

Considering Weil's Treatment of Force and Suppliance in *The Poem of Force* and What  
It Means for *Aristeia* in Homer's *Iliad*

Geoffrey Manzi  
IPS.8311: Homer and Vergil  
5/7/09

Considering Weil's Treatment of Force and Suppliance in *The Poem of Force* and What It Means for *Aristeia* in Homer's *Iliad*

The purpose of my essay is to explore the paradox of force introduced to us by Simone Weil's essay, *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*. Therein, Weil writes

The wantonness of the conqueror that knows no respect for any creature or thing that is at its mercy or is imagined to be so, the despair of the soldier that drives him on to destruction, the obliteration of the slave or the conquered man, the wholesale slaughter—all these elements combine in the *Iliad* to make a picture of uniform horror, of which force is the sole hero.<sup>1</sup>

Whereas Weil argues that force has a purely deleterious effect on the characters of the *Iliad*, I contend that Homer clearly conveys an understanding of force as that which exalts men above their peers. We come to realize that demonstrations of force in the form of martial prowess are the conditions for rising above the ranks of mere men. A reexamination of those passages in the text that are marked by exhibitions of *aristeia* allows us to understand force as a positive influence on its heroes, for it is through force that heroic character is made manifest.

I conclude with an attempt to synthesize the dualistic nature of force in a way that reveals Homer's intentions of transforming the conventional ancient Greek notion of a hero. A careful reading of the encounter between Achilles and Priam reveals a novel form of *aristeia* in which combative force is replaced by an exhibition of love, self-sacrifice, and political diplomacy. Furthermore, the transformation of *aristeia* as that which affirms the mortality of man anticipates Homer's *Odyssey*. I contend that heroic striving for immortality renders the hero similar to a thing insofar as he strives to be

---

<sup>1</sup> Weil, Simone. "The *Iliad* or The Poem of Force," *Simone Weil: An Anthology*. Translated by Mary McCarthy and Edited by Sian Miles. New York, New York: Grove Press, 1986, 186.

godlike, and yet the gods are unable to partake in Homer's transformation of *aristeia* as that which is founded on man's mortality. Perhaps, the hero's dissatisfaction with being an "*anthropos*" is lamentable for Homer. Ironically, it is through my suggested reinterpretation of the passage on which Weil relies so heavily to make her point that one finds in Homer something like the promotion of civic virtue through the exercise of practical wisdom and selflessness over and against warfare's savagery and vainglory.

In her essay, *The Iliad or The Poem of Force*, Simone Weil argues, "The true hero, the true subject matter, the center of the *Iliad*, is force".<sup>2</sup> Weil defines "force" as, "That *x* that turns anybody who is subjected to it into a *thing*".<sup>3</sup> Weil understands force not simply as a physical phenomenon or the result of an equation (mass multiplied by acceleration, or the like), but as an active entity that is capable of profound, always negative, influences on the lives it touches.<sup>4</sup> A hero exhibits force when his rational sensibilities have apparently been replaced by an uncontrollable urge to slaughter his opponent; according to Weil, this type of force is "the force that kills".<sup>5</sup> Weil supports her point by drawing upon the violence that ensues when heroes exhibit *aristeia*, or excellence becoming of a warrior, without ever referring directly to the term. Weil views each hero's catalogue of slayings as animalistic and the resulting carnage as the unavoidable outcome of the force generated by war. She also draws attention to Homer's often gruesome descriptions of death by juxtaposing them with descriptions of a serene

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 163.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 163.

<sup>4</sup> Holoka, James P. *Simone Weil's The Iliad or The Poem of Force: A Critical Edition*. Edited and Translated by James P. Holoka. New York, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006, 71.

<sup>5</sup> Weil, 164.

home life. It is Weil's contention that Homer's graphic descriptions of battle are designed to draw the reader's attention to his preference for peace instead of war. Let us turn to some passages in the text that allegedly illustrate Weil's point.

Weil writes, "Force in its grossest and most summary form [is] the force that kills".<sup>6</sup> The *Iliad* is certainly replete with instances of bloodshed. Some hundred and seventy Trojan and fifty Achaean named warriors lose their lives in the *Iliad*; another dozen, evenly divided between the two sides, are injured.<sup>7</sup> Homer portrays the slaying of people in two primary ways: either he provides a serial listing, or he goes into detail over the death of one killing. It is typical of the poet to go into detail when a hero gets slain, yet even quick descriptions of the death of peripheral characters can be grotesque to the point of the medically precise. For example, Homer writes

Idomeneus stabbed Erymas in the mouth with the pitiless bronze, so that the brazen spearhead smashed its way clean through below the brain in an upward stroke, and the white bones splintered, and the teeth were shaken out with the stroke and both eyes filled with blood, and gaping he blew a spray of blood through the nostrils and through his mouth, and death in a dark mist closed about him.<sup>8</sup>

Weil juxtaposes this passage, as well as other gruesome image on the battlefield with instances of love found in the *Iliad*. Weil contends that there is hardly any form of pure love known to humanity of which the *Iliad* does not treat, and it is in these moments of love that the characters of the *Iliad* discover their souls.<sup>9</sup> Weil proceeds to recall

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 164.

