

## Letters

*To the Editor:*

Ms. Constance A. Brown betrays in “Severed Ears: An Image of the Vietnam War” [*WLA*, Spring 1992], a lack of historical perspective.

Unfortunately, wars are about violence and killing, and mutilation of the enemy—deplorable as such behavior is—hardly began, as Ms. Brown seems to believe, with the U.S. Army in Vietnam.

If we are to give as much credence to Homer as Ms. Brown gives to novelists Caputo, O’Brien, Herr, Heinemann, and Vaughn, Achilles was not merely content to kill Hector—he sought total desecration of the corpse.

The Bible tells us that Saul demanded of David “a hundred foreskins of the Philistines” as a sort of dowry for his daughter, Michal, and David, in his exuberance and love for her, outdid himself, slew two hundred Philistines and presented their foreskins to Saul, who thereupon rewarded him with his daughter.

In 1030 A.D., Byzantine General George Maniakes, after his men had slaughtered some eight hundred Saracens, ordered that the noses and ears be severed from the corpses. He then had the grisly parts placed in a sack and presented them proudly, as proof of his victory, to his sovereign. In recognition of his valor, Maniakes was promoted to Governor of all the cities of the upper Euphrates Valley.

The point is, of course, that humans are often bloodthirsty and “indecent,” and that the very nature of war tends to release mankind’s darker side. Ms. Brown, like many self-appointed “scholars” of the Vietnam war, fails to recognize that human history did not begin in the 1960’s and brutality did not originate, as one of Caputo’s characters suggest, with “your average nineteen-year-old American boy.” It developed much, much earlier.

*Alex Vardamis  
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*Ms. Brown replies:*

Obviously, wars by definition entail violence and killing, and brutality and mutilation began millennia before Vietnam. As someone whose primary research has been in the literature of WWI, I am certainly familiar both with widely believed atrocity “myths” and with accounts of real desecration. The image of the severed ear is not mine; it was chosen and given symbolic importance by the five authors I discuss (whom Professor Vardamis groups dismissively as “novelists”—although Herr is not a novelist, three of the writers are veterans, and the works under discussion by Caputo, O’Brien, and Herr are not fictional). Indeed, the naive ignorance Professor Vardamis imputes to me is more properly attributed to the young Philip Caputo, who also read the literature of WWI and whose account is in a significant way about coming to understand the difference between reading of the horrors of war and becoming part of them.

I do not see entirely the point of Professor Vardamis’s list of atrocities in myth and history. My article is not about war and mankind; it is about a particular image in a particular war and how authors use that image. Nor do I—or the discussed authors—share Professor Vardamis’s apparent complacency about the fact that war releases mankind’s darker side. If “historical perspective” leads us to excuse savage behavior as inevitable, it does not seem a very useful tool. Euripides also knew that human history had not begun in his lifetime, yet he challenged his contemporaries to examine clear-sightedly why nations go to war and what happens to their soldiers. Writers like Caputo, O’Brien, Herr, Heinemann, and Vaughn set us that same challenge.