words, he simply defends his duty as a male in a warrior culture, saying, “But my shame before the Trojans and their wives / With their long robes trailing, would be too terrible / If I hung back from battle like a coward. / And my heart won’t let me. I have learned to be / One of the best, to fight in Troy’s first ranks, defending my father’s honor and my own” (6.465-469). In short, this passage reflects his duty as being more important to his own honor as well as those in the family line of masculinity (his father) than to the females in his life.

Although there have only been a few examples of the warrior culture defining masculinity, the book itself is a testament to a culture that valued notions such as honor, duty, bravery, and the willingness to fight with one’s all or gladly accept death. Although characters such as Paris in the incident previously discussed back away from these life-threatening encounters and some other characters (most notably the mortal females) seem to express some discontent with this way of life, the norm in this society, at least as Homer presents it, is for men to fight and die gallantly or face ridicule and for the women to support the men in their noble male-centered pursuits.