

Moral Injury

Jonathan Shay

For 20 years, I worked in a Department of Veterans Affairs clinic with psychologically and morally injured combat veterans. For fifteen or so of those years, continuing after retirement from the VA, I have also worked with active military service members at all ranks, not as a clinician, but as an advocate for changes in policy, practice, and culture aimed at preventing psychological and moral injury. Dialogues with active military people have partly been in an official capacity—such as performing the *Commandant of the Marine Corps Trust Study* for General Jim Jones, or as Chair of Ethics, Leadership, and Personnel Policy in the Office of the Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, or as the 2009 Omar Bradley Chair at the Army War College—and partly as an unpaid missionary from the veterans I served as a psychiatrist.

What I can say from my encounters with present and former military personnel is that the great Homeric narrative fictions are experiments with the moral materials of military practice. Fictions (what Aristotle would have called “poetry”) are experiments with the moral materials of a society and its practices and of the human condition. The great fictions do not cook the books; the experiments have been honestly done. Certain truths, especially in the realm of ethics, are best told through narrative fiction. So long as humans engage in the social practice of war, and of returning to domestic life afterward, the Homeric experiments will offer substantial insight.

It has been my privilege in two books on the Homeric epics to show how these experiments carry living knowledge to us today. I am profoundly grateful for the large-spiritedness and generosity with which professional classicists have responded to the observations contained in these two books, my labors of love. They examine, in particular, the social and ethical world of soldiers within the ecology of power in their *own* forces.

The epics teach no lesson at all to modern forces on weapons, planning, communications, tactics, organization, training, or logistics. But for those who go to war and return from it today, the epics still vibrate with meaning on cohesion, leadership, and ethics. I speak many times a year with professional military audiences, usually on what might be called *jus rei militaris*, “what’s right, just, equitable, and legal in the internal conduct of military matters.”

My pitch is clear, simple, and not at all new. Nothing I say is new. I say that three things protect the mind and spirit of persons sent into mortal danger: (1) positive qualities of community of the face-to-face unit that create “*cohesion*”; (2) expert, ethical, and properly supported *leadership*; and (3) prolonged, cumulative, realistic *training* for what they actually have to do and face. I explain why, both to win fights with the least spillage of blood (on both sides, potentially) and to abide by the simplest principle of “do unto others,” these three qualities—cohesion, leadership, and training—are ethical imperatives for military institutions. I speak to these audiences for the veterans I

have served: they do not want other young kids wrecked the way they were wrecked in Vietnam.

That's the fly-over of where I'm coming from and what I've been up to. Now to the topic at hand.

William Nash, a senior Navy psychiatrist (the Marine Corps Combat and Operations Stress Control [COSC] coordinator until his retirement from the Navy), Brett Litz, and Shira Maguen, and other clinician-researchers, have done an excellent job of describing a devastating form of moral injury that arises when a service member does something in war that violates their own ideals, ethics, or attachments. The diagnosis PTSD does not capture this. PTSD does a pretty good job of describing a kind of fear syndrome. Litz, et al. pointed out the central fact that PTSD, as officially defined, is rarely what wrecks veterans lives or crushes them to suicide. Moral injury as they have described it does both.



	PTSD	Moral Injury
Triggering Event (A1 Criterion)	Actual or threatened death or serious injury	Acts that violate deeply held moral values
Individual's role at time of event	Victim or witness	Perpetrator, victim, or witness
Predominant painful emotion (A2)	Fear, horror, helplessness	Guilt, shame, anger
Reexperiencing (B Criteria)?	YES	YES
Avoidance or numbing (C Criteria)?	YES	YES
Physiological arousal level (D Criteria)?	YES	NO
What necessity is lost?	Safety	Trust

See: Litz B.T, Stein N., Delaney E., Lebowitz L., Nash W.P., Silva C., & Maguen S. (2009). Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: a preliminary model and intervention strategy. *Clinical Psychology Review*, doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2009.07.003.

Take that in: the soul wound inflicted by doing something that violates one's own ethics, ideals, or attachments.