<sup>7</sup> Mueller, Martin. *The Iliad*. London, England: Allen & Unwin, 1984, 82.

<sup>8</sup> Homer. *The Iliad of Homer*. Translated by Richmond Lattimore. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1961, XVI.345-351. All my references to the *Iliad* follow Lattimore's translation, except where noted.

<sup>9</sup> Weil, 186.

instances in the text of hospitality,<sup>10</sup> parental love,<sup>11</sup> fraternal love,<sup>12</sup> conjugal love<sup>13</sup>, love for the dead,<sup>14</sup> friendship between comrades-at-arms,<sup>15</sup> and friendship that stirs in the hearts of mortal enemies.<sup>16</sup> For Weil, these “moments of grace” are rare in the *Iliad*, but they are enough to make the reader feel with sharp regret what it is that violence has killed and will kill again.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Weil interprets Homer’s incorporation of grotesque descriptions of decapitation alongside tender acts of love as indicative of the poet’s opinion that war is discordant with human nature.

Let us now consider Homer’s listing of characters killed. About eighty out of the one hundred and seventy warriors die in lists, sometimes two, three or four to a line. For example, consider the list of victims that Patroclus slaughters during his *aristeia*: Adrestos first, and after him Autonoös and Echeklos, Perimos, son of Megas, and Epistor, and Melanippos, and after these Elastos, and Moulivos, and Pylartes.<sup>18</sup> The names of fallen soldiers reads like a grocery list of items, and yet these represent people who perhaps, like Hector, had a baby son and a wife who cared enough for them to prepare hot baths in their absence. Weil interprets Homer’s catalogue listing of deaths as indicating the debasing nature of force. Patroclus’ *aristeia* is, for Weil, no more than a dehumanizing effect of the influence of force. Homer’s listing of the names as though

---

<sup>10</sup> Homer, VI.224-226.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* XVIII.94-95

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* IX.293-294.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* VI.410-413.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* XXIV.725-729, 743-745.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* XXIV.3-5.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* XXIV. 628-633.

<sup>17</sup> Weil, 188.

they were items on a checklist symbolizes the way in which people can easily become reduced to objects of impediment that must be destroyed as quickly and mercilessly as possible. Patroclus' tenacity in battle is by virtue of the fact that he has forgotten, in a sense, whom he was fighting. Patroclus does not acknowledge that he is slaughtering numerous individual people; instead, Weil views his and other warrior's *aristeia* as akin to an animalistic, berserker rage that sees only many faceless manifestations of the enemy.

Perhaps the most obvious example of undiluted ferocity in the *Iliad* occurs at the climax of Achilles' *aristeia*. In hoping to expunge his guilt by seeking revenge for Patroclus, Achilles goes on a rampage that almost single handedly routes the Trojan army. Let's consider an excerpt from Book XXII. Achilles has just slain Hector and, after the bystanders have finished stabbing the cadaver, he fastens his lifeless body to the chariot. Homer continues

A cloud of dust arose where Hektor was dragged in the dust, his dark hair was falling about him, and all that head that was once so handsome was tumbled in the dust; since by this time Zeus had given him over to his enemies, to be defiled in the land of his fathers.<sup>19</sup>

Weil first draws the reader's attention to the context of this passage. In the moments preceding the above excerpt, Hector had implored Achilles to give him a proper burial.<sup>20</sup> For Weil, the force of Achilles has effectively reduced Hector to rubble. Hector has conceded defeat and, on his death, asks only for the type of burial that is fitting for any man (*anthropos*), much less a hero of his magnitude. Achilles, however, is unable to

---

<sup>18</sup> Homer, XVI.694-696.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* XXII.401-04.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* XXII.337-343.

show such magnanimity. Instead, Achilles likens Hector to an animal (“no more entreating of me, you dog”), threatens to make him into food for the animals (“the dogs and birds will have you all for their feasting”), literally transforms him from a human into a corpse, (“the soul fluttering free of the limbs went down into Death’s house mourning her destiny, leaving youth and manhood behind her”), and uses a chariot to drag his opponent’s lifeless body for all to see; it is one of the most brutal and cathartic moments of the *Iliad*.

