Battle Tactics in Homer's Iliad

I have made all the calculations; fate will do the rest. - Napoleon Bonaparte

I.

The Iliad is not only an epic about the will of Zeus, the wrath of Achilles, and the quarrels of both gods and men, but also, among other things, a poem about the art of war and how war is best conducted. Battles need to be fought, plans drawn, people killed, and tragedy must ensue for the poem to commence. Thus, more than a third of the Iliad is consumed by battle; to be precise, this amounts to nearly 5,500 lines of poetry out of a total 15,000 lines. No question, the Iliad is a poem submerged in war.

Undoubtedly, Homer's art of war revolves a trinity of leadership, control, and experience. I will be exploring this triad of themes with the following questions as my guide: 1.) Why is strong leadership the elemental key to success? 2.) Why does the ability to shepherd, control, and conduct people prevent chaos from erupting? 3.) Why is "experience" the most elastic and flexible tactic an army can possess? Hopefully, all these questions will be answered earnestly and in full. Furthermore, in a separate yet related appendix, I will be discussing the role of parainesis and its relationship to victory. Namely, why is parainesis used, how does it work, and what is its effect?

Thesis: Clearly, Homeric strategy is based on maintaining control and order. Success comes through quelling the confusion of battle and through brilliant use of rhetoric - parainesis - to spur men into action. The overall goal of this paper is to unearth Homer the tactician, for we have much to learn from his insights on battle and his intimate knowledge on the mechanics of man.

II.

In Homeric war, having strong, focused, and centralized leadership is the elemental key for success. The text, in support of this thesis, is overflowing with examples. (For the sake of brevity, I have chosen a few of the best.) Centralized leadership in a time of crisis, whether it be upheld by a major or minor character, is crucial lest the whole enterprise crumble into an anarchic state. Homer highly values Homer may be using Odysseus as his mouthpiece when he so wisely notes: “We cannot all be leaders here; and mob rule is a bad thing. Let there be one commander only, one ruler.”

All leaders, lest they be crushed or become weak, should rise when all seems lost, when the horizon is bleak. This, in a nutshell, is Homer's leadership ethic. A leader shows his true colors when he is faced with defeat, but only a good leader is able to overcome this dire circumstance.
The wounding of Menelaus in Book Four provides Homer with a strong opportunity to demonstrate this leadership ethic. After Pandarus strikes Menelaus with his errant arrow, the oath which the sides agreed upon disintegrates. Suddenly looming on the horizon is dreadful war, and one of the Greek’s greatest leaders has fallen to the earth. After a brief recess of war, both Greek and Trojan alike succumb and join-in the chaos of battle. More than any other time, for Homer, this is the perfect time for a strong leader to tower up the ranks and quell the chaos. And this is what occurs. In this case, it is Agamemnon who rises to the occasion. Since he is deserving of praise, having fulfilled his role as leader, Homer states: “You would not see godlike Agamemnon dozing or hiding or unwilling to fight, but eager for the battle where men win glory”, and, “[Agamemnon] set out on foot to make his tour of inspection of the troops”\(^2\). By encircling and measuring-up his troops, Agamemnon is fomenting solidarity within the Greek forces. Furthermore, his eagerness for battle, by virtue of example, helps quell dissent in the army and encourages the men to fight. We can hear their cries.

Over the next two-hundred lines - Iliad 4.240-440 - Agamemnon further coordinates his troops. This time he specifically appeals to the other leaders. + Homer depicts him as a man able to delight and encourage his generals, in order to further control the situation. First he stimulates Idomeneus, and then the twin Ajaxes, and then Nestor, and then Odysseus, and finally the tempestuous Diomedes. Meanwhile he listens to them with equal respect and reciprocality, noting their concerns and Agamemnon convinces all these men to carry on the battle and not to collapse into a state of defeatism. Thus, Agamemnon is spreading and delegating his infernal will; he is being a good leader. Clearly, without Agamemnon’s effort and success in solidifying the Greek army, both physically and psychologically, the Trojans would have decimated the Greeks. For Agamemnon’s courage in Book Four, Homer aptly describes him as the bull that stands out from the other cattle\(^3\).

