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Un-silencing the Girls: Critical Classical Reception in Feminist Retellings of Greek Myths

Abstract In recent feminist retellings of Greek myths, the Trojan War has become the preferred mytho-historical setting for reexamining gender performativity in the ancient world. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are foundational texts for how Western culture has historically characterized heroic masculinity, and, in contrast, tragic femininity. Modern novels such as Pat Barker's *Silence of the Girls* (2018), its sequel *Women of Troy* (2021), and Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships* (2019) turn the focus to the largely silent women of these epics. Through the voices of figures such as Briseis and Andromache, Barker and Haynes adopt a critical narrative of masculine ideals, including the glamorization of war and brutality, in order to highlight women's endurance of sexual violence and victimization as a result of men's pursuit of glory.

As this article explores, by enabling the once silenced women of Troy to voice their experiences of rape and enslavement, these three modern retellings challenge both ancient and contemporary notions of ideal masculinity while further highlighting the historical longevity of sexual violence against women as a consequence of men's wars.

Keywords Epic, Trojan Women, Rape, Toxic Masculinity, Tragic Femininity

INTRODUCTION

And I do what countless women before me have been forced to do. I spread my legs for the man who killed my husband and my brothers.¹

So Briseis of Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* (2018) bitterly thinks as she silently witnesses the proud king of Troy, Priam, beg great Achilles to return the body of his beloved dead son, Hector, so that Priam may give him the proper burial rites owed to the Trojan prince. That Briseis is allowed to remain present for Priam's unprecedented visit to his enemy's camp is by no means a mark of distinction for her. While Briseis is a former princess given to Achilles as a high prize for his victories in war, ultimately, she is his slave, of no more value or consideration than any other object in his possession, perhaps even less so. Her presence is both unnoticeable and unnoteworthy until Achilles needs her to perform a duty. But for all her silence during the scene, her suffering is painfully loud to the audience. It is a startlingly blunt and visceral reaction to Priam's declaration that he has done "what no man before me has ever done, I kiss the hands of the man who killed my son,"² from an otherwise self-contained figure who prides herself on not falling victim to the physical and emotional devastation wrought upon herself and her people after the Greek army laid destruction to her city, Lyrnessus. It is a poignant and stark reminder that while the men on both sides of war defend their honor and seek eternal glory, the victims of their war, particularly the women who are taken captive, face far more traumatic consequences than having merely to kiss the hands of their enemy.

This theme runs through Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* and its sequel, *The Women of Troy* (2022), as well as through Natalie Haynes's *A Thousand Ships* (2019).³ All three novels, written by women authors, re-tell the fall of Troy from the perspectives of the women who until now had been largely if not completely silent in the Homeric epic, the *Iliad*. Barker and Haynes are part of a growing group of women authors reimagining classical myths which almost exclusively prioritize the masculine perspective and often perpetuate traditional patriarchal and misogynistic characterizations of women. Authors such as Margaret Atwood, Madeline Miller, Jennifer Saint, Costanza Casati, and Claire North, as well as Pat

1 Barker (2018) 240.

2 Barker (2018) 230 & 240. Cf. *Il.* 24.625–628.

3 Henceforth abbreviated as *TSG*, *TWT*, and *ATS*, respectively.

Barker and Natalie Haynes, are engaging in the feminist revision of myths, what Shuvra Sen describes as analogous to “the re-arrogation of the male privilege with a view to achieving female intents and goals.”⁴ Retelling these myths from a female point of view “with an added feminist edge,” as Shuvra Sen describes it, “enables the women authors to recreate the images of women in a different way to how they are represented in traditional classical literature composed by male writers,” while also having the “profound potential not only to reveal how much the traditional mythical literary texts written from a male perspective contribute to the suppression of women, but also challenge the androcentric premise of these cultural texts.”⁵ The French feminist critic H el ene Cixous writes that, “women’s weapon is the word, because they talk, talk endlessly, chatter, overflow with sound, mouth-sound: but they don’t actually *speak* , they have nothing to say. They always inhabit the place of silence, or at most make it echo with their singing.”⁶ Cixous rallies women who write to write *as women* , to not deny the difference between masculine and feminine writing because doing so sustains, however unintentionally, the masculine voice which silences the feminine voice: “to be signed with a woman’s name doesn’t necessarily make a piece of writing feminine.”⁷ A call for women to give voice to women can rewrite history, “But first she would have to *speak* [.]”⁸

Barker and Haynes answer Cixous’s call to give voice to silenced women through their retellings of the Trojan War and its aftermath. In giving voice to the female victims of the Trojan War who suffered rape and enslavement, Barker and Haynes contribute to a change in rape scripts, accomplished by what Hesford describes as publicly redefining “the experience of rape from the victim’s perspective, rather than from the perspective of the rapist,”⁹ which, from

4 Shuvra Sen (2020) 46.

5 Shuvra Sen (2020) 46.

6 Cixous (1981) 49.

7 Cixous (1981) 51–52. Cixous acknowledges that it can also happen that masculine writing does not automatically exclude femininity.

8 Cixous (1981) 50. See also Solnit (2017) 24 who writes that “by redefining whose voice is valued, we redefine our society and its values.” Swanson adds, “This reclamation of voice is also a gesture toward rebuilding subjectivities profoundly damaged in the foundational act and cultural consequences of wartime rape,” (2019) 1621.

9 Hesford (1999) 203.

a literary standpoint, translates into “point of view, narrative, or testimonial voice, literary keys to calibrating audience response.”¹⁰ In the context of wartime rape, Swanson adds that “the embrace of the survivor’s point of view demands the restoration of her body/mind/soul to the story of what was, the wresting of that story from men who would deny it[.]”¹¹ Barker and Haynes both restore the Trojan women’s bodies/minds/souls to the Homeric epic by unapologetically and at times graphically addressing their traumatic experiences of rape and enslavement at the hands of the men who killed their husbands, brothers, and sons. Barker’s novels are both told primarily from Briseis’s point of view, while Haynes’s is told from multiple women’s points of view, including not just the former royal Trojan women such as Hecuba, Andromache, and Cassandra, but also Helen, Creusa, Iphigenia, and Penelope. The narrator is Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, as she “sings” to the poet (presumably Homer, though not explicitly identified, only hinted at)¹² who requests her guidance and inspiration to recite his poem, though she is reluctant to do so and only helps if he is willing to accept that war is a “web which stretches out to the furthest parts of the world, drawing everyone into itself,”¹³ not just the heroes, and certainly, if not most importantly, including the otherwise footnoted Trojan women. Interwoven into Calliope’s narration are the women’s stories, regardless, or rather, in spite of, the poet’s reluctance to give them voice.