Achilles’ “demented fury” goes unmitigated throughout the scene.<sup>21</sup> The violent force wielded by Achilles throughout his exhibition of *aristeia* combines with the crushing defeat and humiliating repercussions done unto the once proud and mighty Hector in such a way that brings the brutality of the war to its apex. Of particular interest to Weil is Homer’s presentation of the event. It is Weil’s contention that Homer intentionally presented the death of Hector in such a way that renders the devastating effects of force upon the soul explicit to the reader. Weil writes, “The bitterness of such a spectacle is offered us absolutely undiluted. No comforting fiction intervenes; no consoling prospect of immortality; and on the hero’s head no washed-out halo of patriotism descends”.<sup>22</sup> There is nothing to soften such an image of death. At the moment of Hector’s death, each hero seems to exhibit the type of character that would ease the impact of such a moment, had the other hero possessed it. Hector, on his deathbed, is civil minded and conscientious of the dignity of all men when asking for his burial rites. Had Achilles shown such mindfulness, the scene would not be as harsh.

---

<sup>21</sup> Alvis, John. *Divine Purpose and Heroic Response in Homer and Virgil: The Political Plan of Zeus*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1995, 46 n.39.

<sup>22</sup> Weil, 164.

Similarly, Achilles is unflinching in his aggression and unwavering in his determination. Had Hector shown more nerve in the events leading up to his death, the scene would not have evoked as much pathos. However, Homer has both Hector and Achilles surrender to force, albeit in different fashions. Weil writes, “Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates. The truth is, nobody really possesses it”.<sup>23</sup> For Weil, both heroes have lost themselves, or their humanity, to force. The violent force of vengeance, which drives him to kill unapologetically, has possessed Achilles. Hector has lost his life under the force of Achilles and his brazen spear. The lesson Weil draws from the event of Hector’s death and the subsequent corruption of his corpse is that force debases human beings. Force accomplishes its natural task by transforming human beings into either that which is comparable to a beast (such is the case with Achilles) or as lifeless objects (such is the case with Hector).

As we have seen, force manifests itself through heroic exhibitions of *aristeia*; thusly, Weil would seem to understand *aristeia* as inherently negative. For Weil, *aristeia* amounts to nothing other than an uncontrollable bloodlust unbecoming of creatures with rational capacity. If so, then she would also attribute the same opinion of *aristeia* to Homer. Weil draws attention to the way in which Homer depicts warriors such as Achilles while in their frenzied state. She writes

Herein lies the last secret of war, a secret revealed by the *Iliad* in its similes, which likens the warriors either to fire, flood, wind, wild beasts, or God knows what blind cause of disaster, or else to frightened animals, trees, water, sand, to anything in nature that is set into motion by the violence of external forces. Greeks and Trojans, from one day to the next, sometimes even from on hour to the next, experience, turn and turn about, one or the other of these

---

<sup>23</sup> Weil, 171.

transmutations... The art of war is simply the art of producing such transformations, and its equipment, its processes, even the casualties it inflicts on the enemy, are only means directed towards this end—its true object is the warrior’s soul.<sup>24</sup>

The heroes of Homer’s *Iliad* achieve success in battle by submitting themselves to the reckless abandon of force. One must wage war in a way that imitates the destructive essence of animals or elemental forms of nature in order to be successful. As commentator John Alvis indicates, there is nothing of art in Achilles’ warfaring—that is, nothing tactical or cooperative. Instead, Homer likens his exploits to devastation inflicted by nonhuman forces, especially to the elemental destructiveness of fire.<sup>25</sup> Homer employs a similar simile for Agamemnon during his *aristeia*, in which he is likened to an “obliterating fire [that] comes down on the timbered forest and the roll of the wind carries it everywhere”.<sup>26</sup> Elsewhere, Diomedes, Achilles, and Hector are each compared to “murderous lions” during their individual exhibitions of *aristeia*.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Weil is neither inaccurate nor alone in recognizing Homer’s comparisons of subhuman entities with the character of the heroes—especially Achilles—when in the midst of exhibiting *aristeia*. Weil departs from traditional Homeric commentary when she attributes all such instances of demented fury to an overriding notion of force.

For Weil, force necessarily overcomes those who are engulfed in it, including all of the primary and secondary heroes and their victims. Hence, Weil asserts that the *Iliad* is not about particular heroes, but about the deadly and capricious nature of force as it

---

<sup>24</sup> Weil, 185.

<sup>25</sup> Alvis, 45.

<sup>26</sup> Homer, XI.155-159.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* Diomedes’ lion simile is located at V.136-143. Achilles’ lion simile is located at XX.164-173. Hector’s lion simile is located at XVI.630-636.

shows itself through various heroes at various moments. All of this leads Weil to interpret Homer's incorporation of Achilles' wrath into the *Iliad* as nothing more than a precautionary device designed to warn the reader about force's debilitating influence. Therefore, *aristeia* understood as the manifestation of force is something that must be overcome and neither honored nor, if possible, cultivated.