As if to mirror Agamemnon’s leadership capabilities, Homer makes Hector emerge as a great conductor of war as well as a paragon of model leadership. In Book Six, Hector needs to make a quick decision about whether or not he should leave home, wife, and young child in order to do battle. To Hector’s dismay, his troops are manifestly suffering after both the aristiea of Diomedes in the Book Five and resurgence of the brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus onto the battlefield. However, his family is simultaneously pleading with Hector using sheer emotion and sharp reason to influence him. They want him to discharge from battle. Hector is of two minds - either/or.

In line with Homeric wisdom and the leader ethic, Hector chooses (albeit reluctantly) to return to battle as the cornerstone of the Trojans. His words are profoundly moving: “If I hid myself like a coward and slunk from fighting, I would feel nothing but shame before the Trojans and the Trojan women in their trailing gowns. My heart would not be in it either, since I have trained myself always to be a good warrior, to take my place in the front line\(^4\) and try to win glory for my father and myself”\(^5\). Knowing full well that the Trojans are doomed, Hector still maintains his leader ethic. With his brother Paris beside him, Hector storms out of Troy, boldly stating, “War is men’s business; and this war will be the business of every man in Ilium, myself above all”\(^6\). With renewed energy and a renewed will to lead, Hector propels his army in Book Eight and eventually pushes the Greeks back to their ships. If night would’ve come a little later, it’s likely that Hector would’ve triumphed over the Greeks in Book Eight so great was his will and leadership.

Yet, leadership does not need to be as glorious or far-reaching as the latter examples may suggest. Although leadership must be centralized for it to be effective, this does not mean that leadership does not occur on the micro-level. It certainly does.

For instance, in Book Fifteen, a minor hero named Thoas readies the Greeks to fight Hector and he marshals their spirits. Hector, whom had recently been struck formidably by Ajax, reappeared with
renewed vigor, and the Greek’s ‘heart’s sank’.

Who is this Thoas and how does he save the Greeks? In his gloss, Homer states that he is the finest of the Aetolians, skilled with his spear and good at standing battle[3]. But much more importantly, this character is skilled at forming assemblies; Homer writes: “There were few Greeks who could get the better of him in the assembly when they competed to give the best advice”[8]. So as any great leader does, Thoas rallies his contingents and makes a proposition. He succinctly says: “Let the main body retreat to the ships, while we that claim to be the best men in the army make a stand, with our spears up at the ready, in the hope of holding Hector’s first attack. For all his determination, I have an idea he’ll think twice about engaging with such a Greek force”[9]. Thoas, being a gifted leader, refuses to entertain the idea that the Greeks should prostrate themselves to Hector and his ensuing force. To run is to relinquish your manhood and pride. The men agree with Thoas. They gather in a tight formation and wait for Hector.

In the end, Thoas’ plan ultimately fails and the Greek defense is crushed like how “a boy at the seaside knocks down a sandcastle”[10]. However, this does not detract from the praise Thoas deserves. With every Greek leader out-of-battle save Ajax, someone needed to emerge to take the place of the “bull”. Thoas, in his strength and fortitude, consummated his plan by simply keeping the Greeks on track and securing their position.

In the art of war, leadership is imperative. A good leader always orchestrates from top to bottom. A good leader, like we have seen in the examples above, always emerges at the right time; he always provides his men with sustenance and courage, and he never shrinks from the fight.

As we have seen, when men are without a leader and are left to their own devices, they are highly unlikely to organize and mobilize themselves. In this way, men are no different than sheep or cattle, both need to be prodded and coerced into movement. This particular theme - the necessity of control - finds frequent representation in the text, appearing in a wide array of forms and contexts. For instance, a few of the many of Homer’s means of expression include a catalog, a metaphor, a divine intervention, and a conversation (all of which are related below). The abundance of examples throughout the Iliad makes it crystal clear that Homer has a firm grasp on the blessings control and order bring to an army. Homer always always offer the same guidance in his representations: if the leaders lose control of their blocks of soldiers and, therefore, cannot keep track of the field’s activity, failure is inevitable.

It may seem simple and rudimentary, but the simple act of dividing your forces into manageable contingents proves very effective in Homeric war. By breaking the whole into self-sufficient parts, a large army is able to perform in a more potent, expedient, and fluid manner. And by placing a leader in command of each part, the chances of failure lessen and the chances for success increase.