This article examines the ways in which these three feminist retellings of the Trojan War critically assess the heroic masculinity lauded throughout the Homeric epic as opposed to the tragic femininity which the heroines embody as a consequence of their becoming victims to men’s blind pursuit of victory and glory. The first section considers how feminist retellings of epic myths represent a commentary on modern notions of toxic masculinity and rape culture, and how we may consider both in a classical context. The next section explores how Barker’s and Haynes’s novels relate epic heroism to toxic masculinity in order to subvert Homeric heroic ideals and contrast them with the tragic heroic

10 Swanson (2019) 1622. See also Goff (2022) 4.

11 Swanson (2019) 1622.

12 Calliope describes the unidentified bard as, “old, this man. Older than his hard-edged voice suggests,” and his eyes are “closed for a moment with the intensity of his prayer,” though his eyes are never noted to be open throughout the remainder of Calliope’s narration, suggesting that he is in fact blind; Haynes (2019) 2.

13 Haynes (2019) 109.

femininity exhibited by the once largely silent and absent female victims of the Trojan War.¹⁴ The next section discusses specific characterizations of Achilles in both Barker and Haynes as the epitome of the toxic masculinity/epic heroism dichotomy, as well as of select women who become the unsung heroines of the epic, particularly Briseis. The final section considers how Barker's and Haynes's descriptions of wartime rape and the female victims' traumas echo the traumas experienced by female victims of modern wartime/genocidal rape, emphasizing the historical longevity of sexual violence against women as a consequence of men's wars.

TOXIC MASCULINITY THEN & NOW

In a 2021 NPR author interview, Haynes described her inspiration to write *ATS*, noting that it was not an ancient text or artwork that inspired her, but rather a documentary shown at the Cannes Film Festival about restorative justice in Rwanda:

What I looked at was how these women who had obviously survived the war insofar as they were still alive, but they had been brutalized in the waging of that war... And they were then being asked essentially to live next door to the man who had killed their relatives and brutalized their bodies...It doesn't look to me like these women are receiving any kind of justice. It looks like they're having to tolerate what they're given because there's no alternative. That theme ran through writing *A Thousand Ships* for me.¹⁵

Similarly, in a 2018 *Publishers Weekly* interview, Barker noted that the "issues at stake in *The Silence* are also being played out in modern society. What I felt the last few months of working on the book, and editing it, was that it seemed to become more and more topical."¹⁶ The events in *TSG* are on par with "the very worst atrocities that have happened, or are happening, in the modern world – we

¹⁴ In this article, I focus on Briseis and the Trojan women in both Barker's and Haynes's novels for comparison's sake.

¹⁵ Haynes interviewed by Garcia-Navarro (2021).

¹⁶ Barker interviewed by Reese (2018).

shouldn't kid ourselves about that at all."¹⁷ Barker also cites the Yazidi women in Syria and Iraq as examples of modern slavery,¹⁸ and wrote *TSG* and *TWT* "in awareness of the tens of thousands of women raped during the Bosnian conflict."¹⁹ Barker and Haynes draw a connection between modern crises of the rape and enslavement of women occurring as a result of wartime conflicts with the rape and enslavement evident in the Homeric epics experienced by the Trojan women. Though the epics and the characters therein are mythological, they are mytho-historical in the sense that they reveal contemporaneous ideals of masculinity and femininity, as well as societal and cultural values surrounding violence and war, notably from a male perspective. In retelling the events and the aftermath of the Trojan War through the women's perspectives, Barker and Haynes draw stark attention to the striking similarities between the ancient (Greek) treatment of female victims of war and modern female victims of war, compelling modern audiences of an ancient story to consider how and why behaviors and attitudes that justified the rape and enslavement of women as a result of war as far back as the Homeric historical past persist in modern conflicts.

The subversion of "heroic masculinity"/"epic heroism" from a modern female perspective makes for a compelling comparison with the modern concept of "toxic masculinity." While not all characteristics of heroic masculinity are inherently negative, such as honor and courage, and would not have been considered toxic in the relevant time period, it is the attitudes and behaviors in pursuit of these characteristics that often reveal a darker side to notions of masculinity which threatens/suppresses/even violates others, particularly the embodiment of masculinity's opposite (femininity, ergo women). These attitudes and behaviors manifest in modern toxic masculinity and, consequently, in modern rape culture. Toxic masculinity is an underlying factor in many cases of sexual assault, and thus when we speak of toxic masculinity in the Homeric context, we inevitably also encounter rape culture, which is evident in *TSG*, *TWT*, and *ATS*. The definition of both terms and their application to cultures of antiquity is therefore worth considering, particularly in response to objections of anachronistic theoretical frameworks.

¹⁷ Barker interviewed by Reese (2018).

¹⁸ Reese (2018).

¹⁹ Hughes-Hallett (2021). See also Graham-Harrison (2018) on the Vilina Vlas rape camp where, during the Višegrad massacres in the Bosnian War of the 1990s, Bosniak civilian prisoners were tortured and murdered and women were raped.

Hegemonic and Toxic Masculinity

On the value of “anachronistic” formulations for understanding the past, a timely and recent publication addresses this methodology for examining toxic masculinity in the ancient Mediterranean: *Toxic Masculinity in the Ancient World* (2024).²⁰ The editors, Racette-Campbell and McMaster, distinguish between hegemonic masculinity and toxic masculinity and map a theoretical framework for examining toxic masculinity in the ancient world. Hegemonic masculinity “refers to a set of values, activities and attitudes that are associated with the most acceptable fulfilment of a mainstream style of manhood in any given society or culture.”²¹ While hegemonic values are culturally specific, in modern Western cultures these values often include “the belief that men are superior to and dominant over women and other groups perceived as lesser; a willingness to use violence; a lack of emotional openness; and avoidance of displays of emotions other than anger.”²² Hegemonic masculinity is not inherently toxic, but it can encourage characteristics of toxic masculinity, which arises when hegemonic masculinity “is taken to extremes or practised by men who lack other forms of hegemonic power, usually due to their class, race, ethnicity, religion or some other part of their life experience.”²³ Hegemonic masculinity is toxic when it is “harmful to other (protected) individuals, to one’s community or to oneself,” and an especially relevant example of when it becomes toxic is violence against women which is “predicated on beliefs of male superiority and control, and the belief that violence is a legitimate means for asserting these[.]”²⁴ These beliefs are often at the heart of patriarchal value systems. Per Nicholls: “patriarchal thinking normalises for men an entitlement to authority – a belief in their own fitness to rule, to set the terms of engagement in their social relations – and a sexual entitlement.”²⁵ The belief in sexual entitlement is especially relevant to the current discussion as will become evident in later sections.

