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CHAPTER THREE

Women after War: Weaving Nostos in Homeric Epic and in the Twenty-First Century

CORINNE PACHE

While women play a circumscribed role in ancient epic, Homer's *Odyssey* depicts both Helen and Penelope as undergoing their own forms of homecoming, or *nostos*, after the Trojan War: Helen returns to her husband Menelaus after experiencing the war firsthand at Troy and a ten-year separation; Penelope stays home, but Odysseus' return is in many ways as much a challenge for her as it is for him and the *Odyssey* portrays her domestic ordeal as a form of heroic *nostos*. In this essay, I explore female ways of homecoming in the *Odyssey* and draw connections between Homeric heroines and members of "Team Lioness" returning home from Afghanistan and Iraq in the twenty-first century.¹ The 2008 documentary *Lioness* gives voice to some of these women, the country's first generation of female combat veterans, as they struggle to reconcile their experience of war in Iraq with their lives at home. While the ancient Greeks could not have conceived of women experiencing battle in the way the members of Team Lioness did, Helen's and Penelope's marginalized roles in the *Odyssey* open a window into the contemporary experience of women soldiers and veterans and provide ways of understanding the challenges of the trauma of war and female homecoming in the twenty-first century.

A central theme of the Homeric *Odyssey* is the connection between memory and identity. In the aftermath of the ten-year Trojan War, all the Greek heroes struggle to find their way back home, but Odysseus famously undergoes the most difficult—and the longest—of the homecomings, taking ten years to return to his family on the island of Ithaca. Odysseus' journey culminates in his reunion with his wife, Penelope, who tests his identity by appealing to their common memories of their marriage bed, a physical object that symbolizes the stability of their relationship. While Penelope stays home and does not experience war firsthand, she is presented as undergoing some of the same challenges at home as Odysseus experiences abroad, and through her husband's absence and

return, Penelope in fact experiences her own *nostos*, culminating in the restoration of her home and marriage.

A striking Homeric image links the modern warriors in Ramadi and Penelope at home:

ἢ δ' ὑπερώϊω αὐθι περίφρων Πηνελόπεια
 κεῖτ' ἄρ' ἄσιτος, ἄπαστος ἐδητύος ἠδὲ ποτῆτος,
 ὄρμαίνουσ', ἢ οἱ θάνατον φύγοι υἱὸς ἀμύμων,
 ἢ ὁ γ' ὑπὸ μνηστῆρσιν ὑπερφιάλοισι δαμείη.
 ὅσσα δὲ μερμήριξε λέων ἀνδρῶν ἐν ὀμίλῳ
 δείσας, ὅππότε μιν δόλιον περὶ κύκλον ἄγωσι,
 τόσσα μιν ὄρμαίνουσαν ἐπῆλυθε νήδυμος ὕπνος·
 εὗδε δ' ἀνακλιθεῖσα, λύθεν δέ οἱ ἄψευα πάντα.

(*Odyssey* 4.787–794)

But she in the upper chamber, circumspect Penelope,
 lay there fasting, she had tasted no food nor drink, only
 pondering whether her stately son would escape from dying
 or have to go down under the hands of the insolent suitors;
 and as much as a lion caught in a crowd of men turns about
 in fear, when they have made a treacherous circle about him,
 so she was pondering, when the painless sleep came upon her
 and all her joints were relaxed so that she slept there reclining.²

Lion similes in Homeric poetry typically depict warriors in combat situations, and so the connection between Penelope and a trapped predator at first seems tenuous. The fearful beast of the simile is ostensibly in great danger, but the animal's plight is left unresolved as Penelope falls asleep. The lion simile at the end of Book 4 is the second lion simile in that book, and in the poem, following upon the first extended simile in the *Odyssey*, a few hundred lines earlier, where Menelaus imagines Odysseus' eventual return home as a lion attacking a doe and the fawns she has brought to the lion's lair (4.332–340 = 17.124–131). When the narrator compares Penelope to a lion later in Book 4, the audience must recall Menelaus' description and thus the leonine Odysseus and Penelope are placed in a dialogue with each other.³ Odysseus is in addition compared to a lion in five other similes, culminating in the simile of Book 22, which describes his nurse, Eurycleia, finding him covered in blood, standing among the suitors like a lion, "a terrible thing to look in the face," a simile that is then repeated by Eurycleia when she in turn describes the same scene to Penelope at the beginning of Book 23.⁴

It is significant that Penelope is compared to a lion in a poem that is framed by two similes describing Odysseus' vengeance as that of a lion. Lionesses, real or imagined, are also predators, who, when they become surrounded by hunters, kill to save themselves and their young. When

Homeric lions face a human opponent, moreover, they almost always prevail. Penelope may resemble a lion, but never finds herself in a position where she has to do the fighting. While Penelope does not experience combat, through the lion simile she is associated with Odysseus' brutal slaughter of the suitors and by extension with the many Iliadic lion similes depicting men in combat. The lion simile thus gives us an ancient Lioness, a woman thrust into the "treacherous circle" of battle.