This particular strategy is most blatantly seen in the Catalog of Ships. Here Homer divides the whole army into parts making the whole more tangible. With forces so great and formidable that they are compared in number to the “leaves of the forest and sands of the sea”[11], it’s easy to see why this splicing is necessary. Only after this focal adjustment can the reader comprehend the size and magnitude of either opponent[12]. It’s as if Homer wanted to “zoom-in” on each particular group and record their presence while he sits high and aloft above them all. As you read the Catalog of Ships, you can picture the blocks of ships moving along in a pattern through the sea. Homer even acknowledges his stature above the ships, writing, “Tell me now, you Muses that live on Olympus, since you are goddesses, are present everywhere and know everything, while we men have only hearsay to go on and know nothing - tell me who were the leaders and commanders of the Greeks? As for rank and file, I could not name or even count them, not if I had ten tongues and ten mouths [...] So I shall list the captains and their ships from first to last”[13].

The Lucian of Samosata Project - http://lucianofsamosata.info/wiki/
Note three things. 1.) Even Homer divides the ranks of the Greeks solely on the basis of leaders and contingents, thus confirming the thesis. 2.) The individual doesn’t exist independently of their contingent (unless you’re a ‘captain’). In other words, the common soldier lives vicariously through their ‘captain’ and contingent in the Iliad. 3.) The Catalog of Ships is good evidence that these divisions of authority existed in Homeric war. Homeric war was conducted, not haphazardly, but with strategy, order, and intelligence. The Catalog of Ships provides the reader with a panoramic, bird’s-eye view of the rudimentary divisions of each faction as well as the knowledge of how Homeric heroes organized their contingents.

Battle strategies also find frequent expression in metaphoric form. The following examples are very illuminating and help unveil Homer’s perspective. For example, just prior to the Catalog of Ships, Homer writes the following: “Like goatherds who easily sort out their wandering flocks of goats when they have become mixed up at pasture, so the commanders deployed men here and there to advance to battle”\(^{14}\). Note how Homer in this metaphor reflects on how flocks, ie. large, expansive groups of animals, can become “sorted out” and “positioned”. Namely, how they can be given focus and order. He is implying that even the most bovine-minded people can be successfully organized if given the proper direction.

Homer likewise invokes metaphor to discuss the direct consequences of order and chaos on the battlefield. He makes it clear that without leadership, progress will be arrested. He handsomely writes: “As the waves of the ocean under a westerly gale race one after the other on to the booming beach; far out at sea the white horses rise, then break and crash thunderously on the shore and, arching up, climb headlands and send the salt spray flying - so, one after the other, the Greek contingents moved relentlessly into battle. Each leader was issuing orders to his own command, but the men advanced in silence. You would not think so large an army was on the march or had a voice, so silent were they, in fear of their commanders. Their ornate armor glittered as they advanced, rank on rank. As for the Trojans, like sheep that stand in their thousands in a rich man’s yard, yielding their white milk and bleating incessantly because they hear their lambs, so a hubbub went up through the great army. Their speech and dialects were all different, as they spoke a mixture of languages - the troops hailed from many parts”\(^{15}\). With this powerful juxtaposition, Homer, in a nutshell, is describing what benefits “order” can bring an army in contrast to “disorder”. Just looking at the vocabulary Homer uses suffices to clarify this point. The “ordered” army booms, thunders, arches up, and flies at the opponent; the “disordered” army yields, incessantly bleats, and corrodes. There is no question who has the advantage and who will succeed. This passage also juxtaposes the notions of clarity and silence against discord and cacophony. Homer clearly infers that a good army must maintain silence under the yoke of their leadership. Without this respect for command and discipline, they will devolve and become an impotent force. Predictably, the Greeks, in this case, do have the upper-hand in the ensuing battle.