I offer one horrific example, which I will not multiply. This was told to me at a Marine Corps COSC conference in San Diego as an incident that actually happened at Fallujah. A Marine scout-sniper team was supporting a Marine infantry unit, which had taken several casualties from a well-hidden and effective enemy sniper. The Marine sniper eventually found and identified the enemy sniper in his scope and could see

that he had a baby strapped to his front in a sling we would call a Snuggly. The Marine believed that the enemy was using this baby as a “human shield,” although other interpretations are possible [e.g., “I want my son to join me in Paradise”—martyr thinking, or “if I am dead, there will be nobody to protect and look after him—if I die, he will die” (cf. Hector/Astyanax, Odysseus/Telemachus)]. However, the point of this is not the enemy sniper’s thinking, but the Marine’s. The Marine sniper’s understanding of the then-current Rules of Engagement, and of the Law of Land Warfare was that shooting the enemy sniper was permissible, even if the baby could be foreseen to die unintentionally in the process. His understanding of his job description and his duty to the Marines he was supporting was to make the shot. Which he did, and he saw the round land, and will live with that memory the rest of his life.

The sad fact is that, like physical injuries, moral injuries of the kind described by Nash, Lidz & Maguen will sometimes strike in war. There is no absolute way to prevent them short of ending the human practice of war. I discussed this in *Achilles in Vietnam* under the heading “moral luck,” a term used with discomfort, but used, by ethical philosophers, such as Bernard Williams and Martha Nussbaum. What I have to say complements what the above clinician-researchers said—let’s call it Moral Injury N for Nash, Litz & Maguen. My definition of this term—call it Moral Injury S, for Shay—differs in the “who” of the violator.

Here’s my version:

- [1] Betrayal of what’s right
 - [2] by someone who holds legitimate authority (in the military—a leader)
 - [3] in a high stakes situation.
- All three.

For Nash, et. al. the violator is the self; in my definition the violator is a power-holder. Both are important; both can coexist; one can lead to the other.

You can see that my 1-2-3 definition includes the brain as well, because the body codes moral injury as physical attack: [1] Betrayal of what’s right—that’s squarely in the culture; [2] by someone who holds legitimate authority—that’s squarely in the social system; [3] in a high stakes situation—that’s inevitably in the mind of the service member being injured, such as the love he has for his buddy. The whole human critter is in play here: body, mind, social system, culture.

The reasons I am so emphatic about my version of moral injury is that it is something we can *do* something about. It is, to a degree, within our control. When I do my full riff on Cohesion/Leadership/Training, I spell out the leadership part as expert, ethical, and properly supported leadership. These are sensitive to policy and practice, with lots of ways we can do better, especially in our ground forces. But this is not the place to go further on that theme.

How does Moral Injury, as I have defined it [“S”], change someone?¹ It deteriorates their character; their ideals, ambitions, and attachments begin to change and shrink.

Both flavors of moral injury destroy the capacity for trust.² When social trust is destroyed, it is replaced by the settled expectancy of harm, exploitation, and humiliation from others. With this expectancy, there are few options: strike first, withdraw and isolate oneself from others, or create deceptions, distractions, false identities to forestall what is expected.

We have been carefully taught a belief about stable good character in adulthood that has a brilliant pedigree. It starts with Plato, runs through the Stoics, Kant, and Freud. It says, if you make it out of childhood with “good breeding” [Plato’s term; today we would say “good genes”] and good upbringing, that your good character sets up as hard and immovable as concrete by the end of childhood. No bad experience can break it or budge it from its spot. The trouble with this lovely idea is that it’s not true.

Over the years the American Psychiatric Association [APA] has rejected any diagnostic concept that even hints at the possibility that bad experience can damage good character. It has rejected what numerous clinicians, following Judith Herman, call “complex PTSD,” but which the APA named in its field trials, “Disorders of Extreme Stress Not Otherwise Specified [DESNOS]. It has rejected “Persistent Personality Change after Catastrophic Experience” (which is a diagnosis in the WHO International Classification of Diseases), and maybe hasn’t yet had the chance to reject “Post Traumatic Embitterment Disorder.”³ I think this stubborn opposition comes from an American attachment to this old philosophic position with the brilliant pedigree, not from the empirical facts, which abundantly show the opposite.

Does this mean all crimes, no matter how heinous are to be forgiven, because of a bad war experience? Remember the brilliant mockery of this idea by gang-bangers in *West Side Story*: “Gee, Officer Krupke, we’re really upset. . . .” This opens more territories that we cannot explore here.