More provocative is Weil's notion of a second kind of force. In comparison to the more obvious and coarse operation of force one finds in violence, Weil understands this second form of force as subtler, more insidious, and ultimately more horrific because it brings about the paradox of a living death.<sup>28</sup> Weil characterizes such a relationship as one between a hero and his suppliant, in which the suppliant suffers his living death in the presence of the hero. The suppliant is denied his humanity and is treated as though he were already inert matter devoid of any sort of dignity allotted to living creatures. The thrust of Weil's discussion on this alternative form of force centers on her identification of three types of suppliance: immanent death, slavery, and presence. Weil provides her reader with many textual examples of the relationship between hero and suppliant as they relate to these three focal points. I shall briefly attend to three examples, each illustrating the suppliant in relation to one of the above three notions.

The first type of suppliance focuses on the relationship between the hero and his victim prior to the deathblow. Weil locates the debasing effects of force at the poignant moment in which the suppliant begs for his life and gets refused in such a way that suggests an ontological diminishment has taken place; in essence, the lack of human recognition on behalf of the warrior has already killed the victim before his sword has a

---

<sup>28</sup> Holoka, 73.

chance to penetrate the body. The suppliant as he—or, that thing which—faces immanent death has, in essence, already perished.

Weil draws upon the second encounter between Achilles and Lycaon as an example of this form of supplicance. Lycaon, a son of Priam, is beaten and assuming the posture of the suppliant before the victorious Achilles. Once before, Lycaon had fallen into Achille's hands. On that occasion, Achilles had been content to sell his Trojan captive into slavery, from which his family subsequently ransomed him.<sup>29</sup> This time, however, the death of Patroclus has made Achilles deaf to any negotiated release of enemy captives. Homer writes, “ ‘[Achilles] do not kill me. I am not from the same womb as Hector, he who killed your powerful and kindly companion’ . So the glorious son of Priam addressed him, speaking in supplication, but heard in turn the voice without pity, ‘Poor fool no longer speak to me of ransom nor argue it’ .<sup>30</sup> Weil interprets this passage to indicate force's transformative quality. Lycaon recognizes that he is already mere matter. He cannot evade the sword that concentrates force to a lethal hardness and sharpness; the deathblow only completes an inexorable process. Weil continues, “He grasps the fact that the weapon which is pointing at him will not be diverted; and now, still breathing, he is simply matter; still thinking, he can think no longer”.<sup>31</sup> Paralyzed in life, he awaits the final paralysis of death.

Weil locates the paralysis of force not only in killing, but also in the very prospect of killing. She writes, “From its first property (the ability to turn a human being into a thing by the simple method of killing him) flows another, quite prodigious too in its own

---

<sup>29</sup> Homer, XXI.76-80.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* XXI. 95-99.

way, the ability to turn a human being into a thing while he is still alive. He is alive; he has a soul; and yet—he is a thing. An extraordinary entity this—a thing that has a soul”.<sup>32</sup> Persons at the mercy of a superior force mimic the dead. They are queer entities, part vital (possessing a soul) and part inert.<sup>33</sup> The conjunction of soul and thing is a perversion of the natural order and a lamentable deformity common in the environment of war.

Another form of suppliance is slavery. I need not spend too much on time on slavery, as the connection between suppliance and slavery is obvious. Suffice it to say that the slave is property of her master no different than the way in which the hero owns his weapons or his armor. An example of slavery suppliance is Chryseis, whose enslavement is the root cause of the schism between Achilles and Agamemnon that triggers the action of the *Iliad*. While the suppliant may hope, however forlornly, to escape the realm of force if his plea is heeded, the slave has become an object for the rest of his life; his lacerated soul is trapped in a body that is held as a material possession from the spoils of war. Such a person is a kind of zombie: part living being, part corpse.<sup>34</sup> As such, the slave exists in that permanent state of death-in-life in which the previous form of suppliant exists temporarily. Whereas Lycaon supplicates himself for only a few moments (be it, his last moments on earth) and Chryses’ supplicates himself for a short while and with specific objectives (to retrieve his daughter), the slave bows and obeys his way through life benumbed and benighted by the absence of any goal; the

---

<sup>31</sup> Weil, 165.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 165.

<sup>33</sup> Holoka, 73.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 75.

master's force cancels all genuine inner life in slaves. Recall that Hector wishes to be dead rather than live to witness the enslavement of his wife and his son; this seems to suggest that slavery is a fate worse than death. Weil seems to agree that it would be better to die than to live as a shell before one day cracking under the master's force; indeed, Hector has had the easy way out compared to Andromache and Astyanax.<sup>35</sup>

Weil refers to a third type of suppliance as a peculiar lack of presence. Weil writes, "Anybody who is in our vicinity exercises a certain power over us". People have a presence about them that insists on being treated in accordance with the type of living, breathing creature that they are. Weil understands such a presence as indicative of a fundamental human dignity that requires recognition from those around them. In the suppliant's case, such recognition goes unacknowledged, even unnoticed, by master and suppliant alike. In this sense, the suppliant is reduced to a thing, which is unable to exude a distinctly human presence. Weil continues, "This undeniable influence that the presence of another person has on us is not exercised by men whom a moment of impatience can deprive of life, who can die before even thought has a chance to pass sentence on them".<sup>36</sup>

Weil has in mind the encounter between Achilles and Priam. Weil renders her own translation of the passage as follows:

No one saw great Priam enter. He stopped, clasped the knees of Achilles, kissed his hands, those terrible man-killing hands that had slaughtered so many of his sons... Taking the old man's arm, he [Achilles] pushed him away... Both were remembering... Priam wept, abased at the feet of Achilles.