(In an interesting parallel, Thucydides will later write in a similar vein nearly four centuries later. He attributes the Athenian defeat at Epipolae, not to inferior forces or weaponry, but to darkness, rout, and cacophony. Mirroring Homer, he writes: “The Athenians fell into great disorder and did not know where to turn. Indeed, it was difficult to found out from either side\(^{16}\) exactly how things happened. […] In a battle by night how could anyone be sure of what happened exactly? There was a bright moon, but visibility is what might be expected by moonlight; they could see the outlines of figures in front of them, but could not be sure whether they belonged to their own side or not. […] By constantly asking for the watchword, which was the only way they had of recognizing each other, they caused much confusion among themselves, by all asking for it all at once. […] It was the singing of the paean that did [the Athenians] as much, or even more harm harm than anything [else].”\(^{17}\) Thus we can see a continuity of thought from Homer on through Thucydides. Both writers emphasize the importance of silence, control, compactness, and the maintenance of clear, distinct lines in order to succeed in war.)
Even the gods themselves use this Homeric pattern. In a violent metaphor at the beginning of Book Twelve, Homer discusses the effectiveness of nature’s destruction under the gods’ command. He states that when nature is given direction and coordination, it can effectively annihilate anything in its path. The gods’ here, metaphorically, become the generals and the rivers the contingents under their reign. He writes: “Poseidon and Apollo decided to destroy the [Greek’s] wall by unleashing upon it the force of all the rivers that run down from the range of Mount Ida to the sea. The name of the rivers were Rhesus, Heptaporus, Caresus, Rhodius, Granicus, Aeseus, divine Scamander and Simoies. [...] When the day came, Phoebus Apollo brought all these rivers together at one mouth and for nine days he flung their waters at the wall, while Zeus rained without ceasing to submerge it quicker. Trident in hand, Poseidon the earthshaker himself directed the torrent, washed out to sea all the wooden and stone foundations. [...] When the wall had been destroyed, [Poseidon] covered the wide beach once more with sand and turned the rivers back in to the channels down which their lovely streams had run before”\(^{18}\). What can be accomplished when many leaders and their contingents work towards one goal is incredible. Instead of bickering and conflicting with one another, the gods coordinate their forces like ideal generals and crumble the opposition (i.e. the wall). Their ultimate goal is to destroy the wall, therefore, they bridle, control, and focus their forces to reach this goal. The gods combine their individual strengths together: Apollo mused together the eight rivers; Zeus supplied the rivers with rain; Poseidon directed the torrent and restored peace and tranquillity after the destruction. Clearly, this is the way war should ideally be conducted - swift, orderly, and goal-orientated.

Lastly, in a golden passage in Book 13, we find Meriones and Idomeneus are discussing their situation-at-hand. Before setting out for battle, Meriones asks Idomeneus where is it best to attack the front-lines - on the right, in the center, or on the left? Meriones imagines that the left is weakest. However, Idomeneus, being a proficient and skilled leader, doesn’t just “imagine” the circumstances-at-hand, but measures and calculates them. Like a chess master, he tries to determine which parts are currently holding steady and which are faltering. He decides that securing the ships in the center is paramount. Eventually, he becomes convinced its secure after seeing the twin Ajaxes and Teucer there. For all of Hector’s tenacity, he will never be able to effortlessly defeat these men. Only with this assurance does Meriones decide to follow Idomeneus’s “intuition” and attack the weakness in the left flank. If Meriones did not stop to assess the situation, as any good general should do, and rushed to the left immediately, he could have destroyed the whole Greek expedition. By dividing the whole picture, Meriones was able to make the correct call.

Archidamus, in Thucydides, Archidamus: “Think of the glory, [...] follow your leaders, paying the strictest attention to discipline and to security, giving prompt obedience to the orders which you receive. The best and safest thing of all is when a large force is so well disciplined that it seems to be acting as one man”\(^{19}\).

Of the three strategies outlined in this paper, the most important in the long-run and in immediate times of crisis is having experienced personnel on your side. No weapon, horde of troops, willpower, or charisma can replace this specific necessity. What experience brings is perspective, guidance, and a sense of consistency, no matter what condition you find your army in. Experience corrects overlooked situations and it helps penetrate the weaknesses of the enemy. In Homer, the characteristic - ‘experience’ - is almost always embodied by an elderly member of the expedition. In the Iliad, the character which best embodies experience is Nestor the Gerenian charioteer. Only he fully exemplifies wisdom, old age, and experience. So, let’s “go straight up to Nestor, the tamer of horses; we are here to learn the wisdom hidden in his heart”\(^{20}\).

