

Men and Women, Love and War * **

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*All citations from Andromache, Hector, and other Trojan War figures are from The Iliad of Homer, translated by Samuel Butler, *The Great Books*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., Chicago, 1952

** This article was written shortly after the Iraqi army invaded the country of Kuwait (Aug., 1990). In response, an international coalition of forces, headed by the U.S., attacked the Iraqi army. The resulting armed conflict, called the Gulf War, is also known as Operation Desert Shield, Aug., 1990 – Jan., 1991 and Operation Desert Storm. Jan., 1991- Feb., 1991. At the time, the majority of combat troops were males.

"A year ago my husband was ordered to Germany. I took it one day at a time, turning to God and my friends. Now he's in Saudi."

She gulps, holding back the tears.

"Whenever I think about making love with him and all our plans for a baby, I . . ."

Still no tears. Other military wives, however, cannot keep a "stiff upper lip." Crying, screaming, pleading -- they protest the lordship of the military over their lives.

Consider Andromache, wife of Hector, one of the most valiant soldiers of the Trojan War. Although Hector was a Trojan, he did not believe the war against the Greeks. Yet once his city decided to fight, he led almost every battle.

At first Andromache did not protest. But since the Greeks had already killed her parents and her seven brothers, once it became obvious that Troy was doomed, she begged Hector to withdraw from battle.

"Andromache . . . stood by [Hector] weeping and taking his hand in her own. 'Dear husband,' said she, 'Your valor will bring you to destruction; think on your infant son, and on my hapless self who 'ere long shall be your widow -- for the [Greeks] will set upon you in a body and kill you. It would be better for

me, should I lose you, to lie dead and buried, for I shall have nothing left to comfort me when you are gone, save only sorrow.

"Hector -- you who to me are father, mother, brother, and dear husband -- have mercy upon me. . . . Stay here, make not your child fatherless, and your wife a widow."

"And Hector answered, 'Wife, I too have thought upon all this, but with what face should I look upon the Trojans, men or women, if I shirked battle like a coward? I cannot do so: I know nothing save to fight bravely in the forefront of the Trojan host. [Yet] well do I know that the day will surely come when mighty [Troy] shall be destroyed.

"But for none of these do I grieve as for you, when the day shall come on which . . . one of the [Greeks] shall rob you forever of your freedom and bear you weeping away [into slavery, where you will be treated] brutally by some cruel task-master."

Hector then lifted his small son towards the heavens, "Zeus, grant that this, my child, may be even as myself, chief among the Trojans; let him be not less excellent in strength. May he bring back the blood stained spoils of him whom he has laid low, and let his mother's heart be glad."

But Andromache is not like the ancient Spartan women who commanded their sons to: "Come back with your shield victorious or come back on it." Nowhere in the Iliad does she say she wants more killing, but rather for Hector to remain alive.

So why does Hector think that "blood stained spoils" are going to make Andromache glad? Was Hector simply not listening to her? Or was he so imbued with loyalty to his city and the warrior ethic that he simply could not comprehend what she was talking about? Or perhaps the conflict between his loyalty to his city and his loyalty to his family was so unbearable that he simply had to choose one of them.

As a traditional woman, the essence of Andromache's existence were her family and home. Hector was a family man too. An exceptionally devoted one at that. Yet when his wife reminded him that he had obligations not only to his troops and city, but to his family, Hector could not hear her. To him, military and patriotic values were not only fused, but supreme.

In Hindu philosophy there are five orders of love. They are, in order of importance, first, love of God, a supreme being, or something larger than oneself (e.g., one's country or religion); secondly, love of friends (especially, comrades in arms); thirdly, love of one's children; fourthly, love of one's wife; and lastly, love of one's illicit lover.

Notice that loving one's friends (presumably male friends) is considered superior to loving one's wife and children. Most likely this rank-ordering was made by Hindu men, not Hindu women. Had Hindu women been involved, loving one's family would probably not be at the end of the list.

In general, Hindu women, like many other women, are expected to put their family obligations first. In fact, for some Hindu women (as for some traditional Christian, Muslim, and Jewish women) dedication to the family is considered not only a religious duty, but a patriotic one.

In this age of military Barbie dolls and female combatants, however, there are no hard and fast divisions between men and women regarding how they prioritize their loves. While some mothers today gladly offer up their children's lives for their country, other mothers become involved in peace movements or threaten suicide should a child decide to enlist.

Men are divided too. For example, since the Gulf War started, increasing numbers of men are volunteering for military duty. At the same time, however, many men hope to avoid the military at all costs--for the sake of their families.

Nevertheless, some distinctions along traditional sex line remain. While both parents may love a child intensely, being a mother is considered to be a woman's "job," her major identity, even if she does work outside the home. When that child dies in combat, the mother loses not only her child, but her major life work--the object of years of care, creativity, physical labor, and personal sacrifice. All that effort blown up in a matter of seconds!