20 Racette-Campbell/McMaster (eds.) (2024).

21 Racette-Campbell/McMaster (2024) 2. The seminal work on hegemonic masculinity is Connell (1995).

22 Racette-Campbell/McMaster (2024) 2.

23 Racette-Campbell/McMaster (2024) 3.

24 Racette-Campbell/McMaster (2024) 3.

25 Nicholls (2021) 70.

Studies on toxic masculinity build upon the relatively recent scholarship on masculinity in the ancient world. This subcategory of gender and sexuality studies examines how masculinity was then understood to be acquired through learning and experience/actions (and was therefore variable and capable of being lost); it was dependent on one's ability to continuously and successfully project socially prescribed masculinity and on whether that projection was accepted by one's contemporaries.²⁶ By examining toxic masculinity as a product of hegemonic masculinity, Racette-Campbell/McMaster and the volume's contributing authors aim to determine whether the terminology can be successfully applied to this ancient (largely Greek and Roman) understanding of, and performance of masculinity, ultimately demonstrating that the ancient authors did recognize and critique "the toxic potential in certain aspects of masculinity."²⁷ Some research finds that the misogyny inherent in toxic masculinity comes through in both ancient and modern attitudes toward rape and rape victims,²⁸ while other research finds that toxic masculinity can be perceived in the source material, but not without contextual modification.²⁹

Toxic Masculinity & Rape Culture

Per Burnett, rape culture exists "when rape, or sexual assault, is a normalized expectation."³⁰ It is "an intersectional phenomenon that crosses gender, race, ability, ethnicity, [and] sexuality" wherein "men are taught to be dominant, sexually aggressive, and powerful," thereby creating an environment that "fosters the idea that rape is part of being a man" while often sympathizing with the rapist and blaming the victim.³¹ Societies which foster behaviors or attitudes that en-

²⁶ Racette-Campbell/McMaster (2024) 3. See Foxhall/Salmon (eds.) (1998), Gleason (1998), Nagy (1999) and (2013), Foxhall/Salmon (eds.) (2011), and Rosen/Sluiter (eds.) (2003).

²⁷ Racette-Campbell/McMaster (2024) 9.

²⁸ Ex. Gellar-Goad (2024) 243–256.

²⁹ Ex. Ager (2024) 231–242.

³⁰ Burnett (2016) 1. See also Nicholls (2021).

³¹ Burnett (2016) 1, 1–5.

able sexual violence can therefore be considered as having a rape culture. One of the first scholars to ascribe rape culture to antiquity is Rabinowitz, who in her analysis of Greek tragedy remarks that “the prominence of rape in the heroic corpus may have the effect of normalizing rape.”³² However, scholars such as Lape and Harris contend that to discuss rape in an ancient context, specifically an Athenian context in their respective analyses, is inherently flawed due to modern projections of cultural and moral ideologies.³³ Koutsopetrou-Møller disagrees, arguing that their position presupposes “an unjustified disruption of the historical phenomenon of rape,” and impedes “any sort of causal explanations, which is...possible only by using the comparative method.”³⁴ Instead, we may consider rape as the term most relevant for comparing the phenomenon as it manifests both in the past and in the present, as Bal suggests and Rabinowitz concurs.³⁵

Koutsopetrou-Møller considers the application of the term “rape culture” to antiquity within Classical Athens, examining the legal treatment of rape and comparing it to the literary evidence in Athenian plays where the performance of female rape deviates from the content of the law.³⁶ Koutsopetrou-Møller contrasts the Athenian legal system, which “wilfully undercut the traumatic impact of rape on its female survivors, espousing only attitudes that would keep patriarchy alive,”³⁷ with Classical literature, which discusses “sexual violation of women in different terms, revealing that actual social practices could diverge significantly from the official legal framework, and take into account victims’ feelings.”³⁸ Koutsopetrou-Møller notes that Athenian law considered rape an offense only insofar as it violated the honor of the female victim’s husband (or father, or *kyrios*, the primary male guardian) and that of the *oikos* he con-

32 Rabinowitz (2011) 16.

33 Lape (2001); Harris (2006). See also Konstan (1994).

34 Koutsopetrou-Møller (2021) 2.

35 Bal (1994) 38: “I would like to take a closer look at the contested term, ‘rape’. In other words, I want to *confront* the phenomenon through the word we *would* use if we were to speak ‘ethnocentrically’ and see what happens”; Rabinowitz (2011) 6, citing Bal (1994).

36 Koutsopetrou-Møller (2021).

37 Koutsopetrou-Møller (2021) 2.

38 Koutsopetrou-Møller (2021) 17.

trolled and to which she belonged.³⁹ In contrast, Koutsopetrou-Møller demonstrates that Athenian literature considers the physical and emotional traumas experienced by female rape victims, and that these traumas are characteristic of toxic masculinity and rape culture present today, including the victims' feelings of guilt and shame, their reluctance to come forward, victim-blaming/doubling, and rape apologists/leniency for rapists.⁴⁰

Koutsopetrou-Møller's comparison of Classical Athenian law and literature is noteworthy because she demonstrates that the modern terminology is informative for how we may situate the traumas experienced by female victims of wartime rape today as historically undisrupted and shared traumas, a theme which permeates Barker's and Haynes's respective novels. As Swanson notes, rape "gains meaning through a long history of culturally coded shame, silence, and repression in which gendered subjectivities of victim and perpetrator are assigned according to age-old scripts of hegemonic masculinity."⁴¹ These gendered subjectivities equate female victims of modern rape culture with shame, silence, repression, and liability, in opposition to those which equate male rapists with control, entitlement, and inculpability. These "culturally coded" gendered subjectivities are products of toxic masculinity (and thus by-products of hegemonic masculinity) and are identifiable in ancient cultures as much as they are in modern ones. The similarities between the ancient attitudes and behaviors which constitute rape to the attitudes and behaviors modernity define as distinctive of rape enable us to characterize cultures of antiquity as embodying "rape cultures." This characterization consequently enables writers such as Barker and Haynes to confidently situate ancient women, including mythological women, within a recognizable (and relatable) cultural context from both an ancient and modern perspective. The term "rape culture" may be a modern phenomenon, but the characteristics and precedents thereof, including toxic masculinity, are recognizably ancient in their conception.

³⁹ Koutsopetrou-Møller (2021) 9–13. On the punishments for rape, cf. Ogden (1997) 30 & Koutsopetrou-Møller (2021) 17. On the language of rape, see Gaca (2015) and Robson (2013) 103.

⁴⁰ Koutsopetrou-Møller (2021) 18, examining Euripides's *Ion* & *Auge*, and Aeschylus's *Ag.*

⁴¹ Swanson (2019) 1614.