---

<sup>35</sup> Homer, VI.464-465.

<sup>36</sup> Weil, 167.

But Achilles wept, now for his father. ...He [Achilles] spoke; the old man trembled and obeyed.<sup>37</sup>

That nobody senses Priam's entrance is an immediate indication of his suppliance. That Achilles lets his thoughts wonder in the presence of Priam is another indication of Priam's acquiescence to "thinghood". Achilles' thoughts turn to his own father, Peleus, and to his fallen friend, Patroclus, just as if Priam were not present at all. The suppliant, at the mercy of superior force, does not long command attention, because he has already started to approximate a thing. Next, Weil contends that it was not insensibility that made Achilles with a single movement of his hand push away the old man who had been clinging to his knees. It was merely a question of his being as free in his attitudes and movements, as if there was not a person clasping his knees but an inert object. Weil writes, "In the presence of [such a suppliant], people move about as if they were not there; they, on their side, running the risk of being reduced to nothing in a single instant, imitate nothingness in their own persons. Pushed, they fall. Fallen, they lie where they are".<sup>38</sup> Achilles shows such casualness in his gestures because he does not feel the normal influence a living person has on those in his presence. Weil maintains that the Trojan king is already a thing in Achilles' eyes, and indeed in his own eyes, since he shows no indignation at such treatment; he has begun to "imitate nonentity".<sup>39</sup> Macleod concurs, "Priam's posture at this point is as humiliating as can be".<sup>40</sup> Finally, Priam fears to express a desire lest he provoke the force that, as Achilles pointedly informs him,

---

<sup>37</sup> Homer, XXIV.477-479, XXIV.507-512, XXIV.571. Also, Weil, 166-168.

<sup>38</sup> Weil, 167.

<sup>39</sup> Holoka, 75.

<sup>40</sup> Macleod, Colin W. *Homer: Iliad, Book XXIV*. Edited by Colin Macleod. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1982, 130.

can easily destroy him.<sup>41</sup> As a result, Priam can only tremble and obey. Weil sees this passage as an instance of Priam supplicating himself to Achilles in a manner that is unbecoming of a human being; Achilles accords by treating him as less than one. We have thus realized the subtler forms that force can take on when supplicating without physically murdering.

Ultimately, Weil maintains that Homer composed the *Iliad* in order to illustrate the powerfully negative effects of force. For Weil, force's effects are rendered most explicit during times of war, and the *Iliad* does well to capture this. At its worst, force takes possession of the heroes in such a way that they lose sight of the human element in their victims as well as in themselves. Indeed, the man worthy of resentment in the *Iliad* is not the weak man, but on the contrary, the hero who can use force to subjugate everyone to his will. In the midst of demonstrating *aristeia*, the heroes treat their human opponents as mere objects, both figuratively and literally. Figuratively, in that the heroes treat their suppliants as though they were subhuman; literally, in that the slaying of a victim transforms the victim from a human being into a corpse. Such is the nature of force. Its power of converting a man into a thing is a double one, and its application double-edged. To the same degree, though in different fashions, those who use it and those who endure it are turned to stone.<sup>42</sup> Even heroes fail to escape the role of supplication insofar as the majority of them suffer the same fate as their victims. For Weil, no one is safe from the debilitating power of force.

Weil concludes her interpretation by suggesting that Homer had hoped that his readers would recognize the dangerous effects of force. By presenting his readers with a

---

<sup>41</sup> Homer, XXIV.510.

poem that is wrought with supplication, gruesome battle scenes, catalogues of death, ontologically unflattering similes, and general dehumanization, Weil contends that Homer presents a disparaging view of war and its supposed glory. She goes so far as to claim that Homer wrote the *Iliad* while in state of bitterness over the inevitable pain and suffering brought on by those who exhibit force.<sup>43</sup> For these reasons, Weil understands Homer to be advocating (for) peace and recognition of universal human dignity as opposed to glorifying war by recounting the grandiose exploits of mythic Greek heroes.