The lion simile has another important counterpart in the *Iliad*, where Achilles, strikingly, mourns Patroclus like a lion who has lost its cubs (18.316–322), an image that we also find in the earlier *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where the hero mourns the death of his friend Enkidu, "like a lioness whose cubs are in a pitfall."⁵ Another Iliadic simile describes Ajax protecting the body of Patroclus as a maternal lion:⁶

Αἴας δ' ἀμφὶ Μενoitιάδῃ σάκος εὐρὺ καλύψας
 ἐστήκει ὡς τίς τε λέων περὶ οἷσι τέκεσσι,
 ᾧ ῥά τε νήπι' ἄγοντι συναντήσονται ἐν ὕλῃ
 ἄνδρες ἐπακτῆρες ὃ δέ τε σθένει βλεμεαίνει,
 πᾶν δέ τ' ἐπισκύνιον κάτω ἔλκεται ὅσσε καλύπτων.

(*Iliad* 17.132–137)

Now Aias covering the son of Menoitios under his broad shield
 stood fast, like a lion over his young, when the lion
 is leading his little ones along, and men who are hunting
 come upon them in the forest. He stands in the pride of his great
 strength
 hooding his eyes under the cover of down-drawn eyelids.

While the Homeric lions are grammatically male, they seem to share the maternal inclinations of the mother lioness in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In all these examples, lions (and lioness) are always depicted in the act of attempting to protect, or lamenting, their own blood relatives, most especially their own children.⁷

Homeric lions often appear on the battlefield via similes, but strikingly, as we have just seen, they often figure as maternal animals trying to protect their offspring or mourning their loss. Homeric warriors are thus imagined as mothers to one another.⁸ The lion is also a symbol of vengeance and of the predator's proverbial superiority over its human and animal rivals. The implications of the Iliadic simile comparing mourning Achilles to a lion are clear: nothing is more dangerous than a mourning lion keen on revenge.

At the moment she is compared to a lion in *Odyssey* 4, Penelope is also in a state of mourning for her presumably lost husband and absent son. Lion similes thus evoke both war and its consequences by suggesting a kind of mourning that gives rise to wrath and desire for revenge. Penelope the lioness does not experience battle, yet Homer's comparison

strikingly suggests just this possibility, in an image that is all the more surprising given the attitudes of ancient Greeks toward fighting women. (As an aside, the Greeks did not seem to be aware that among real lions, it is in fact the lioness who does the hunting, while the males are, as it were, the homebodies.)

While women do not experience battle firsthand in Homeric epic, war affects them in many ways, including their social position. Defined by their marital status in everyday life, women become prizes during conflict, and wives risk becoming slaves. Helen, a stolen wife, is the cause of the Trojan War and is central to the conflict, even as she stands by as an observer. She finds herself briefly on the losing side when the Greeks sack Troy, but is ultimately reunited with her husband Menelaus, instead of enslaved by the Greek victors, which is the fate of the Trojan women. For Penelope, war and her husband's long absence have also put her in a deeply ambiguous situation: she is neither wife nor widow, thus attractive as a potential bride yet unable—and certainly unwilling—to remarry. The end of the Trojan War restores both Helen's and Penelope's identities as married women, but both figures remain ambiguous because of their potential for independence. While modern attitudes toward women in war are fundamentally different, the Homeric image of Penelope the lion and the struggles of the Homeric heroines can be connected to those faced by the women of Team Lioness, the first generation of US women sent into direct ground combat in Iraq (Figure 3.1).

Because it is unacceptable in Iraqi culture for male soldiers to interact with women, in late 2003 US Army commanders started to attach teams of female support soldiers to battalions of Marines to interview and search Iraqi women during search missions. *Lioness*, directed by Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers, tells the story of five female soldiers: Shannon Morgan, Rebecca Nava, Kate Guttormsen, Ranic Ruthig, and Anastasia Breslow.⁹ Through the women's own words (in conversations and excerpts from their diaries), archival footage, and newsreel, the filmmakers explore the women's homecoming and include flashbacks to combat the women faced in Ramadi in the spring of 2004.

In this documentary, Colonel William Brinkley is credited with establishing and naming the first Lioness Team (Figure 3.2). While the name "Shield Maidens," which evokes Scandinavian myth, was apparently considered, Brinkley settled on the animal moniker. Whether he was thinking of predatory or literary connotations is not known, but the comparison of women to lions—whether ancient or modern—is evocative of victory, vengeance, and mourning after battle.

While the film is a straightforward documentary, it threads images of prey and predator throughout its narrative. The first image is a shot of a fawn looking directly into the camera, before turning and running away in fear. On one level, the fawn sets the scene in the countryside of Mena, Arkansas, where the first section of the film, focusing on Shannon Morgan, takes place. But does the fawn stand in for the Lioness or for her



Figure 3.1 Sergeant Michelle Brookfield Wilmot on guard duty in Ramadi, Iraq in April 2005.
Photograph by Spe. Miranda Mattingly.



Figure 3.2 Lionesses Cynthia Espinoza, Ranic Ruthig, Shannon Morgan, and Michelle Perry in Ramadi, Iraq in July 2004.
Photograph by Lloyd Francis, Jr.

prey? Shannon at home is a hunter, but also someone who remembers being hunted.