The parallel for fathers would be if they lost not only their child, but their bank account and their job as well. This is not to say that fathers are not devastated by the loss of a son or daughter in combat. Some fathers grieve so deeply that they develop psychosomatic illnesses or have heart attacks or strokes.

During the course of the Trojan War, the famed hero of the Greeks, Achilles, loses his armor. So his mother runs to Hephaestus (commonly known as Vulcan) and asks him to make her son the most splendid shield the world has ever seen.

On this shield Hephaestus renders, “a vision how beautiful the world might be if there were no [war]. It is a garden of earthly delights. [It contains] the soft colors of spring, tilled fields and . . . grapevines, dancing and music -- filling us with longing and sadness for we do not know how to get from the reality of the destruction to that vision of peace.” (Eli Sagan, The Lust To Annihilate: A Psychoanalytic Study of Violence in Ancient Greek Culture, Psychohistory Press, Publishers, N.Y. 1979, p. 14-15)

That war is the enemy of farming, festivities, and other peace time activities is obvious. Less obvious, and to some, less important (but not unimportant to many women) is that war is also the enemy of love and lovemaking. Returning soldiers suffering from combat trauma are often too psychologically or physiologically scarred to enjoy the physical pleasures of lovemaking.

Yet many women deeply believe that their ultimate fulfillment lies in loving a man. One can only imagine the loneliness and desolation experienced by women for whom war has stolen the opportunity to love and be loved. In some societies, the death toll has been so high that scores of women have been left alone.

Consider the especially heavy casualties Russia and Greece suffered during WW2; and Iran and Iraq, during their recent eight year war. Consider also the Paraguayan War. The pre-war population of Paraguay was 525,000. But the post-war population was 221,000, of which only 29,000 were adult males. (“Wars That Went On and On,” by Joel Achenback, *The Washington Post*, Thursday, January 24, 1991, p. B2)

During the Trojan War, the warrior-goddess, Athena, enjoys planning strategy, encouraging warriors, and watching the fight. But Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty, and sensuality in all its forms (including the pleasures of sight, smell, and taste, as well as touch) only enters the combat arena to save her son, Aeneas, and her favorite, Paris. And when, on one occasion, Aphrodite is wounded by an arrow, she cries

like a baby.

In contrast, Athena never cries. She never plays either. While Aphrodite flirts, laughs, and enjoys life, Athena is dead serious, as is appropriate for a goddess who loves war. Needless to say, the heaviness of war makes love, play, and other forms of lightheartedness assume the status of frivolities. Even when people do "play" during war time, frequently their play is a form of escape.

In Myths to Live By, Joseph Campbell, the brilliant student of ancient legends and civilizations, notes that those few ancient societies that did not invest heavily in a defense system were short-lived. Hence, he concludes, war, although distasteful, is a necessary evil.

The debate about the necessity of war is beyond the scope of this article. However, for war to be eliminated, certain admittedly naïve and impossible conditions would have to be met. First, the political, economic, and other inequalities that serve to trigger wars and fuel the aggression of combatants would need to be significantly reduced.

Secondly, sexism and rigid sex role socialization would also need to be eliminated. That way, men would be able to separate their sense of masculinity from aggression and be able to adopt a definition of power that minimized the need to dominate and included the power of love, cooperation, and compromise.

A third impossible condition would be the elimination of family violence -- child abuse, wife abuse, incest, etc. Battle heat, killing fever, or what Sagan calls "the lust to annihilate" (Sagan, op. cit.), is often fed by the individual warrior's leftover rage from having been abused or witnessing domestic abuse as a child.

Research indicates that girls tend to be sexually abused more often than boys at home, but that boys tend to receive more physical abuse. Physical abuse does not refer to a one time slap or spanking, but to repeated blows over time, usually accompanied by verbal denigration and other forms of emasculation. In addition, an alarming number of boys are sexually abused before the age of 18.

These kinds of prior victimization set the stage for the desire to be powerful, rather than powerless, as one was as a child. Saddam Hussein was a physically abused child. Perhaps this contributes to his

enormous need to be powerful and in control. Since sexism underlies family violence, if advances are made in eliminating sexism, some of the emotional reasons for war may be reduced.

Curbing war would also require that war, like other forms violence, be deglamorized. Perhaps a quick tour around a soldier's hospital or amputee ward might help rectify the Hollywood myth that war is some kind of giant football game. There are no pretty deaths, no pretty injuries or dismemberments. And, excuse me John Wayne, but for those who have been physically and/or psychologically scarred by war and for those who love them, there are few happy endings. Just a lot of pain.