Unfortunately for Weil, Homeric scholars have repeatedly drawn attention to an undeniable lacuna in Weil's interpretation of Homer's *Iliad*. While Weil does well to illustrate the detrimental effects of force, she fails to give due consideration to what the reason might be for the heroes to engage in warfare. More so, Weil's emphasis on human dignity seems to anachronistically disregard the historical conditions of what constitutes dignity; for the ancient Greeks, it seems like any sort of human dignity would be more akin to a valor that was earned as opposed to inherited by virtue of one's species. Specifically, Weil overlooks the Homeric hero's investment in the ethos of glory, which is to have participated in the "noblest deeds of men (*klea andron*)," deeds that promise to live on in human memory.<sup>44</sup> It is precisely this motivation that encourages the heroes to engage in exhibitions of *aristeia*. Such considerations would appear to undermine Weil's primary thesis: that acts of force demonstrated through exhibitions of *aristeia* lower the human being to the level of animals. Instead, acts of *aristeia* disdained by Weil turn out to raise human beings to a level comparable to gods. At the very least, they introduce a

---

<sup>42</sup> Weil, 184.

<sup>43</sup> Weil, 188.

distinction between heroes and men. Let us briefly consider this position before drawing our conclusion about Weil's treatment of force in the *Iliad*.

The *Iliad* expresses a sharp distinction between the hero and the human being. One need only look to the Greek to discover that heroes are of a higher rank than men. The difference between men and heroes is indicated by the difference between *andres* and *anthropoi*. Both the Achaeans and Trojans not only insist on being men as opposed to women, but also being *andres* as distinct from *anthropoi*. The warriors are *andres*, or he-men; others, such as their own children, parents, wives, are *anthropoi*, or human beings. *Anthropoi* are men and women collectively, and men and women indifferently: and whatever may be the virtues of an *anthropos*, martial courage, which is a specific virtue of heroes, cannot be among them.<sup>45</sup> The difference between *andres* and *anthropoi* is more than a difference of degree, such as one finds in the difference between the English terms "man" and "hero. It is a difference in status that is overcome only by virtue of the fact that both *andres* and *anthropoi* are mortal beings. In other words, their sizeable difference does not extend to a distinction of ontological status. Even for those heroes who can claim divine ancestry, their distinction from ordinary human beings is eclipsed in the shadow of the gods.

Another way in which Homer distinguishes the hero from the average man is through an attribution of divine heritage; a hero in the Homeric world is generally able to trace his lineage back to a divinity. However, such a condition is not necessary, nor is it the primary indicator for identifying a hero. For the majority of the *Iliad*, heroes

---

<sup>44</sup> Holoka, 72.

<sup>45</sup> Benardete, Seth. *Achilles and Hector: The Homeric Hero*. Edited by Ronna Burger. South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2005, 11.

distinguish themselves by displaying their superiority on the battlefield through demonstrations of physical prowess. Demonstrations of physical prowess or martial excellence are characterized by an uninterrupted succession of violent killings, which sways the momentum of the battle in favor of the hero's allies. The influence of one entity on an entire army is godlike. Such a divine-like quality is only demonstrable through acts of force characteristic of *aristeia*. Additionally, it is through executing magnificent acts of violence that a hero is able to transcend his mortality by living on in mythic memory. Indeed, the hero uses force as a springboard that catapults him into eternity.

The question now arises: is Weil's interpretation of Homer iconoclastic and her approach doctrinaire? Could Weil simply have an agenda that she tries to meet by using Homer's *Iliad* as vehicle for promoting political peace, civility, and Christian spirituality? Is she committing the hermeneutic error of reading too much of herself into another author's work? Some scholars readily agree with such a scathing assessment. Seth Schein writes, "Her interpretation is one-sided and fails to recognize the nobility and glory of the slayers along with the humanity and pathos of the slain. Weil makes this omission because, like the others who read the *Iliad* as an antiwar poem, she tacitly substitutes for its social and cultural values her own spiritual categories. Weil views the *Iliad* through Christian lenses".<sup>46</sup> Following suit, Kirsti Simonsuuri writes, "Weil's reading is subjective. The essay disregards...the historical conditions that surround the literary work. It cannot be viewed in the context of Homeric scholarship..., since it does not deal either with the textual problems or with the oral epic tradition. Nor does it

represent any of the main currents of twentieth-century literary criticism”.<sup>47</sup> Oliver Taplin offers a similar criticism of Weil’s flagrant disregard for procedure when he writes, “Simone Weil’s essay...was not written for scholars and is not argued in the academic mode”.<sup>48</sup>