In spite of the legal prohibition against women on the battlefield in effect at the time, the members of Team Lioness often found themselves in combat situations when they accompanied male soldiers during raids to find hidden weapons in the houses of suspected insurgents. Captain Manning, director of the Women in the Military Project based at the Women's Research and Education Institute, observes in the film that the Lionesses were forced to violate the policy in place at the time in order to do the jobs assigned to them. The Lionesses had no official status, and their actions were not documented, since the US Army could not acknowledge the presence of women in combat situations. The role played by the Lionesses in Iraq and Afghanistan and the difficulties they encountered on their return must have played an important role in Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's decision (at the unanimous recommendation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) to overturn the ban on women in battle in the US military, a welcome corrective to the earlier practice, which resulted in a lack of recognition of the women's actions and unfair discrimination, especially for returning female veterans in need of treatment for physical or psychological injuries experienced during combat.¹⁰

Ordering untrained female soldiers into situations that could involve battle came with its own set of dreadful dilemmas: Army support soldiers are, by definition, not trained for combat, making hazardous situations even more dangerous; moreover, the Lioness team was composed of female Army soldiers who were sent to the battlefield with Marines, who function according to different rules and often speak what amounts to a different language.

Specialist Shannon Morgan, a mechanic, describes the shock of her first experience of accompanying a firing team of Marines during raids against insurgents. Because Shannon has the skills to fire a squad automatic weapon (SAW), the Marines wanted her to cover their rear. As they made their way through the city, the firing team came under attack, and Shannon, for the first time in her life, found herself in a combat situation. As bullets flew by, Shannon noticed one of the other Lionesses, Staff Sergeant Ranie Ruthig, also a mechanic, signaling to her from the top of a nearby building:

And all of the sudden I looked, and everybody was gone. I was the only one in the street, there were insurgents all around me, firing at me. I'm like son-of-a-bitch! You know? I didn't know what to do... Ranie's like—going like this, like, trying to get my attention, "get over here," or something, "run." Because in Army, you tap back. You tap every man back and you let them know you're moving. These bastards didn't say nothing to me, just left me there. So I ran for my damn life and caught back up with my firing team—when I

got there I kicked the squad leader right in the nuts for leaving me. I sure did. (*Lioness*, chapter 10, at 40:03)

The Lionesses lacked not only the training necessary for combat, but also the very language to communicate effectively with the Marines to whom they were assigned. While Shannon was doing the job assigned to her according to the training she received, communication failure causes her to be left behind in mortal danger.

Communication plays a central role in the Lionesses' experience of war and subsequently in their homecoming, when finding ways to tell their story brings the women some solace. While soldiers returning from war in the twenty-first century have a variety of media at their disposal from diaries to film, in Homeric epic, women use weaving to tell their experience. Women and men occupy different realms in Homer, and women's place is by their looms, as Telemachus reminds Penelope when he asks her to go back to her loom while the men focus on talk and the contest of the bow that determines Penelope's fate (1.356–359 and 21.350–353). Weaving is singled out as a female activity, but it is also the means through which women are able to tell their story.¹¹ While Telemachus contrasts the loom with the power (*kratos*, 21.353) invested in the male head of the household, it is striking that the narrative of the *Odyssey* subtly undercuts his attempt to keep male and female realms separate by using the same word, *polupeno* ("to complete," "to bring to an end"), to describe Penelope's weaving and Odysseus' completion of the war, thereby suggesting that Penelope is both essential to, and participates in, her husband's successful hornecorning.¹² In both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, both Helen and Penelope are portrayed as master weavers whose weaving encapsulates the different ways in which they react to the war and its aftermath.

In the *Iliad*, Helen weaves what she sees:

...ἦ δὲ μέγαν ἰστόν ὕφαινε
δίπλακα πορφυρέην, πολέας δ' ἐνέπασσεν ἀέθλους
Τρώων θ' ἰπποδάμων καὶ Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων,
οὓς ἔθεν εἶνεκ' ἔπασχον ὑπ' Ἄρηος παλαμάων·

(*Iliad* 3.125–128)

...she was weaving a great web,
a red folding robe, and working into it the numerous struggles
of Trojans, breakers of horses, and bronze-armored Achaians,
struggles that they endured for her sake at the hands of the war god.

This arresting image of Helen at the loom presents her as both cause and observer of the war. Helen's visual narrative encompasses not only the sufferings and the great deeds of the Greek heroes, but the "struggles" of both sides, mirroring the *Iliad* itself and its insistence on depicting

war as devastating to both victors and losers. Helen bears witness to the carnage she has caused and is observing from a distance but she remains seemingly unaffected by the events she watches. While Helen becomes a poet of sorts, her web is full of paradoxes: her storytelling is so private that it is addressed to no audience but herself; and while she depicts events that she notionally caused, she is noticeably absent from the scene she creates.