My Homeric focus in this piece is on the military leadership of Agamemnon, Odysseus, and Achilles. When I use the English word “leader,” do I mean the Homeric *heros*, *anax*, *basileus*, or *hēgemōn*? Hans van Wees’s *Status Warriors: War, Violence and Society in Homer and History* (1992) and Johannes Haubold’s *Homer’s People* (2000) open doorways into such philological research that I, an enthusiastic amateur, can only glimpse from the outside. But philological arguments aside, Haubold goes so far as to say that the relationship of leader and his people is the common theme linking the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. “People” here refers to the key term *laos*. He says in the book’s conclusion: “Early Greek epic sings about the incurably vulnerable nature of the *laoi*. Their defining structure . . . fails. [It is] encapsulated in the metaphor of ‘the shepherd of the people’ (*poimen laon*). . . . The leaders are said to have ‘destroyed the people’” (195). The Iliadic troops are almost always the *laos*, for which the leaders Agamemnon, Achilles, Odysseus, and Hector have a shepherd’s fiduciary responsibility, and all fail catastrophically in their separate ways and for their separate reasons. The *Odyssey* uses the word *laos* only rarely outside Books 2-4, referring instead to Odysseus’ Ithacan troops/crew as “companions” and to the Ithacans remaining behind as “suitors.” Tellingly, the suitor Eurymachus pleads for the lives of the suitors, using the word *laos*, the moment after

Odysseus puts an arrow through the neck of the most villainous suitor, Antinous: “Then spare your people (*laon*), your own ones” (*Od.* 22.54). And just before the brief final battle of the *Odyssey* in Book 24, Eupheithes, the father of Antinous, whips up his lynch posse with the words, “First he took many excellent men away in the vessels with him [to Troy], and lost the hollow ships and destroyed the people (*laous*)” (*Od.* 24.427 ff.). Haubold comments, “Eupheithes’ version of the events is by no means absurd” (108). Nor is it absurd from the ethical and professional perspective of today’s military officers.

In *The Mourner’s Song: War and Remembrance from the Iliad to Vietnam* (2003), James Tatum offers the novel argument that the *Iliad*’s point of view is that of the excellent leader, compared to whom *both* Agamemnon *and* Achilles fall short. I was not convinced of his thesis until rereading Haubold’s *Homer’s People*, in preparation for this piece. The key is the fiduciary duty embodied in the expression “shepherd of the people.” Anticipating the cry, “anachronism!” that my talk may call forth when I attribute a fiduciary duty to the Homeric military leaders, I note that Haubold meticulously documents textual evidence that the moral world of the Homeric poems held leaders to obligations that today we would recognize as the duties of a fiduciary (17-40): to take care attentively, and to subordinate your own interests to those of the person or persons in your care.

The *Iliad* and Demodokos’ first song in *Odyssey* 8 show Agamemnon as an almost perfectly *bad* leader—with one important exception, that he was personally brave and shared the lethal risks of combat with the rest of his forces. He did not orbit in his helicopter at 6,000 feet, yelling instructions into the radio for his people down in the mud, as some higher commanders did in Vietnam.

Before we ever encounter Agamemnon’s personal bravery, we encounter the following ripe example of his leadership: the *diapaira* in the second book of the *Iliad*, his “test” of the army. The army flunks the test, and Agamemnon has flunked as a leader, both through his (mis-)conduct and this “test.” The whole tragedy of the *Iliad* had been kicked off in the first book by Agamemnon’s breathtaking twin violations of his army’s moral order. First, he impiously—with disgusting crudity—refuses ransom for the captive girl Chryseis from her father, the priest of Apollo. Then, he publicly dishonors his most esteemed, most effective subordinate commander, Achilles, in front of the troops by seizing Briseis, Achilles’ *geras*, his “Medal of Honor.” The next day, Agamemnon is so obtuse that he demands the following bizarre demonstration of the army’s loyalty: he tells his officers that he is going to *pretend* to give up the war, one of the nuttiest things in the annals of military leadership, real or fictional.

He says to his officers:

We’d better move if we’re going to get the men [ready].

But I’m going to test them first with a little speech,

The usual drill—order them to beat a retreat in their ships.

It’s up to each one of you [officers] to persuade them to stay.

(*Iliad* 2.77, translation by Stanley Lombardo, my emphasis)

Apparently he has done this before enough times that it seems normal, and nobody says to him, “That’s a *really* bad idea!” His Chief of Staff, Odysseus, never says, “Boss, you *sure* you want to do that?” Then, with the whole army mustered, Agamemnon stands before them and says that, even though they came ashore with a ten-to-one advantage over the Trojans, Zeus has decreed their failure after so much struggle and sacrifice:

Now this is what I say, and I want us all to obey:
Let’s clear out with our ships and head for home.
There’s no more hope we will take Troy’s . . . town.
(*Iliad* 2.150 ff., Lombardo translation)

As one, the whole army stampedes for the ships, a mad rush that takes everyone by surprise. Apparently in the past, when Agamemnon had pulled this dumb trick, the troops had stood fast and said, “Hey, we’re here for the duration!” When the army bolts for the ships, Agamemnon is surprised and the Greek officers are surprised.