Of course, choosing not to follow protocol does not necessarily indicate a lack of contribution to Homeric interpretation. Perhaps there is a way to reconcile Weil’s interpretation of force in Homer’s *Iliad* with the ancient Greek conception of *aristeia*. Let’s consider the following line of interpretation. Throughout Homer’s *Iliad*, the heroes appear at their most rational, or at least do the most reflecting, when they are away from the battlefield. While Achilles remains in abeyance from battle, he begins to play music and consider the futility of the heroic enterprise. In particular, he articulates the hero’s paradox: the hero can either sacrifice heroic honor in order to live a contented life with his family, or sacrifice his life for the attainment of heroic glory through exhibitions of *aristeia*.<sup>49</sup> His key insight is that the dead hero can never enjoy his richest spoils, and yet honor, glory, and eternity can only be captured through death. Such insight is uncharacteristic of the typical Greek hero, and it doesn’t take long for the embassy to sway Achilles from these profound thoughts with the prospect of battle. Hector has a similar experience. When surrounded by the hearth and home, holding his son in the presence of his wife’s love, he begins to reflect on the grim destiny of the hero’s loved ones. However, the moment thoughts of war and grandeur enter his mind, he seems to

---

<sup>46</sup> Schein, Seth L. *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer’s Iliad*. Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1984, 83.

<sup>47</sup> Simonsuuri, Kirsti. “Simone Weil’s Interpretation of Homer.” *French Studies*. 39:167.

<sup>48</sup> Taplin, Oliver. “The Shield of Achilles within the *Iliad*.” *Greece and Rome*. 27:17.

forget his previous reflections. In each case, the hero appears to maximize his rational capacities and expand his concerns beyond his destiny on the battlefield. The reader almost begins to see a new potential for the hero, and in some sense the reader longs for Hector to accept his wife's appeal and enjoy a hot bath. Of course, such reflections are fleeting, and each hero reenters the war only to never return, except as a thing (corpse). Ironically, Hector receives his warm bath, but due to his corpse-like condition is unable to enjoy it in the way Andromache had hoped.

Now, let's return to the interaction between Achilles and Priam, a careful reading of which yields the grounds for a possible reconciliation of terms regarding the function of force. If we recall, Weil provided us with her own translation of the Greek. She writes of Achilles, "Taking the old man's arm, he [Achilles] pushed him away." A closer look at Lattimore's translation suggests that Weil's translation corrupts the text. Lattimore translates the same passage the following way, "He took the old man's hand and pushed him *gently* away."<sup>50</sup> The modifier "gently" indicates two things relative to Weil's translation of the passage: first, that Achilles is not exercising force, for force and gentleness contradict one another. Secondly, that Achilles' tender dismissal of Priam acknowledges the Trojan king's humanness. Achilles doesn't appear to be invoking force whatsoever. Then, what are we to make of this passage?

A further inspection of their interaction gives rise to a pivotal detail in the text, a detail Weil fails to consider but would nevertheless seem to bolster her case. Once Priam's presence is acknowledged, it gives rise to a shudder. First of all, it is hard to imagine any kind of "thing" that can give rise to such a reaction; clearly, Achilles views

---

<sup>49</sup> Homer, IX.307-430.

Priam as flesh and blood as opposed to “inert matter”. The cause of Achilles’ reaction becomes clear as their evening proceeds. Force does not overcome Achilles in a way that somehow reduces Priam to his unwilling suppliant; instead Priam’s arrival to Achilles’ tent as a willing suppliant indicates a courage and stoutness of heart to which Achilles has previously not born witness. Achilles is perceptive in recognizing a new understanding of heroic activity in the form of Priam’s suppliance. In other words, Achilles is confronted with an uncustomary version of heroism.<sup>51</sup> The suffering experienced by both men—and in this regard, both could be viewed as suppliants to the inevitably destructive nature of force itself—opens up new avenues of reflection. Through enduring the painful loss of loved ones, Achilles finally comes to regard the similarities between men and heroes as more significant than their differences. In particular, both men and heroes are mortal, and both must endure difficult losses at the hands of what Weil would call the force of war. After all, it was Achilles’ *aristeia* that brought about the conditions for the possibility of their encounter, which in turn gave rise to the revelatory notion of the kind of heroic response to tragedy demonstrated by Priam.

The new form of heroism is confirmed over dinner. Each admires the other in a way that heroes command admiration. Achilles is especially bowled over by Priam in a way that he has never been by heroic achievements of *aristeia*. For Achilles, it is Priam’s courage impelled by dutiful affection rather than by ambition for glory that is most striking. The political undertones of such heroism are also striking: the courage to act and willingness to supplicate oneself to another’s will on behalf of another are akin to the selflessness proper to a just ruler. Priam’s courage in the mode of enduring force rather

---

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* XXIV.506-507. My italics.

than imposing force supersedes—if not redefines—the conventionally heroic mode of self-assertion. It is thus as Alvis indicates; Priam’s journey is best understood as comparable to the brave exploits of prominent warriors.<sup>52</sup> *Aristeia* can now be demonstrated by the suppliant’s courageous self-abasement as opposed to acts of self-aggrandizement, and it may not be too far afield to interpret both Achilles’ recognition of Priam’s act as uniquely heroic and his hospitable reception of Priam as intellectual or political exhibitions of this new *aristeia*. Ironically, the insight which best testifies to Weil’s assertion that Homer depicts force as a danger to humanity that needs to be mitigated whenever possible is found in the very passage that Weil misreads in order to make the same point. Weil and Homer appear to agree fundamentally on their respective views of force, but for reasons that Weil seems to have overlooked.