Penelope, by contrast, uses weaving to control events as she faces the consequences of the war and her husband's long absence. At home in Ithaca, Penelope sees nothing of the slaughter on the Trojan plains. Nevertheless, the war and its aftermath are for her a source of constant grief. She cannot bear, for example, to hear the singer Phemius sing "of the Achaians' bitter homecoming /from Troy, which Pallas Athene had inflicted upon them" (Hom. *Od.* 1.326–327). Lattimore's choice of the adjective "bitter" to describe the Achaians' homecoming captures the double-edged nature of the Greek *lygroun*, "baneful, mournful." The *nostoi* of the Achaians are bitter for them to experience, but also bitter for others to remember, and to Penelope, they bring "unforgettable sorrow" (1.342). Telling the suitors that she will remarry only when she has completed the burial shroud for her (still living) father-in-law, Penelope uses weaving—and unweaving—to deal with the consequences of the Trojan War in Ithaca. Unlike Helen, Penelope shows no interest in recording the events that surround her, and has no wish to memorialize her suitors' sordid feasts, but her weaving, like Helen's, is also a way to tell her story and shape her future memories. By unweaving at night what she wove in the daytime, she is able to postpone giving an answer to the suitors who want to marry her and thereby gain a measure of control over her own fate. Penelope's weaving is a symbol of her cunning, but also her way of controlling the narrative of her life.¹³ Helen's and Penelope's weaving thus stresses two important problems for women who face war and its consequences: how to tell a story for which there is no audience; and how to control and tell the story that has not yet been written.

For the members of Team Lioness, the ambiguity of their mission—to give support in combat situations that they, strictly speaking, are not expected to be in—marks both their experience in war and their homecoming. The ambiguity of their position is reminiscent of Penelope's ambiguous social position in Ithaca during Odysseus' absence, when she is both a wife and not a wife. For Penelope, it is essential to maintain her ambiguous status so she can control events, delay an eventual remarriage, and wait for Odysseus. For the Lionesses, the ambiguous nature of their position protects the men who order them in battle while it creates problems for the women when they come home. How does one come back from, and come to terms with, an experience that is not supposed to have happened at all? How can the former Lionesses find ways of telling their stories, which for many of them are too painful to be told? Because of

what Captain Lory Manning describes as “the big disconnect right now between what the policy says women can do and what women are doing,” the members of Team Lioness faced further hardships when they returned home to a society that did not recognize what they experienced. The film gives the Lionesses a voice, but there was no official mechanism to help these women gain access to professional recognition for their actions or to the treatment they might need. This of course has many harmful consequences for both their professional and personal lives.

In Homeric epic, warriors are compensated for their sufferings in war by becoming immortalized in poetry. Women suffer in, and as a consequence of, war, but they remain marginal characters in epic. While the *Iliad* stops short of describing the sack of Troy, the *Odyssey* explores the female experience of war in a famous simile in Book 8, describing Odysseus’ reaction to the song just sung by the Phaiakian singer Demodocus. Demodocus’ song glorifies the Greek victory at Troy, but Odysseus surprisingly breaks down when he hears the singer’s praise of his own endurance in battle:

... αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς
 τήκετο, δάκρυ δ’ ἔδευεν ὑπὸ βλεφάροισι παρειάς,
 ὡς δὲ γυνὴ κλαίῃσι φίλον πόσιν ἀμφιπεσοῦσα,
 ὅς τε ἔῃς πρόσθεν πόλιος λαῶν τε πέσῃσιν,
 ἄστει καὶ τεκέεσσιν ἀμύνων νηλεὲς ἦμαρ·
 ἢ μὲν τὸν θνήσκοντα καὶ ἀσπαίροντα ἰδοῦσα
 ἀμφ’ αὐτῷ χυμένη λίγα κωκύνει· οἳ δὲ τ’ ὄπισθε
 κόπιτοντες δούρεσσι μετάφρενον ἠδὲ καὶ ὤμους
 εἴρερον εἰσανάγουσι, πόνον τ’ ἐχέμεν καὶ οἴζυν·
 τῆς δ’ ἐλεεινοτάτῳ ἀχεί φθινύθουσι παρειαί·

(*Odyssey* 8.521–530)

...but Odysseus
 melted, and from under his eyes the tears ran down, drenching
 his cheeks. As a woman weeps, lying over the body
 of her dear husband, who fell fighting for her city and people
 as he tried to beat off the pitiless day from city and children;
 she sees him dying and gasping for breath, and winding her body
 about him she cries high and shrill, while the men behind her,
 hitting her with their spear butts on the back and the shoulders,
 force her up and lead her away into slavery, to have
 hard work and sorrow, and her cheeks are wracked with pitiful
 weeping.

Listening to Demodocus’ song, Odysseus cries for himself, his lost companions, and for the violence and suffering he has experienced in the past 20 years. While the passage describes a martial victory, the poet of the *Odyssey* offers a tragic scene that focuses on the human costs of war.

The song also evokes a specific event in the Trojan War, to which I will return below. The woman in the simile is a victim of war—the Trojan Princess Andromache, Hector’s widow, immediately comes to mind—and Odysseus is also in some sense crying for her and the violence and suffering he has caused. This is a crucial moment in the *Odyssey*, in which the victor is described as seeing the war from the point of view of the most vulnerable of his victims.