But should *we* be surprised? No, we should not be, because this is the predictable result of Agamemnon’s earlier betrayals of “what was right” with Achilles and with the priest. Motivation, loyalty, and perseverance go whooshing out of the troops like air from a balloon. They desert psychologically even if they cannot desert physically. The stampede to the ships carries one of the *Iliad*’s most important lessons for military leaders. “Command climate” is not the weather report of atmospheric in the boss’s office or tactical operations center. Command climate is the observed trustworthiness of how power is employed. What Agamemnon did to Achilles was no private wrong. There are no *private* wrongs in the use of military power. Everyone watches the trustworthiness of those who wield power over them—*all the time*.

If anybody dared to ask, Agamemnon would have said that what went between him and Achilles was none of their business. When a military leader violates “what is right” in the use of power, the injury afflicts everyone. Agamemnon has caused Achilles’ desertion yesterday, and today caused the stampede to the ships—the desertion of his whole army.

The three Homeric leaders contrast sharply in their relationship to their troops: Achilles has broad, other-regarding care for *all* the troops, not just his own. He is famous among them for his skill and interest in treating wounds. When a plague ravages the army, it is Achilles who steps in to end it. He leads by example and is lavish in his generosity to both peers and subordinates. He shows moral courage as well as physical courage.

Odysseus motivates troops through a mix of eloquence and physical coercion. Later, in the *Odyssey*, we see that he trusts no one but himself to do things right, even the simplest things. We see him habitually lie to and withhold information from his troops, and we watch him take them into needless danger for personal gain. And in the most catastrophic episode of the *Odyssey*, where 11 of the 12 ships in his flotilla are destroyed, he has taken steps to protect himself, but has not lifted a finger to protect them.

Odyssey 8.72-82 gives us another glimpse of Agamemnon's disastrous leadership when Demodocus sings of Agamemnon gloating over the clash between Achilles and Odysseus. According to an ancient scholiast they were clashing over the relative military values of *biē*—violent force, and *mētis*—cunning tricks and strategy. The bard sings about how their insecure and incompetent commander, Agamemnon, delights in this clash.

If, as suggested earlier, the *Iliad's* Agamemnon is an almost perfectly bad leader, Achilles was an almost perfectly good leader—*prior* to the opening of our *Iliad*—according to the wealth of information salted throughout the *Iliad* about him. The poet of the *Iliad* does not indulge in exposition, but hits the ground running like its hero. I shall limit my remarks here to Achilles' purely military capacities.

The recent five-volume *Iliad* commentary from Cambridge University Press summarizes Achilles' operations as extending over Lesbos (9.129), Skuros (9.668), Tenedos (11.625), Lurnessos (2.690, 19.60, 20.92, 191), Pedasos (20.92), Thebes (1.366, 2.691) and concludes that, "All the booty in the Greek camp has been captured by Akhilleus..." (Hainsworth 75 *ad Il.* 9.128-9). In Book 9 Achilles recalls that he has captured 23 cities in the years before our *Iliad* begins (*Il.* 9.328-29).

The Greek expeditionary force had arrived at Troy with overwhelming numerical superiority, greater than ten to one, with technological parity, and with all the logistical worries of any amphibious operation. Foraging and pillaging were one traditional solution to the logistical problem; commercial contracting, with goods paid for by booty yet another. Getting booty to pay the contractors appears to have been the main point of the raids that Achilles led.

However, the Greeks failed to tie a tight blockade around Troy while solving their own logistical problems. Famine never torments Troy during nine long years of war, so the siege must have been extremely permeable. The text gives direct evidence of a more important military failure: Agamemnon has allowed so much coming and going from Troy that King Priam can assemble a formidable alliance, whose troops are now quartered within the town. Beat that! Agamemnon himself admits:

". . . If we Greeks and the Trojans
should hold a truce and tally on both sides,
on one side native Trojans, on the other [side]
Greek troops . . . in squads of ten,
and each squad took one Trojan for a steward,
then many squads would go unserved. So far
Greek men outnumber those
whose home is Troy!