THE SUBVERSION OF HEROIC IDEALS & TRAGIC FEMININE HEROISM

In *TSG*, when the Greeks sack the city of Lyrnessus during their campaign against Troy, the Lyrnessian women take refuge in the citadel, common women and slaves in the basement and members of royal and aristocratic families on the top floor. From within, the ominous battle cry of Achilles can be heard, drawing ever closer. As Briseis, the titular female character throughout Barker's novel, awaits the unspoken yet expected defeat with the other women, she notes that, "The air was heavy with the foreknowledge of what we would have to face."⁴² Similarly, in *ATS*, the Trojan women huddle together on the shores while the Greeks finish pillaging Troy, waiting to be divided amongst the soldiers, and "all knew that they would never know solitude again," because "When a war ended, the men lost their lives. But the women lost everything else. And victory had made the Greeks no kinder."⁴³ The women, Lyrnessian and Trojan,⁴⁴ understand that repeated rape and enslavement at the hands of their enemies await them, even girls "as young as nine and ten would not be spared."⁴⁵

All of the women express a foreknowledge based on real ancient practice. Gaca defines the practice of aggravated rape and keeping the victims alive, or of aggravated rape and killing the victims or leaving them to die, and of targeting this practice against women and girls belonging to peoples who have been the focus of martial aggression, as "populace-ravaging warfare."⁴⁶ Previously free-born women and girls of a conquered society became war captives and were thus subject to repeated rape and enslavement as a customary and commonly top-down martial practice.⁴⁷ As Fallon notes, due to the sociocultural value placed on women, "the perception that a woman's sexual virtue is a matter of public

⁴² Barker (2018) 5.

⁴³ Haynes (2019) 34.

⁴⁴ Forthwith, all of the captive women will be referred to collectively as the "Trojan women."

⁴⁵ Barker (2018) 5.

⁴⁶ Gaca (2015) 279.

⁴⁷ Gaca (2015), 280–81. This practice and the closely related practice of "andrapodizing" (the enslavement of specific groups of people who do not possess the abilities to fight back, cf. Gaca 2010) are historically corroborated by Herodotus (1.66.3–4, 8.33), Thucydides (3.28.2, 3.35.1–36.6, 3.49.1–50.3, 5.3.4, 5.32.1, 5.116, 6.62.3), and Xenophon (*Kyr.* 7.5.73, *Mem.* 2.2.2 and

ownership often renders it possible to translate an attack against one woman into an attack against an entire community.”⁴⁸ More pointedly, the “‘pollution’ of survivors via the perceived contamination of their body by enemy rape is considered destructive for both the individual and the community, rendering rape an effective weapon of devastation.”⁴⁹ To rape and enslave the Trojan women and to bear children by them renders her former community barren.

Throughout *TSG*, *TWT*, and *ATS*, Barker and Haynes examine the traumas the Trojan women experience through the female victims’ perspectives. As a result, the victory of the Greeks and the glory of the epic heroes, so lauded in Homer and throughout Western cultures, become highly scrutinized. Heroic masculinity begins to take the shape of a far more insidious and recognizably modern phenomenon: toxic masculinity. The Greek camp where the Trojan women are taken and distributed amongst the soldiers is, at its most fundamental, a “rape camp.”⁵⁰ Barker and Haynes, in revealing the toxicity of the epic heroes and underscoring the reality of wartime rape culture, subvert heroic masculinity and instead emphasize the heroism of tragic femininity. Tragic femininity relates to heroines of Greek tragedy who are commonly figures from or related to the Homeric epics (notably the Trojan women), and who are usually characterized as women who suffer the consequences of male decisions and actions.⁵¹ These women, in contending with insurmountable situations, may respond with either vengeful violence of their own, by accepting their fates (to die), or by enduring and surviving (usually with divine intervention).⁵²

Barker and Haynes draw upon this tragic femininity in the sense that what the Trojan women endure is representative of real ancient women who, historically, were raped and enslaved as both a strategy and a result of war. However,

4.2.15). One of my previous publications also examines these practices in relation to the ideology of male victory in the *Iliad* and the role the captive women play in securing this ideology; cf. King (2022).

48 Fallon (2018) 72. See also Shanks/Schull (2000), cited by Fallon.

49 Fallon (2018) 72. See also Sheth (2015) 338, 341, cited by Fallon.

50 As Barker notes, cf. (2018) 291.

51 Roisman (2021).

52 Roisman (2021). On the first response, Clytemnestra and Hecuba are relevant examples. On the second, Alcestis is a loosely related example as the mother of one of the Greek soldiers, Eumelus, who participated in the Trojan War and was in the Trojan horse. On the third, Helen is a relevant example.

through the Trojan women's experiences, the heroism of their resilience becomes clearer, their voices, in effect, louder. It is a heroism specific to femininity, one borne from experiences only these ancient women would have endured in contrast to what defined "heroic" hegemonic masculinity. In what follows, I discuss examples through which Barker and Haynes undermine epic heroic masculinity and instead highlight tragic heroic femininity.

Heroic/Toxic Masculinity

The Trojan women make countless references to the dubious honor of the Greek army in general. In *TSG*, while she is waiting for Achilles to return to his room the first night after being given to him as his prize, Briseis observes Achilles and Patroclus from a secluded cupboard: "Patroclus went into the other room, followed almost immediately by Achilles, who threw his arm across his friend's shoulders, laughing in triumph and relief. Another successful raid, another city destroyed, men and boys killed, women and girls enslaved – all in all, a good day. And there was still night to come."⁵³ The mockery in Briseis's voice is clear. As she awaits her first night with her new master, knowing that he will rape her in a claim to his sexual rights over her body as his war prize just like all of the other captured women awaiting the same fate (if they have not already endured it), Achilles and his fellow soldiers celebrate. Briseis describes the triumph of the sack of Lyrnessus as carrying no more consequence to the men than simply another good day's work. For the Greek army, the devastation they have wreaked is a sign of victory, the emotional and physical traumas experienced by the survivors, inconsequential. If anything, the men look forward to the night as a reward for their triumphs in battle.⁵⁴ Briseis, as with the other women, knows what the night has in store for her just as much as she understands that there is no escaping it. But the Greek soldiers' revelry on a night of what will prove for the captured women to be even further physical and emotional devastation on the heels of losing their families, their homes, and (for some) their freedoms, is salt on a deep and unhealing wound.

⁵³ Barker (2018) 23.

⁵⁴ Barker (2018) 17–18, 22.

In *ATS*, Briseis's sentiments toward the Greek army at large are echoed by other female characters. After the Greeks find and bring Polydorus's corpse before his mother, Hecuba, Odysseus approaches the former queen of Troy and asks whether she has any more sons. With contempt, Hecuba responds, "I had many other sons...But you Greeks have killed them all, one after another, like a pack of wolves."⁵⁵ But the discovery of Polydorus's corpse leads the Greeks to wonder whether there are more sons of Priam and Hecuba who may have survived, one of whom may "try to take his vengeance upon the Greeks, in years to come."⁵⁶ The exchange between Hecuba and Odysseus captures Odysseus's indifference to Hecuba's suffering as well as Hecuba's hatred for the Greeks, the former representative of the Greek army's general apathy toward the sufferings of the captured women and their fallen city, and the latter of the women's pain made worse by their enemy's certainty in there being no other path to victory but savagely slaying all of the men, children included, and enslaving all of the women.