Yet it is also striking that the woman to whom Odysseus is compared is nameless: the anonymous woman who embraces her dying husband, and who, like the women on the losing side of the Trojan War, loses everything, including her identity. The passage in fact functions as an identity marker for Odysseus: his role during the sack of Troy signals him as a war hero, but his tears also liken him to a combat victim, and shortly after his breakdown Odysseus finally reveals his name and identity to his hosts. But while the passage establishes Odysseus as a hero, the ancient poet also stresses throughout the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that war—and the memory of war—always conjures loss and hence tears for the men involved (see chapter 2 in this volume).

The Homeric poems include many descriptions of weeping warriors, in a stark contrast with the gendered meaning ascribed to tears in modern US military culture.¹⁴ Kate Guttormsen, the only female company commander at Ramadi who came to be in charge of choosing the women sent on Lioness missions, confesses that she thinks women soldiers are better equipped to deal with strong emotions than men because they are less afraid to express them:

I don’t think my experiences were any different than my male counterparts. I think some of my coping mechanisms were different. For example, I’m sure I cried more than my male counterparts—behind closed doors.¹⁵

For Guttormsen, as for Odysseus and Achilles, tears are a natural reaction to some of the events she witnessed. I will return below to what she calls elsewhere “the emotional side” of war and the ways in which it affects female soldiers.

In Homeric epic, women experience war from a distance. Helen is the only woman to come back from Troy, but in contrast to the heroes whose homecoming becomes the subject of song, she returns to a world in which remembering her actions in Troy is a source not of storytelling and epic *kleos* (“fame”) but of grief. When Telemachus visits Sparta to gather information about his father in *Odyssey* 4, he finds Menelaus and Helen living in extraordinary luxury, but the beauty of their palace and its furnishing cannot hide the lack of harmony between the spouses. Their conflicting memories of the war are so painful that they can only reminisce about the past after taking a *pharmakos*, a drug in Helen’s possession that counteracts grief.

After Helen and her husband partake of the *pharmakos*, both remember episodes from the war that draw attention to less heroic moments away from the battlefield. Helen tells how she recognized Odysseus when he made a foray into the city disguised as a beggar. While Helen remembers trying to help the Greeks, Menelaus counters with his memories of her trying to trick the Greek warriors out of the Trojan horse by imitating their wives' voices, tempting them to forget war for wives, and inspiring them with a yearning for home so powerful that it almost causes them to abandon their mission at the most dangerous moment possible. But ultimately, Menelaus' story is about Odysseus' power of restraining the other men hidden in the horse and Helen's motivations remain mysterious.

The difficulties faced by Helen when remembering her role at Troy are mirrored in the modern Lionesses' troubles in remembering and telling their stories.¹⁶ Because memories are intricately linked with identity, telling one's story is an important way of recovering from trauma. Yet traumatic memories are difficult to narrate precisely because they are dominated by nonverbal components such as sounds, sights, and emotions that are difficult to translate into a connected narrative. Traumatic memories can further cause individuals to lose a sense of the coherence of their entire life narratives, and lead to confused memories, as in the case of Helen and Menelaus, or to memories that are impossible to put into words.¹⁷

Trying to communicate what she has been through to her parents, Shannon finds it difficult to find words (Figure 3.3): "I didn't really know



Figure 3.3 Shannon Morgan on her parents' porch in Mcma, Arkansas.

Photograph by Stephen T. Mainz.

what to say.” She finds some solace with her uncle, a veteran from the Vietnam War, as they sit together, “not saying a word,” yet understanding one another because of their common experience in war. The Lionesses find it not only difficult to recount their experiences after they return, but also at the time because they did not wish to be a source of worry for their families. Shannon explains how even when she had the opportunity to tell her mother on the phone what she was doing in Ramadi, she could not tell her because she feared her mother would be so worried that it might affect her health. For Ranie Ruthig, her inability to manage her memories after her return results in bursts of uncontrollable anger typical of PTSD that leave her feeling both psychologically exhausted and full of guilt toward her family, especially her young daughter.¹⁸ Ranie finds it particularly difficult to transition from her role as soldier to her role as mother.

When Helen and Menelaus talk of their memories at Troy, they both in different ways stress the notion of war as transgression. The role played by Odysseus and the other Greeks is ambivalent at best: they lurk, hide, and trick the Trojans into utter defeat, but the Greeks’ victory is marred by its deceptive nature. Let me return to the song sung by Demodocus that provokes Odysseus’ tears in *Odyssey* 8:

ἦειδεν δ’ ὡς ἄστυ διέπραθον υἱες Ἀχαιῶν
 ἱππόθεν ἐκχύμενοι, κοῖλον λόχον ἐκτρολιπόντες,
 ἄλλον δ’ ἄλλη ἄειδε πόλιν κεραϊζέμεν αἰπήν,
 αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσῆα προτὶ δώματα Διηφόβοιο
 βήμεναι, ἦ ἦτ’ Ἄρηα, σὺν ἀντιθέῳ Μενελάῳ.
 κείθι δὴ αἰνότατον πόλεμον ἠάτο τολμήσαντα
 νικῆσαι καὶ ἔπειτα διὰ μεγάθυμον Ἀθήνην.