But the allies are there.

*From many Asian cities came these lances,
and it is they who hedge me out and hinder me
from plundering the fortress town of Troy."*

(Fitzgerald trans. 2:141ff, [emphasis mine])

“But the allies are there.” Agamemnon speaks like they were some natural phenomenon, perhaps an uncharted reef his ships have struck. He takes no responsibility. This is the “history” of Achilles’ hair-trigger anger at Agamemnon in *Iliad* 1. How could he allow this to happen? We can imagine Achilles’ earlier reproaches. He has returned to the beachhead after every raid to discover that Agamemnon has allowed more enemy forces through the blockade. Tempers run high among commanders in the field if they have fundamental military differences. The stakes are *mortal*.

Odysseus displays a mixture of both good and bad leadership in the *Iliad*. Odysseus is, as Homer says, *polytropos*, many-sided, mixed, multi-colored, piebald. He is a mixture of outstandingly good and outstandingly bad military traits. His night reconnaissance with Diomedes behind Trojan lines in Book 10 (10.254-579) of the *Iliad* condenses, in a single episode, Odysseus’ contradictory blend of brilliance and failure.

During this exceedingly dangerous mission, Odysseus and Diomedes discover the Trojan order of battle and learn that Hector and his top commanders are conferring *unguarded* by the tomb of Ilos. We know that Odysseus is armed with a bow and that he is capable of very rapid, aimed fire of great accuracy. So why do they not decapitate the Trojan leadership, or even try?

Greed for personal gain gets in the way. Diomedes wants to go after the tired and newly arrived Thracians for their booty, but Odysseus never says, “Whoa! Let’s keep our eye on the ball,” and wholeheartedly goes for the loot. Everywhere I turn I stub my toe on the defects of Odysseus’ character. In this case, he has lost sight of the military purpose of the night reconnaissance. He puts self before mission, forgetting that there is a good chance that the next morning the Greeks will be thrown out of their beachhead and all slaughtered, as Nestor has said earlier when proposing this very night reconnaissance.

Odysseus and Diomedes find the Thracian bivouac, kill the Thracian king and some of his sleeping soldiers, and then race away with the king’s glorious team and chariot, outrunning the hue and cry. They drive it into the Greek beachhead. Amidst all the crowing and congratulations on their flashy prize, amid the relief that both Odysseus and Diomedes have returned safely, nobody remembers to debrief them for intelligence needed for the next day’s fight. Remember, the whole army is in danger of being thrown into the sea and annihilated.

Book Ten ends with the two warriors having a hot bath and a stiff drink. The next day the Greeks are saved, not by intelligence from the night reconnaissance, but by Achilles’ release of fresh troops under Patroclus, who take the Trojans on the flank by surprise.

The figure of Odysseus is profoundly troubling to modern American military officers as a multi-faceted example of leadership malpractice. It would be less troubling, if he were not so brilliantly gifted in specific areas of military functioning. You can look at a “Summary of the Charges against Captain Odysseus,” in *Odysseus in America* (236), a mock charge sheet for his Court Martial, which also summarizes the mitigating examples of his outstanding contributions to the Achaean cause.

Odysseus is even more troubling to the modern enlisted ranks, who pay the butcher's bill for military malpractice of the sorts that Homer portrays. The Homeric texts permit us to learn new things about modern veterans who have survived their Odysseus, and contrawise, to learn about the Homeric texts and their ancient reception from modern veterans. The portrayal of Odysseus as a "stage villain" by the Athenian tragic poets may reflect the war veteran composition of the Athenian audience (Stanford 102-117). The reception of Achilles at Athens as an object of grieving veneration may tap into other aspects of military experience.

Odysseus was mainly on stage in the *Iliad* as Agamemnon's principle staff officer, or as a fighter on the battlefield where he related almost exclusively to other Greek leaders or to Trojan adversaries, but hardly at all to his own men. Agamemnon gave him the task of returning the captive woman Chryseis to her father in *Iliad* 1; Odysseus stopped the stampede to the ships in *Iliad* 2, which Agamemnon caused, saving his neck. In *Iliad* 2, Odysseus took the initiative as Agamemnon's deputy to humiliate the critic Thersites and to give him a public beating. Odysseus functioned as Agamemnon's representative where "the General's" presence was not required, such as pacing off the dueling ground with Hector in *Iliad* 3. In the "Embassy" to buy out Achilles in *Iliad* 9, Odysseus was clearly Agamemnon's negotiator, with Ajax and old Phoenix along to soften Achilles up. In *Iliad* 14, we find the only occasion where Odysseus did anything but agree with Agamemnon. With his boss in a terminal funk, ready to bolt for his ship, Odysseus shames him out of it.