H – You think I might have sent more sons away for safekeeping.

O – Not so safe, perhaps.

H – I have only daughters now...All my boys are gone. Do you hear me? All of them.

O – You lost a war, madam.

H – You could have ransomed my sons. You chose to kill them.

O – With what could you have paid the ransom? *He laughed, his head tilting back towards the sky.* All your treasure belongs to us now.

H – Is this an example of the great heroism of the Greeks?...Gloating over an old woman whose sons have all been slaughtered?⁵⁷

Hecuba mocks the supposed "great heroism" of her enemies, questioning whether men of true honor would treat others, even their enemies, with such disgrace and lack of mercy. The Trojans lost a war, yes, but did the Greeks lose their honor?

Briseis also decries the Greeks' actions in an emotional and forthright discussion with Patroclus. In response to Patroclus asserting that Lyrnessus should

⁵⁵ Haynes (2019) 196.

⁵⁶ Haynes (2019) 197.

⁵⁷ Haynes (2019) 196. Format of the text adapted by present author.

have accepted its place in Achilles's story and surrendered, Briseis responds: "The lives of my family cannot be measured by their deaths. And your friend should hope the bards treat him so kindly. Many men would see no glory in the murder of an old man and his wife. Perhaps they will sing of his senseless cruelty and lack of honour."⁵⁸ Briseis likewise questions how glory can be found in the manner of the violence and death the Greeks inflicted upon her community, including her father and mother. During the same discussion, Patroclus asks Briseis, "Do you always look so sad?"⁵⁹ Briseis, incredulous, responds, "I watched your beloved friend slaughter my greatest happiness... I watched them bleed into the sand. How can you ask me if I was always sad?", to which Patroclus responds, "I didn't ask if you were always sad...I asked if you always looked sad...I wondered if you had always looked like that, or if it is a consequence of your enslavement."⁶⁰ Though Patroclus corrects Briseis to say that he wondered if she *always* looked sad, not just because of her enslavement, the exchange demonstrates that Patroclus is not unaware of the "sadness" the women's enslavement must bring them, as the other Greek soldiers must not be either. Patroclus recognizes the emotional impact of enslavement, but his rather blasé acknowledgement also resonates with the common and ostensibly harmless criticism modern women experience when men tell them to "smile." The modern phenomenon is a toxic male behavior indicative of an underlying expectation that women exist for the male gaze, that men's desires outweigh women's autonomy, and that men are owed the happiness of women.⁶¹ Patroclus wonders if Briseis always looks sad and it is tempting to read in this his way of telling Briseis to "smile" for his sake, despite her enslavement.⁶²

58 Haynes (2019) 93.

59 Haynes (2019) 92.

60 Haynes (2019) 92–93.

61 Viera in *Fabulize Magazine* (2016). See also Fazlalizadeh (2020) and Baskerville (2023).

62 This scene resonates with another similar encounter in *ATS* between Neoptolemus and Andromache. After taking Andromache back to Epirus with him and fathering a child by her, Neoptolemus asks Andromache if she felt that being taken to Epirus was worse than death, to which Andromache admits that she thought so at the time; Neoptolemus asks if she still feels that way, and Andromache hears "the unmistakable note of hope in his voice" (2019) 334. Despite murdering her son, destroying her city, and sexually enslaving her, Neoptolemus craves Andromache's happiness/approval.

The Greek soldiers' attitudes toward the Trojan women align with contemporary perceptions of toxic masculinity, characterized by an extreme and innate capacity for violence (particularly in warrior societies)⁶³ and the belief in sexual entitlement to women as measures of asserting dominance. For the reader, the epic heroes as a whole are less triumphant and more so cruel. These are the realities of war, as Odysseus implies. But no man (or hero) appears to believe that wars can be won differently, that the rape and enslavement of the captive women need not be a foregone conclusion. Through the Trojan women's collective condemnation of the Greek soldiers' actions, Barker and Haynes portray the epic heroes in such a way as to call into question their honor by emphasizing the toxicity of their actions and beliefs with regard to the captured women.

Certain epic heroes face heightened scrutiny which serves to draw greater attention to the toxic masculinity hiding just beneath the surface of epic heroism. Achilles in particular epitomizes this toxic masculinity/epic heroism dichotomy. In many ways, Achilles in *TSG*, *TWT*, and *ATS* embodies the Homeric hero as he is portrayed in the *Iliad*: courageous, fierce, unmatched in battle prowess, as well as volatile and self-centered.⁶⁴ As Briseis describes him: "At that time, he was probably the most beautiful man alive, as he was most certainly the most violent, but that's the problem. How do you separate a tiger's beauty from its ferocity?...Achilles was like that – the beauty and the terror were two sides of a single coin."⁶⁵ As expected, Achilles rapes Briseis the first night she is brought to his camp. Reflecting on the night, Briseis notes that while Achilles was not cruel, she still hated him: "I lay there, hating him, though of course he wasn't doing anything he didn't have a perfect right to do. If his prize of honour had been the armour of a great lord he wouldn't have rested till he'd tried it out...That's what he did to me. *He tried me out.*"⁶⁶ Achilles expects sexual entitlement to Briseis after having won her for his triumphs in war, and because Briseis is very much an object, he wastes no time in appraising her value (in bed).

Barker does not pretend that there could be an emotional bond between master and slave. The author makes her feelings clear: "What horrifies me is how many commentators assume Briseis was in love with Achilles. Of course,

63 Anderson/Anderson (2020) 50.

64 See Martorana (2024) 137, 140.

65 Barker (2018) 49.

66 Barker (2018) 24.

Achilles is the tallest, the strongest, the fastest, the most beautiful man of his generation. Here you are in bed with this miracle – why would you not fall in love with him?”⁶⁷ In *TWT*, Barker has Briseis echo this sentiment nearly verbatim, subtly criticizing these commentators in the process. While contemplating her marriage to Alcimus following Achilles’s death, Briseis remarks: “The crux was that Alcimus believed – or rather assumed – that I’d loved Achilles, and still loved him. He certainly wasn’t alone in that belief. Then – *and now* – people seem to take it for granted that I loved Achilles. Why wouldn’t I? I had the fastest, strongest, bravest, most beautiful man of his generation in my bed – how could I not love him?”⁶⁸ The answer? “*He killed my brothers. We women are peculiar creatures. We tend not to love those who murder our families.*”⁶⁹ Achilles murdered Briseis’s family and sexually enslaved her. While some may wish to see love blossom between the epic hero and tragic heroine, Barker knows differently.⁷⁰ These circumstances, particularly Achilles’s toxic masculinity as it manifests in both his capacity for extreme violence and his belief in his right to set the terms of his (sexual) engagements with Briseis,⁷¹ hardly encourage a love story.