(*Odyssey* 8.514–520)

He sang how the sons of the Achaians left their hollow
 hiding place and streamed from the horse and sacked the city,
 and he sang how one and another fought through the steep citadel,
 and how in particular Odysseus, went, with godlike
 Menelaus, like Arcs, to find the house of Deiphobus,
 and there, he said, he endured the grimest fighting that ever
 he had, but won it there too, with great-hearted Athene aiding.

At Odysseus’ request, Demodocus sings of the wooden horse and the destruction of Troy. I have already discussed Odysseus’ reaction to the song and the comparison of the hero to a captive woman, but his reaction is even more surprising given that the trick of the Trojan horse, and hence the sack of Troy, is celebrated as Odysseus’ greatest victory. Yet taken together, Demodocus’ song and Odysseus’ tears offer a compressed

version of the war and of the typical Homeric way of remembering war, which always acknowledges the indissoluble connection between battle and lament. Consider the *Iliad*, with its celebration of martial deeds that always lead to mourning, which becomes increasingly prevalent in the later parts of the poem. Achilles, accompanied by his mother and the Nereids, mourns the loss of Patroclus in Book 18, while the Trojans lament Hector in Book 22. Mourning takes center stage in Book 23 with the funeral of Patroclus and culminates with the tears of sorrow shared by Achilles and Priam in Book 24. Victors and losers mourn alike in the *Iliad*, and not even Zeus is immune to the grief brought upon by war, reacting to the death of his son Sarpedon with tears of blood (16.459).

Odysseus' tears in *Odyssey* 8 are also connected to the specific events, "the grimmest fighting" he ever endured, which took place at Deiphobus' house during the night of the sack of Troy. Demodocus does not give any details about what Odysseus did there, but the ancient audience would have known Deiphobus as the Trojan prince whom Helen marries after the death of Paris. When Menelaus and Odysseus go to Deiphobus' house, it is for one very specific reason: to get Helen back. And Helen plays a central role in what happens there.

To get a glimpse of that "grimmest" of battle, we have to turn to Vergil's *Aeneid* 6, where Aeneas encounters the dead Deiphobus in the underworld and hears the Trojan's version of the same events: Deiphobus recounts how Helen betrayed the city, leading the Trojan women into an ecstatic dance while simultaneously signaling to the Greeks to come out of their hiding place. While Deiphobus is asleep, Helen prepares for the Greeks' arrival by removing all weapons from his house. She then summons Menelaus and Ulysses inside, and they brutally mutilate and kill Deiphobus. The Roman Vergil to be sure presents a perspective that is as anti-Greek as possible—his Helen helps Menelaus and Ulysses to torture and slaughter her defenseless Trojan husband. When earlier in Book 2 Aeneas describes his own encounter with Helen during the sack of Troy, he portrays her as a dreadful presence, crouching in the shadows of Vesta's shrine, in fear of both the Trojans' and the Greeks' wrath. Aeneas is enraged at the sight of the hated woman whom he describes as the "Erinyes," the vengeful curse bringing destruction both her own country and his own (2.573).

While the *Odyssey* does not describe the scene in the house of Deiphobus in any detail, the word Demodocus uses to describe the fighting is *ainotaton*, "the grimmest" or "the most dreadful," a word that connotes a transgression of some kind. Odysseus uses the same word to warn his companions of the "most dreadful evil" (*ainotaton kakon*) that awaits them on the island of Helios, where his companions will find death after they consume the forbidden cattle of the sun god (12.271–276). Yet the *Odyssey*

remains silent on the events that take place at the house of Deiphobus, during the battle to recover Helen, which is in some sense at the center of the narrative of the Trojan War. And Helen at Sparta is depicted as a potential traitor whose past actions are so painful that they can only be remembered by her and her husband when they are drugged. Whatever the reasons for Demodocus' reluctance to mention Helen—whether he is unwilling to mention her second Trojan marriage or loath to ascribe any part of Odysseus' success in a war to a woman's help—we are left with a flickering and tantalizingly inconsistent image of Helen at Troy and at home: was she there at all or did she remain in Egypt, as Euripides has her do in his *Helen*, while the Greeks pursue her ghostly image to Troy? Is she always the enemy?

Helen's disappearing act finds its counterpart in some contemporary documentaries telling the story of the Iraq War. In *Lioness*, we witness a reunion of the team during which they watch together "Battlecry Iraq: Ramadi," an episode from the History Channel's series *Shootout*, which focuses on reconstructing famous historical battles. "Battlecry Iraq: Ramadi" depicts the struggles faced by US Marines in the spring of 2004 as they faced insurgents on the streets of Ramadi, including the same battle in which the *Lioness* teams were involved and which they recount in the central section of *Lioness*.¹⁹ Although both films center on the same events, the contrast between the two versions could not be more striking. "Battlecry Iraq" of course belongs to a subgenre of war documentary that filters historical events through a traditional view of battle as the business of men: "witness real life-and-death combat, house-to-house, block by block, told for the first time, by the men who were there," announces the narrator at the beginning of the documentary. But while the documentary details the skirmishes between Americans and Iraqis in Ramadi and purports to tell of real events, using archival footage and interviews, it has no place for the untraditional *Lionesses* who were, in fact, there, and simply elides their presence. Women—whether American or Iraqi for that matter—are completely absent from the narrative. The omissions of "Battlecry Iraq" contribute to the documentary's generic and unproblematic vision of war, which has nothing to offer to the *Lionesses* who are still struggling to come to terms with their experiences in Iraq. Like Helen who comes home from a city at war only to find her experience muted through the *pharmakos*, or Penelope, whose role as narrator is severely curtailed in the *Odyssey* after Odysseus comes home and retakes control of the household (and the story), the women of Team *Lioness* come back from Iraq to find that their experience is neither acknowledged nor remembered.²⁰