Nestor is by far the oldest and most highly respected member of the Greek expedition. His claims to being wise are not empty clout. This octogenarian, although unable physically to fight, wagers war with his mind and his great memory and intuition. He had already seen “two generations of men born,
grow up and die in sacred Pylos, and now he ruled the third” and had himself been a great warrior, defeating even greater threats than the Trojans (or so he claims). Nevertheless, Nestor has impressive credentials (more than any other hero), and therefore, Nestor is the most valuable mastermind the Greeks possess. So, what exactly does Nestor bring to the Greeks? In other words, what does Nestor believe is the correct way to conduct warfare, him being the master strategist? How does he use experience and age to his advantage?

Firstly, Nestor dispenses confidence and a grand plan to the Greeks. This is important because no other Greek leader, prior to Nestor’s proposal in Iliad 4.290 - 4.320, had any concrete idea what to do. Although the will to fight was there, the Greeks lacked direction. Incipit Nestor. Even prior to the arrival of King Agamemnon, Nestor is found rallying his troops. Homer praises this behavior, writing: “[Agamemnon] found [Nestor] preparing his men to fight and marshaling them under their leaders, great Pelagon, Alastor and Chromius, Lord Haemon and Bias, shepherd of the people”. Notice how Nestor uses delegation to accomplish his ends. He places trust on the men directly below him, and then that passes on to other men, till the orders reach the common soldier. Thus, a chain of command is formed. But, this is not any ordinary chain: it is one forged with trust. Nestor understands that in war trust and communication must flow up and down the ranks in order to succeed. War must be conducted smoothly and accurately, no matter if communication travels up or down the ladder.

Because Nestor has established this trust, he can begin positioning and ordering the troops. Now he can unleash his well thought out plan, which is uncomplicated yet effective. In three steps, it’s: 1. Charioteers reside in the front, in order to charge the enemy. 2. In the back of the formation, charioteers and trusted soldiers rear-guard the foot soldiers who tend to be unwilling to do battle. 3. Place inferior troops in the middle of the fray, so they cannot turn away in the heat-of-battle. Nevertheless, Nestor cautions the contingent leaders against arrogance. He warns the charioteers that bravery and skill doesn’t entitle them to charge forward and fight independently. Instead of some vainglorious act of bravery, the charioteer should opt for the basic spear thrust. This is the best tactic.

This strategy teaches us a two main things: 1.) One is not to trust the main blocks of soldiers since they can be inconsistent, unwilling, and generally apathetic. Never trust the hoi polloi. 2.) Leaders are absolutely necessary, but must be constantly mindful of their own vain tendencies. Note that both these lessons revolve around one point: the maintenance of balance and order (a familiar theme). Furthermore, it is very telling that Nestor regards spear thrust - since it’s quick and blunt, controlled and effective, organized and rigid - as the greatest of all tactics. Nestor, ever brimming full of ideas, has other strategies to share in the Iliad. After the prophecies of Calchas (Book Two), with Nestor agreeing by and by that the prophecy is good for the Greeks, he implores Agamemnon, saying: “Lord, think over things carefully and take advise from another. Here is my own: it is not to be put aside lightly. Sort your men out, Agamemnon, into their tribes and clans, so that clan helps clan and the tribes support each other. If you do this and the Greeks comply, you will find out who the cowards and who the brave among your commanders and troops. For each man will be fighting at his brother’s side and you’ll soon find out whether it is the gods’ will that stands between you and the sack of Ilium, or the cowardice of your warriors and their incompetence in battle”.

This statement is very similar to many other themes already covered earlier this paper, yet Nestor, with his experience and wisdom, lends a new seriousness to them. When he speaks, we listen carefully because Nestor always breathes new life into stale concepts. Here, he interpolates this psychological insight: When its your relatives, friends, and neighbors, you’ll be more inclined to fight harder than if you were fighting with people you did not know. Also, this separation of manpower squeezes out the worthy from the worthless - the cowards will bolt from the battlefield. Now, the Greek’s are highly unlikely to lose for they have the spirit and mechanics of success. Once again, in
Book Fourteen, Nestor comes to rescue the Greek’s from a collapse in morale.