In conclusion, the greatest moments of reflection take place away from the battlefield; either in the confines of hearth and home, or while breaking bread with the enemy. It is not a stretch to say that Homer is showing his heroes to be capable of the kind of civil resolution that characterizes the development of rational politics, in which force is often considered a reconciliatory last resort. Where force is not present, *andres* become capable of behaving like *anthropoi* in a way that is not demeaning, but equally as impressive as their performance in battle. Benardete writes of Achilles’ temporary abstinence from battle

Achilles becomes the shadow of what he was. In becoming a minstrel, he unwittingly becomes an *anthropos*; in withdrawing from the war, he deserts his own character. If martial excellence is denied Achilles, he no longer is Achilles, no longer what he thinks he is and what we think he is. His name

---

<sup>51</sup> Alvis, 68.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* 68.

depends on his deeds, and he cannot abandon all deeds without forfeiting himself. In becoming passive, he loses what distinguishes him.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, insofar as Achilles is destined for heroism and a hero's death, reflection and musical performance run contrary to his pattern of behavior as the mightiest Achaian warrior. But we would do well to not forget the words that Homer puts in the mouth of divine Zeus: "[Achilles] is no unthinking man, nor inconsiderate nor offending but will very kindly spare the man who comes to him as suppliant".<sup>54</sup> In other words, Benardete may be overstating things by describing Achilles as passive. Achilles engages in critical reflection over his predicament as a hero, and such a reflection is certainly applicable to all ancient Greek heroes. Assuming his initial concerns expressed to the embassy regarding the hero's paradox are earnest, one can make the case that Achilles is active in rational reflection, not in spite of but *because of*, his passivity in combat.<sup>55</sup> Zeus describes Achilles' nature as pensive, considerate and merciful. Relative to Achilles, Homer may have been showing the reader new potential for his hero. But if one applies Achilles' reflection to heroism in general, then Homer has already begun to pave the way for a new *kind* of hero, and thus a new kind of *aristeia*.

So, does Weil's definition of force as that which turns a human being into a thing hold true? Indeed, it does. Throughout the *Iliad*, *aristeia* indicated the hero, or a higher type of mortal that could compete with the gods. We have seen that conventional *aristeia* is, in essence, a violent demonstration of force accomplished through an animalistic rage

---

<sup>53</sup> Benardete, 94.

<sup>54</sup> Homer. *Iliad, Books 13-24*. Edited and Translated by D.B. Monro and T.W. Allen. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1920, XXIV.157-158, and then again at 186-187.

<sup>55</sup> Homer, IX.307-430.

and blatant disregard of the opponent as human. We are now in a position to see that, for Homer, it is man as man that is worthy of heroic admiration. Man must embrace his mortal nature and use it as grounds for rational reflection, relatedness, and endurance in the face of suffering. By giving into the “demented fury” required for conventional *aristeia*, man is avoiding his true nature. Those ferocious acts of violence that exhibit *aristeia* pale in comparison to the type of *aristeia* exhibited by Priam. The condition of such *aristeia* is man’s mortality; thus, *aristeia* is something that can neither be mimicked nor understood by the gods. Indeed, Priam is an *anthropos* that never once engages in battle; his magnanimity is the strength highlighted by Homer. Force’s paradox can thus be solved by realizing that Homer prizes man as superior to divinities by virtue of man’s mortal inferiority. The Divinities are unable to experience such virtue because it is available only to men. In this light, the divinities are lesser than men: they are things. Hence, force as the condition for an *aristeia* that raises man to a level close to divine is consistent with Weil’s understanding of force as that which turns men into things. It’s as Benardete writes, “Why Odysseus prefers Penelope to Calypso, toil and trouble to heart-ease, his own rocky kingdom to a kind of paradise, the golden hounds of Hephaestus explain. He prefers to remain mortal and human: *to be a person and not a thing.*”<sup>56</sup> As the commentator’s quotation indicates, Homer’s new, unconventional kind of hero becomes the Odysseus of Homer’s *Odyssey*. The potential Achilles expressed in the interaction with Priam comes to fruition in the Odysseus of the *Odyssey*. Odysseus comes to exemplify the strengths and virtues of *anthropoi* in a way that parallels Achilles

---

<sup>56</sup> Benardete, 67. My italics.

and those exhibitions of *aristeia* that Homer and Weil agree must be left behind if man as man (and not as any-*thing*, be it divine or diminished in ontological status) is to flourish.