While some of the bluster is typical of the *Shootout!* series, the men also tell their stories in their own words, which reflect their different training and reactions in the face of combat. A soldier describes discovering

an insurgent's silhouette against a lighted background as "a dream come true" because he could easily aim at and kill his target. *Lioness* by contrast brings to the forefront the moral dilemmas faced by soldiers and the *ainotaton*, the "grimmiest," dimension of war. As they break into the houses of presumed insurgents to seek hidden weapons and information, the Lionesses have to trust that they are acting on trustworthy information. Ranie Ruthig imagines what it would be like to be at the other end of the search missions, which mostly took place between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m.: "I felt like the Gestapo. You know, all I could think of was what would I do if they did this to me?" Similarly, Anastasia Breslow writes in her diary that she finds the search missions unsettling; she imagines how she herself might react: "If someone rammed my gate down in the middle of the night I might be inclined to plot. We just have to have faith in the intel that these people are doing wrong."

Upon her return, Shannon Morgan continues to struggle with the implications of having killed another human being in the streets of Ramadi. She knows she had no choice and had to kill the man who was aiming at her before he shot her. She says that she is happy to be alive and to be back home, but also feels like she lost a part of herself when she took a human life in Iraq. Kate Guttormsen quotes what she wrote in her diary the day on which Shannon Morgan killed the insurgent and remembers another officer's reaction:

I cannot imagine the feelings that she [Shannon] must be experiencing. Gave her a huge hug and didn't say anything. Chief Warrant Officer at the time came up to me because he saw me give her a hug and he said, "Remember, you're in charge." Which really bothered me because there's still an emotional side, you know, which I found, while I was over in that environment, that the women deal with much better than men, you know? I tried not to do it in front of people, but I would get teary-eyed when there were bad days, and I would break down when there was a bad day. I'd try to do it behind closed doors but you can't always do that. (*Lioness*, chapter 10, at 49:56)

What comes through again and again in *Lioness* is the difficulty for the team members to talk about what they have been through. Words are not enough: Kate Guttormsen "didn't say anything," while Shannon Morgan didn't know "what to say." Yet, while it may be impossible to find words adequate to recollect their painful experiences, the Lionesses are also keenly aware of the importance of telling their stories. The film is framed by Shannon Morgan's emphatic statement, "you don't ever forget," which functions as both introduction and conclusion, and both an explanation and an imperative: Shannon cannot forget what happened to her, but neither should we. Where both "Battlecry Iraq: Ramadi" and *Lioness* and both male and female soldiers agree—even if they do it in different

ways—is on the absolute necessity to remember, and more particularly to remember fallen soldiers.

By way of conclusion, let me go back to the *Odyssey*, and its home-bound Ieanine heroine. Although she never leaves her house, Penelope is singled out by the ancient poet for both her struggle and her achievement. The epic *kleos* that is denied to unfaithful wives such as Helen (or Clytemnestra) instead goes to Odysseus' steadfast companion. Just after their final reunion, Odysseus breaks down:

ὣς φάτο, τῷ δ' ἔτι μᾶλλον ὑφ' ἡμερον ὤροε γόοιο·
 κλαῖε δ' ἔχων ἄλοχον θυμαρέα, κεδνά ἰδυῖαν.
 ὡς δ' ὅτ' ἂν ἀσπᾶσιος γῆ νηχομένοισι φανήη,
 ὣν τε Ποσειδάων εὐεργέα νῆ' ἐνὶ πόντῳ
 ῥαῖσι, ἐπειγομένην ἀνέμῳ καὶ κύματι πηγῶ·
 παῦροι δ' ἐξέφυγον πολιῆς ἀλός ἠπειρόνδε
 νηχόμενοι, πολλή δὲ περὶ χροῖ τέτροφεν ἄλμη,
 ἀσπᾶσιοι δ' ἐπέβαν γαίης, κακότητα φυγόντες·
 ὣς ἄρα τῇ ἀσπαστὸς ἔϊν πόσις εἰσοροῶσι,
 δειρῆς δ' οὐ πω πάμπαν ἀφίετο πῆχθε λευκά.