All the major leaders (save Ajax) are wounded and out of battle, and they are standing around, depressed, looking out over the field of battle. The text states that when they met Nestor their hearts sank even further. Agamemnon says: “[...] I am afraid imperious Hector is going to carry out the threat he made in a speech to his men - that he would never fall back from the ships to Ilium till he had sent them up in flames and slaughtered us as well”26. But Nestor wisely admits the impotence of the Greeks, for “some such disaster is upon us, and high-thundering Zeus himself could not advert it”27. Instead, he rightly suggests the leaders rest and consider what to do next and not submit like Agamemnon. Nestor effectively ‘breaks-the-ice’ and, therefore, resurrects their spirits.

III. Appendix: “On Parainesis”

“Thus, you must know that there are two kinds of combat one with laws and one with force. The first is proper to man; the second to beasts; but because the first is often not enough, one must have recourse to the second. [...] A prince needs to know how to use both natures”28.

In this appendix29, I hope to address the following questions with frequent references to the text: 1.) Who uses parainesis and why? 2.) Why is it so effective? 3.) How is parainesis carried out? 4.) What arguments are used to rouse and encourage the men? 5.) How does parainesis work on a basic psychological level, or why is parainesis so intoxicating? 6.) What is the relationship between the gods and parainesis. Like I stated before, I hope I will answer these questions earnestly and in full. Thesis: Parainesis Parainesis is certainly a common battle strategy in Homeric war. However, there is one crucial difference between the aforementioned tactics and parainesis. Parainesis appeals to the irrational side of human psychology, whereas leadership, grouping, and experience certainly do not. This does not mean the parainesis is any less effective as a battle tactic, or visa-versa. Parainesis just relies on the other side of man (i.e. Machiavelli’s beast) to accomplish war’s ends. For full and absolute success to occur a correct balance between the rational and irrational, the patterned and unpatterned must occur.

The brilliance of parainesis lies in its ability to turn men into raging beasts driven by instinct and competition with one another. No other tactic of Homeric war turns men’s hearts so swiftly and forcefully than parainesis. Parainesis is insiduous and extremely smart in the way it convinces men to do things they normal would not even consider. It has this infectious quality. For this reason, the generals use and manipulate parainesis to their advantage. When they need something from the common rabble, the leaders address them en masse, get them fired up, and then release them upon the enemy. For this reason, it is clear why the leaders use parainesis: it gets the masses moving and infected with furvor, even if previously they were languishing.

In support of this obsevation, I cite the parainesis of Agamemnon in Book Two. Here we can clearly see the differentiation between the common soldier and the leaders, the hoi polloi and the aristocracy. Agamemnon effectively infects the hoi polloi ... a. Homer writes: “When after some difficulty the troops were brought to order in their seats and had settled down and stopped their chatter, Lord Agamemnon rose holding his sceptre, which Hephesteus himself had made.”3 1. Agamemnon rises while the troops bow to his immense power and persuasion. He relates to his soldiers that Zeus has seriously deluded him and the Greeks will now have to return home in disgrace.

CITATIONS

1998.

1) Iliad 2. 203-4.
2) Iliad 4.224-235
3) Iliad 2.480
4) Where the leaders and major heroes battle, in contrast to the battles of today where the front-lines are populated with common soldiers.
5) Iliad 6.442-48
6) Iliad 6.492-94
7) Iliad 15.282-83
8) Iliad 15.283-85
9) Iliad 15.295-99
10) Iliad 15.361-62
11) Iliad 2.801
12) In all, the Greeks have 29 contingents and the Trojans 15 contingents
13) Iliad 2.485-90, 492-93
14) Iliad 2.474-78
15) Iliad 4.422-38
16) Witnesses of the battle
17) Peloponnesian War 7.44
18) Iliad 12.17-35
19) Peloponnesian War 2.11
20) Odyssey 3. 18-9
21) Iliad 1.250-51
22) Substituting for the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘him’
23) Iliad 4.294-97
24) Iliad 4. 305-09
25) Iliad 2.360-69
26) Iliad 14.40-8
Prince, The. Chapter 28, paragraph 2

- Niccolo Machiavelli’s advice to Lorenzo de Medici

I’ve included this essay on parainesis as an appendix because of its intimate relationship to the previous essay. The two essays share many commonalities, the largest being that they are both concerned with battle technique.