A further deterrent to there being a love story between Briseis and Achilles is the latter’s propensity for child-like, entitled behavior which mirrors common traits of toxic masculinity.⁷² Barker and Haynes both often portray Achilles as petulant, his demand for the respect “owed” to him self-pitying. In *ATS*, Achilles complains to Patroclus about Agamemnon’s desperation to be superior to him,

⁶⁷ Barker interviewed by Wachtel (2018).

⁶⁸ Barker (2022) 249.

⁶⁹ Barker (2022) 249.

⁷⁰ In *TSG*, Barker directly addresses those who would find a love story in the relationship between the Homeric heroes and their captive women. Briseis wonders at the end of the novel: “What will they make of us, the people of those unimaginably distant times? One thing I do know: they won’t want the brutal reality of conquest and slavery...They won’t want to know we were living in a rape camp. No, they’ll go for something altogether softer. A love story, perhaps? I just hope they manage to work out who the lovers were” (2018) 291.

⁷¹ Cf. Racette-Campbell/McMaster (2024) 3 & Nicholls (2021) 70, as previously discussed.

⁷² Another example of Achilles’s infantile characterization is his apparent Oedipus complex as portrayed by Barker in *TSG*. While toxic in its own way, Achilles’s Oedipus complex is not relevant to the present discussion on toxic masculinity. It is, however, worth noting as a characterization of an epic hero which paints the hero in a new light. Cf. Barker (2018) 38, 50, 82; Altin (2021) 855–856; Barker (2021).

wondering, “How many more lives must I take?’ he asked, and suddenly he was plaintive, like a child. ‘Before they give me my due?’”⁷³ Achilles’s expectation of respect is not in itself toxic. However, his attitude becomes indicative of toxic masculinity when taken to the extreme that Achilles takes it to by withdrawing from the war after Briseis is given to Agamemnon. Kupers suggests that what can lead to toxicity “is the repeated frustration of a man’s need to be respected,” and that “desperate attempts to gain respect where none seems forthcoming lead to an intensification of toxic masculinity...the man who feels he cannot get respect in any other way is the one who feels a strong urge to dominate others.”⁷⁴ Achilles’s frustration with not feeling that he is being shown the respect he deserves, especially by Agamemnon, reaches its pinnacle when Agamemnon takes Briseis from him after being forced to return Chryseis to her father.

Barker and Haynes both portray Achilles’s reaction to this dishonor similarly to how it is portrayed in Homer – Achilles is fiercely angry, embittered, and defiant. In the *Iliad*, Achilles’s wrath and his diatribe against Agamemnon for daring to take what is Achilles’s due when the king himself does nothing to earn it comes across as justified;⁷⁵ as a reader, you sympathize with him. However, because Barker and Haynes describe the incident from a woman’s perspective, any sympathy is difficult to feel. In *TSG*, Briseis remarks that Achilles behaves like a child raging against Agamemnon: “he ranted and raved, fists pumping, spit flying, working himself up into a state of near-insanity...Sometimes you see a toddler, purple with rage, screaming till he gasps for breath – and you know only a slap will shock him out of it. Achilles’ rages were like that.”⁷⁶ From Briseis’s perspective, Achilles’s tantrum is self-indulgent at best. His self-pity only gets worse after his confrontation with Agamemnon, which is ripe with fury as both men let their emotions get the better of them. When Agamemnon’s heralds take Briseis away, Barker’s Briseis notes that, “Achilles cried as I was taken away. *He* cried; *I* didn’t. Now, years later, when none of it matters anymore, I’m still proud of that.”⁷⁷ Likewise, in *ATS*, Haynes contrasts Briseis’s composure with Achilles’s lack thereof: “She did not weep when Odysseus arrived in the Myrmidon camp

73 Haynes (2019) 83.

74 Kupers (2005) 717.

75 *Il.* 1.301–328.

76 Barker (2018) 80.

77 Barker (2018) 98.

and told Achilles that Agamemnon had claimed his girl. Achilles wept, from impotent rage. Patroclus wept to see his friend so angered. But Briseis, carried away to another man's tent, and another man's bed, did not.⁷⁸ Through Barker and Haynes, Achilles's infantile reaction to Briseis being taken away resembles toxic masculine behaviors which manifest when what a man feels entitled to is not guaranteed to be his. Briseis, who has more right than anyone to rage and weep, is the only one among these great heroes to remain composed.⁷⁹

Achilles's fury stems from the fact that Agamemnon has no right to take another man's prize of honor. Per Achilles: "It doesn't belong to him; he hasn't *earnt* it."⁸⁰ But Briseis is more focused on Achilles's word choice: "There was a lot more, but I'd stopped listening. Honour, courage, loyalty, reputation – all those big words being bandied about – but for me there was only one word, one very small word: *it*. *It* doesn't belong to him, he hasn't *earnt it*."⁸¹ Briseis knows too well that Achilles's anger has nothing to do with her as a person; she is an object, an "it", something symbolic in value to Achilles more than in value as a person.⁸² But while Achilles rages against an injury to his pride, Briseis faces further injury to her very personhood. For Briseis and the other captive women, these heroes speak freely of honor, courage, loyalty, and reputation, but none of them consider those most deeply affected by their posturing. Heroic ethics have no place in the Trojan women's consideration. They are long past caring whether a man's honor, especially an enemy's, has been disrespected when theirs has not only been disrespected, but discounted altogether.

Achilles's "impotent rage" parallels the anger that derives from modern toxic masculinity when a man feels that the respect he is owed is not being shown, and he reacts by becoming dangerous to himself and to those within his own community. Achilles withdraws from the war in defiance of Agamemnon's actions, causing countless of his comrades to perish on the battlefield without his leadership and skills, and inhibiting the heroic characteristics that once de-

78 Haynes (2019) 100.

79 That Briseis is the only person to remain composed whilst the men around her lose control of their emotions likely also resonates with a modern female audience used to hearing the stereotype that women get too emotional and men are more adept at regulating emotions.

80 Barker (2018) 97.

81 Barker (2018) 97.

82 Achilles reiterates this sentiment when contemplating the insult to his honor: "That's what hurts – not the girl – the insult, the blow to his pride" Barker (2018) 105.

fined him. Achilles feels that his decision is justified due to the offense against his honor and withdrawing could be “an attempt to (re)establish his hegemonic role, and therefore his masculinity, among the Greeks.”⁸³ Nevertheless, because Barker and Haynes give us the unique opportunity to view this incident from a woman’s perspective, we see Achilles’s behavior in a new and far less favorable light. While the dishonor shown to him would have been understood in his time as highly offensive, and his anger even justified, modern readers instead see that Achilles cares nothing for Briseis or for the fact that she is trading one sex slave owner for another. Briseis’s courage in the face of further degradation is a stark contrast to Achilles’s toxic entitlement and the danger he presents to himself and to his comrades as a consequence.