(*Odyssey* 23.231–241)

She spoke, and still more roused in him the passion for weeping,
 He wept as he held his lovely wife, whose thoughts were virtuous.
 And as when the land appears welcome to men who are swimming,
 after Poseidon has smashed their strong-built ship on the open
 water, pounding it with the weight of wind and the heavy
 seas, and only a few escape the gray water landward
 by swimming, with a thick scurf of salt coated upon them,
 and gladly they set foot on the shore, escaping the evil,
 so welcome was her husband to her as she looked upon him,
 and she could not let him go from the embrace of her white arms.

In the end, the *Odyssey* does grant Penelope her share of heroism. This powerful double simile, which suggests that men's and women's experiences can be reconciled, also stresses the ways in which *nostos* always remains an incomplete tapestry woven and unwoven by both those who leave and those who remain. Shuttling back and forth between modern and ancient experience, we weave new narratives of war and homecoming that include those who have been marginalized by ancient poets and those who are neglected by contemporary institutions. While Homeric epic gives the "female race" a circumscribed role, it also gives us a lioness heroine who is remembered as undergoing a heroic *nostos* of her own, and, in so doing, provides us with a model for contemporary and future homecomings.

Notes

1. For a study of Homeric epic and PTSD in the twentieth century, see Shay (1994, 2003). For the reception of Homer in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, see Graziosi and Greenwood (2010) and Hall (2008).
2. All translations of Homer are by Lattimore (1951, 1967).
3. See Heubeck et al. (1990, 243) for Stephanie West's summary of the scholarly reception of the simile, which she concludes is "inept;" for the ways in which the lion similes connect Penelope and Odysseus, see, for example, Moulton (1977, 123); see also Magrath (1982, 207), who notes that the poet highlights "Penelope as the passive mate for Odysseus as the active lion." I examine this simile in greater detail in a forthcoming article.
4. There are seven lion similes in the *Odyssey* (or five, if we discount repetitions): Odysseus the lion coming back to his lair, 4.333–340 = 17.124–131; Penelope the lion, 4.787–794; Odysseus compared to a lion during his encounter with Nausicaa, 6.127–137; Polyphemos eating Odysseus' men compared to a lion, 9.287–295; Odysseus after the slaughter of the suitors, 22.402 = 23.48.
5. Tablet VIII.56–63. Translation by Foster (2001).
6. The connection between lionesses and maternal love and vengeance is perhaps linked to the strange belief about real lionesses only giving birth to one cub recorded by Herodotus, *Histories* 3.108.4: "On the one hand there is this sort of thing, but on the other hand the lioness, that is so powerful and so bold, once in her life bears one cub; for in the act of bearing she casts her uterus out with her cub. The explanation of this is that when the cub first begins to stir in the mother, its claws, much sharper than those of any other creature, tear the uterus, and the more it grows the more it scratches and tears, so that when the hour of birth is near seldom is any of the uterus left intact" (Godley 1982). How and Wells (1989) note in their commentary on these lines that "Aristotle without naming H. (Hist. Au. vi. 31. 579 a 2) rightly styles this story as to the lioness λιρῳδις; it was invented, he says, to account for the scarcity of lions. The lioness breeds once a year, and has usually three cubs. H. fails to explain how under his system the race of lions survives at all."
7. See West (1997, 342–3), where he notes that both "nēši 'lion' and nēšti 'lioness'" are found in different versions of the Akkadian epic, "but the sex of the creature in any case matters little."
8. For more on the ways in which Greek soldiers, and Achilles in particular, see their affection for each other in terms of similes involving maternal motifs in Homeric epic, see Dué and Ebbott (2012); see also Shay (1994, 42).
9. *Lioness* (Room 11 Productions, 2008). More information on the film can be found at <http://lionessthefilm.com>
10. Bumiller and Shanker (2013). For the ways in which the practice of using Lionesses went against policy (and may have played a role in making a change necessary), see, for example, Shingle (2009, 155–77).
11. Weaving in ancient Greek is also metaphorically associated with poetry and the art of narrative (as it also is in the English "text," derived from "textile") and with marriage. See, for example, McNeil (2005, 1–17).
12. On this key verb and its role in the narrative of the *Odyssey*, see Levaniouk (2011, 267).

13. In the words of the literary scholar Heilbrun (2002, 108), Penelope is faced “with an as-yet-unwritten story: how a woman may manage her own destiny when she has no plot, no narrative, no tale to guide her.”
14. See, for example, Monsacré (1984). All the Greek heroes weep in Homeric epic, with the striking exception of Odysseus, who does not shed a single tear in the *Iliad*; see Pache (2000).
15. Interview with Kate Guttormsen available on <http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/lioness/guttormsen.html>
16. For the connection between memory and trauma, see, for example, Kenny, Bryant, et al. (2009, 1049–1052).
17. For the connection between traumatic memories and storytelling, and further references to the literature on traumatic memories, see Hunt (2010, 118–20, 126). Cf. Shay (1994, 188–93).
18. For outbursts of anger as one of the criteria used to diagnose PTSD, see the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (*DSM-V*); see also Shay (2003, 39–40).
19. *Shootout!* Season 1, Episode 11, “Battlecry Iraq: Ramadi,” (A & E Television Networks, 2006).
20. On Penelope's diminished importance as a narrator after Odysseus' return, see Nieto (2008, 39–62).

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