In *Odysseus in America*, I summarized the case for Odysseus' court martial, using data derived from both epics. In *Achilles in Vietnam*, I summarized the data scattered throughout the *Iliad* that Achilles had been an exemplary soldier and leader prior to our first sight of him during Book 1, in which he was so publicly dishonored by Agamemnon.

The experiences of real soldiers and real veterans have greatly heightened our ability to hear what chamber musicians call the "inner voices" in the complex music of these compositions. In the *Odyssey*, the in-your-face theme in the brass is, "Odysseus is not to blame—his people brought destruction upon themselves." Only by consciously attending to the other instruments do you hear, "He destroyed the people!" In the *Iliad*, the announced theme is, "Achilles brought pain, suffering, and death on the people," but a second theme in another key weeps, "This was the tragedy of Achilles at the hands of the leader Agamemnon."

Notes

1. Moral Injury S often, in the same instant, causes Moral Injury N—think of a situation where an infantry Marine is ordered to leave behind the body of his dead buddy or even worse, a wounded buddy—think of sexual coercion by someone above you in the chain of command, targeting one of your subordinates.

2. This can become a monster problem in the clinic, addressed in a clinical chapter in Saigh & Bremner, *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Comprehensive Text*.

3. Professor Michael Linden's group at the Free University of Berlin and Charité in Berlin have a vast body of clinical and research data on the devastating psychological consequences of having one's dignified and respect-worthy life trajectory shot out of the sky, such as non-violently occurred to hundreds of thousands in the former German east zone upon reunification.

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Contributors

Justine McConnell is a Leverhulme Postdoctoral Research Associate at Oxford University's Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, working on the 'Performing Epic' project. Her book, *Black Odysseys: The Homeric Odyssey in the African Diaspora, since 1939* (OUP, 2013) developed out of her doctorate. Previously, she was a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in Classics at Northwestern University. She is co-editor of *Ancient Slavery and Abolition: from Hobbes to Hollywood* (OUP, 2011) with Edith Hall and Richard Alston, and of the forthcoming, *Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas* (OUP, 2014), with Kathryn Bosher, Fiona Macintosh, and Patrice Rankine.

Peter Meineck is Clinical Associate Professor of Classics and Ancient Studies at NYU and specializes in the performance, reception and history of ancient drama. He has also held appointments at Princeton University and the University of South Carolina and is also Special Lecturer at the University of Nottingham in the UK. He is originally from London and now resides in New York. He has studied in the departments of Greek and Latin at University College London and the University of Nottingham and worked extensively in London and New York Theatre. He is also the Artistic Director of Aquila Theatre which he founded in 1991 to present innovative productions of classical drama and has since produced and/or directed 47 shows, wrote, translated or adapted 18, and designed lighting for 33 in New York, London, Holland, Germany, Greece, Scotland, Canada, Bermuda, and the United States in venues as diverse as Carnegie Hall, the ancient Stadium at Delphi, Lincoln Center, and the White House.

Kathryn Milne is Assistant Professor of Ancient History at Wofford College in Spartanburg, SC. She holds a PhD in Ancient History from the University of Pennsylvania (2009), with a dissertation entitled, "The Roman Soldier: Historiographical Representations and Human Realities." After graduating from Penn, she spent a year at Cornell University as a Postdoctoral Associate in Military History. She considers herself an ancient, military, and intellectual historian. Her research interests lie in warfare in the ancient world, and particularly the Roman military of the middle and late Republican periods.

James Tatum is Aaron Lawrence Professor of Classics emeritus at Dartmouth and the author of *The Mourner's Song: War and Remembrance from the 'Iliad' to Vietnam* (2003) and (with William Cook) *African American Writers and Classical Tradition* (2012), both from the University of Chicago Press.

Jonathan Shay is a clinical psychiatrist and physician whose work focuses on Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. Dr. Shay was a staff psychiatrist from 1987 until recently at

the Department of Veteran Affairs Outpatient Clinic in Boston, Massachusetts. He has written *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* and *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*.

Wendy Whelan-Stewart is Assistant Professor of American Literature and Women's Studies at McNeese State University. Her research focuses American women writers, particularly the appropriation and transformation of classical literature and culture in their work.

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