Tragic Heroic Femininity

Briseis is the foil to Achilles’s toxic masculinity and that of the Greek army in general. She emerges throughout *TSG*, *TWT*, and *ATS* as a hero(ine), albeit a reluctant one. All of the Trojan women are portrayed as heroic in their fortitude to survive their new circumstances, tragic though they may be. Both Barker and Haynes do not shy from describing the atrocities committed against the Trojan women and in making it clear that the Greek camp was, as Barker labels it, a rape camp; the Trojan War evinced its own rape culture. In *TSG*, when Lyrnessus falls, Briseis witnesses the slave women who had been hiding in the tower basement dragged out first. One slave woman is “raped repeatedly by a gang of men who were sharing a wine jug, passing it good-naturedly from hand to hand while waiting their turn. Her two sons – twelve, thirteen years old perhaps – lay wounded and dying a few yards away from her...She kept stretching out her hands and calling their names as first one and then the other died.”⁸⁴ Briseis witnesses the cruelty of the Greek soldiers, who, with the demeanor of men enjoying a typical boy’s night, gang rape a woman as she watches her sons die, and it is a precursor of things to come in the Greek camp. In the camp, common women, those not distributed to specific soldiers and given to the rest of the men to share, were regularly beaten and raped, some as young as nine and

⁸³ Martorana (2024) 137.

⁸⁴ Barker (2018) 14–15.

ten.⁸⁵ Through Briseis's awareness of these common women and her desperate hope to avoid their fate, Barker also draws attention to women who have "even less voice."⁸⁶ What the Trojan women endure in the Greek camp is no less than a wartime rape culture built on the premise of repeated sexual violence against women for the sake of male dominance and superiority.

As one commentator on *ATS* notes, "In war, fighting isn't the only form of heroism: sometimes simple survival is equally heroic."⁸⁷ The Trojan women certainly prove the veracity of this mindset, personifying a tragic heroic femininity. For, despite being forced into sexual slavery, the Trojan women find ways to become resilient, to maintain their identities, and to draw strength from one another.⁸⁸ Their resilience manifests in various ways. When the Greek soldier Myron dies of an illness, his former slave women, whom he had beaten and raped repeatedly, are required to perform the tasks involved with laying-out the body. Left with his wasted corpse, one of the women lifts his limp penis and waggles it at the others and they all burst into laughter.⁸⁹ Their shared merriment over the undeniable impotence of the Greek soldier who once abused them brings these women a much-needed moment of levity and demonstrates their capacity to find amusement even in the darkest of circumstances. In contrast, in a moment of deep sorrow in *TWT*, the women join Hecuba in what becomes a group howling of grief, "until they turned from women into wolves," all of them howling for "the loss of our homeland – for the loss of our fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, for everybody we'd ever loved. For all the men carried away on that blood-dark tide."⁹⁰ While the Greeks had been like a pack of wolves murdering the Trojan men and showing no mercy, as Hecuba describes it in *ATS*, the Trojan women become like a pack of wolves bonded by grief who must help one another to survive.

⁸⁵ Barker (2018) 45.

⁸⁶ Goff (2022) 10.

⁸⁷ Lowry (2019).

⁸⁸ See also Shuvra Sen (2020) 53. On Helen specifically and her use of tapestry weaving to maintain her identity, see Shuvra Sen (2020) 52; O'Gorman (2006); Linne (2022); Judge (2022). Cf. Barker (2018) 130.

⁸⁹ Barker (2018) 76–77.

⁹⁰ Barker (2021) 81.

This is not to say that the Trojan women do not experience the shame, guilt, and fear common to rape victims. Barker and Haynes both describe the women waiting in fear, some unable to hold back the tears, as the Greeks assembled and assessed them for distribution among the soldiers.⁹¹ Andromache, like Briseis, goes from a queen to being raped by her family's murderer in the same day. In *TWT*, when Andromache returns to the women's hut after her first night being raped by Pyrrhus, Briseis takes her to Alcimus's tent. Andromache hears the rocking of the cradle that had been her son's, the one since given to Briseis for the child of Achilles she now carried. Briseis, distressed, offers to give it back, to which Andromache responds, "'Why would I want it back?...I'll only have to put *his* child into it.' Her gaze slid from my face to my belly. 'How are we supposed to love *their* children?'"⁹² Andromache's question reveals the guilt and shame felt by rape victims, especially those who bear their rapist's child. Andromache expresses guilt for feeling unable to love the child and shame for feeling that she has somehow betrayed her former husband/family. Briseis is not able to comfort Andromache as she has often wondered the same. Briseis feels that the child she carries is not hers: "At times, it seemed more like a parasitic infestation than a pregnancy, taking me over, using me for its own purposes – which were *their* purposes."⁹³ As Scodel notes, when a woman becomes the sexual slave of a captor, the "gift-exchange of normal marriage is replaced by the violent death of the woman's kin";⁹⁴ the captive woman's transfer from one man to another is distorted by her lack of sexual consent on one hand, and on the other by the conspicuous lack of familial involvement. This distortion causes significant emotional turmoil as conveyed by both Andromache and Briseis.⁹⁵ The Greeks are eradicating the Trojan people one forced pregnancy at a time, increasing their own numbers in the process. Briseis, Andromache, and all the other Trojan women impregnated by their rapists grapple with the reality of being a mother to an enemy's child.

However, it is through motherhood that some of the Trojan women find greater resilience. In *TWT*, Maire, a Trojan woman who was a slave in a Trojan

91 Barker (2018) 17; Haynes (2019) 77.

92 Barker (2021) 64.

93 Barker (2021) 57.

94 Scodel (1998) 142.

95 Andromache expresses this turmoil in Euripides's *Tro.* (661–668).

household and is again a slave in the Greek camp, is pregnant. The father is not, as Briseis expected, a Greek soldier, but a Trojan and a former slave himself, though presumably he did not survive the fall of Troy. When Maire delivers a healthy son, Briseis and the other slave women know what is at stake: if the Greeks should discover the child's existence, that a Trojan boy has been born, they will kill him. No Trojan male can be left alive.⁹⁶ And so the women do everything they can to protect the boy – disguising him as a girl and letting it be known that Maire delivered a healthy “daughter.” With the boy's birth, “the girls had a new focus”: helping Maire care for and protect the child gives the Trojan women a new sense of purpose, something unsullied by Greek violence, a light amidst darkness which compels them to survive each day.⁹⁷ The child is a Trojan male who, against all odds, will live because of the women's determination.

