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Thersites Metamorphosed: *Full Metal Jacket's* Private Gomer Pyle

The plot of *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), Stanley Kubrick's contribution to the sub-genre of Vietnam War films, is bipartite. The first part explores the making of soldiers in an American boot camp; the second takes them into a sniper battle. During the first part the story focuses repeatedly on Private Leonard Lawrence [Vincent D'Onofrio], soon nicknamed 'Gomer Pyle' for his country bumpkin manner. With his bald (shaved) head and obese figure, Pyle is an unlikely soldier and inept in almost every exercise. He is overweight, slow of foot, and ignorant. Pyle is risible in the eyes of Gunnery Sergeant Hartman (R. Lee Ermey) and most of his fellow recruits. And he is an affront to military discipline. The classicist thinks immediately of Thersites.

Of course we know little about Homer's Thersites. In *Iliad* 2 Homer describes him as bald and misshapen. He openly criticizes Agamemnon, and after Odysseus punishes him for speaking against the king, Thersites weeps from the pain. This passage is often offered up to those who wish to know something of the lower class, non-aristocratic Homeric warrior. It is usually assumed Thersites is of low birth, but Homer does not make that clear. In fact, the relevant scholion traces his lineage to the royal family of Diomedes. Elsewhere in the epic tradition (*Aethiopis*) Thersites taunts Achilles for his hastily found and lost love for Penthesileia, and he is punished once again by a Homeric king.

Thanks to the Roman, Dares/Dictys tradition reinvigorated by Benoit de Sainte-Maure in the twelfth century, subsequent versions of the Trojan War saga often reduced heroic Greek characters to commit utterly immoral acts, and otherwise unimportant Trojan characters were elevated to be heroic or tragic. This was not so with Thersites, who in various versions, e.g. Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, deteriorates further into a loathsome rogue.

Gomer Pyle's homely appearance is an unmistakable sign that Kubrick differentiates him from 'normal' troops, and like Thersites Pyle becomes the object of enjoyable derision by them. When Pyle ultimately rebels against authority, he, like Thersites once again, is punished severely. But *Full Metal Jacket* offers a modern pacifist's perspective, and in revising the 2700-year old tradition Kubrick first gives Pyle at least one supporter (Private Joker), and then allows Pyle to murder the authority figure that has been tormenting him from the outset of the film, Gunner Sergeant Hartman [R. Lee Ermey]. With this murder the Thersites-type character speaks for twentieth-century, anti-war opinion and utterly destroys the chain of command and the parameters of correct human behavior. The army has dehumanized this bumpkin in order to develop him into a killing machine, but now the tables are turned and their newly developed killing machine kills the discipline and authority on which the army thrives.

Then this modern Thersites turns his weapon on himself, committing suicide in a bloody sequence meant to horrify the viewing audience which now feels pity for the renegade soldier. His blood splattered along the latrine wall leads into the second part of the film.

More blood will be spilled by killing machines, but here one person kills a faceless other because of political and military necessity, not personal enmity. Pyle has offered up his blood and been metamorphosed into a symbol of common virtue punished by the evils of war.