Even Briseis begins to envision a different future for herself through motherhood. She struggles with feeling as if the child does not belong to her, and cannot help but notice the shift in the Greeks' attitude toward her. Where once she was blamed for the conflict between Agamemnon and Achilles and held responsible for the latter withdrawing from battle, now that she is pregnant with Achilles's child, the atmosphere has shifted: “Only the other day, a man I scarcely knew had placed his hand on my stomach, and not in a sexual, predatory way, but as a mark of his loyalty to the bloodline of Achilles. I was the casket that contained the crown jewels – at least, that's how the Myrmidons seemed to see me. As a person, I didn't count at all.”⁹⁸ Now that she carries the bloodline of Achilles, Briseis's status within the Greek camp has been elevated, supported as well through her marriage to Alcimus. She is still not valued for who she is as a person, but as the vessel through which Achilles's glory continues, she warrants respect. Briseis also knows that the child brings her salvation – she would have been offered to someone else in Achilles's funeral games, transferred yet again from one sex slave owner to another, had it not been for the child. At the end of *TWT*, as the Greeks prepare to set sail from Troy and the Trojan women say their goodbyes as each begins the next chapter of their captivity, Briseis pauses at one of the rock pools on the beach, noticing a starfish with one of its limbs torn off. The starfish inches toward seaweed and the torn limb begins to move as well, and Briseis recalls her mother telling her that “the parent starfish grows

⁹⁶ As conveyed by Barker (2018) 5, 235; Haynes (2019) 197.

⁹⁷ Barker (2021) 236.

⁹⁸ Barker (2021) 57; see also (2021) 143.

a new limb, the amputated limb becomes a starfish – and so, from one damaged and mutilated individual, two whole creatures grow.”⁹⁹ Witnessing this gives Briseis hope. The rape and enslavement she has endured as a result of the Trojan War has certainly changed her. While she refused to break, there are scars. Briseis’s impending birth represents a new beginning, not just for the child, but for her as well.

As Barker notes, “The act of picking up and moving on...is at the heart of *The Silence*,”¹⁰⁰ and Briseis more than any other character epitomizes this sentiment in all three novels. Throughout *TSG* and *TWT*, Briseis retains her “sense of worth and agency.”¹⁰¹ When, in *TSG*, Nestor tells Briseis and the other captured women to forget their past lives, Briseis immediately thinks, “*Forget*. So there was my duty laid out in front of me, as simple and clear as a bowl of water: *Remember*.”¹⁰² This determination to keep her sense of identity and to keep the memory of her people alive carries Briseis through her stay in the camp and thereafter. Though she is repeatedly raped by Achilles (and then beaten and raped by Agamemnon), Briseis refuses to let the Greek camp or the men in it break her. This characterization is consistent across *TSG*, *TWT*, and *ATS*. As she explains to Chryseis in *ATS* after recounting how Achilles murdered her father, mother, brothers, and husband:

‘So when I tell you I have nothing, you know I speak the truth. They took me before I could throw a handful of earth on any of them, so I don’t even have that.’ Chryseis gazed at the woman, whose eyes were not puffy, whose hair was not torn and whose tunic was not ripped. The woman saw her looking and nodded. ‘They will not see my grief,’ she said. ‘They have not earned it.’¹⁰³

Briseis exhibits the composure that reappears in *ATS* when Agamemnon’s heralds arrive to take her away from Achilles. Here, she does not exhibit the same signs of despair commonly attributed to grieving women – the eyes swollen from crying, the torn hair, or the ripped clothes. “‘They have not earned it’” is

⁹⁹ Barker (2021) 305.

¹⁰⁰ Barker interviewed by Reese (2018).

¹⁰¹ Shuvra Sen (2020) 51.

¹⁰² Barker (2018) 18.

¹⁰³ Haynes (2019) 75.

a piercing parallel to Briseis in *TSG* noting that Achilles considered her an “it” which Agamemnon did not “earn.” Briseis makes it clear that none of the Greek men have earned her grief. Whereas Achilles reduces Briseis to nothing more than an object symbolic of his pride, Briseis understands her own value as well as the value of her grief to men who build their pride on the sufferings of women.

Briseis represents the heroism that the Trojan women all possess as part of their collective tragic femininity. In glaring contrast to the supposed epic heroism of the Greeks, the Trojan women’s heroism is built on the courage and resilience to endure in the face of insurmountable odds. As Briseis realizes when she hears a fellow slave, Tecmessa, sing Trojan lullabies to the son she bore by the Greek soldier, Ajax: “We’re going to survive – our songs, our stories. They’ll never be able to forget us. Decades after the last man who fought at Troy is dead, their sons will remember the songs their Trojan mothers sang to them. We’ll be in their dreams – and in their worst nightmares too.”¹⁰⁴ As one scholar notes, “The songs of the captive women are thus set up as a direct challenge to the heroic songs of the Greeks.”¹⁰⁵ The women the Greeks forced into a lifetime of rape and servitude will ultimately be the ones who ensure Troy lives on, and therein lies the true heroism. As Calliope declares at the end of *ATS*: “I have sung of the women, the women in the shadows. I have sung of the forgotten, the ignored, the untold...[This] was never the story of one woman, or two. It was the story of all of them.”¹⁰⁶ As with the Trojan lullabies, so through Calliope have the women’s voices been heard, their tragic heroic femininity emerging from the shadows to outshine the epic heroism we, as modern readers, have to come to see for its toxic masculinity.

Ancient Stories, Modern Crises, & Timeless Victims

In her interview with NPR, Haynes referred to the female rape victims of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, while in a separate interview, Barker referred to the Yazidi women of Syria and Iraq who were raped and enslaved following the 2014 genocidal campaigns of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Both authors

104 Barker (2018) 266.

105 Goff (2022) 12.

106 Haynes (2019) 339–340.

see reflections of Homeric/ancient wartime rape culture in the pervasive and inhumane treatment of women during and as a result of modern global conflicts. Constraints of the present article preclude a comprehensive analysis of modern examples of wartime rape which bear a striking resemblance to, if not a direct mirroring of, ancient cornerstones of wartime strategies specifically related to the treatment of women, including masculine behavioral and attitudinal patterns which give rise to gender-based sexual violence.¹⁰⁷ Such an analysis forms part of the present author's on-going project to examine the connections between wartime, gender-based sexual violence in the Greco-Roman period and the rape and enslavement of women in modern-era conflicts. Notably recent modern examples include reports of the rape and torture of Ukrainian women by Russian forces during the Russia-Ukraine War, as well as the systemic use of rape and sexual violence against women by Hamas on the October 7, 2023 attacks on the Gaza-envelope of Israel.¹⁰⁸ Because Barker and Haynes cite the Yazidi and the Rwandan women when discussing the inspirations behind their respective novels, I limit myself to highlighting a few parallels between the traumas experienced by the Trojan women and those experienced by the Yazidi and Rwandan women. However, as in-depth analysis owed to such a discussion is not presently feasible, I hope to draw even brief attention to the near-unchanging facets of wartime rape that span an unbroken timeline at least as far back as Homer.¹⁰⁹

Barker and Haynes describe the shame, guilt, and fear experienced by the Trojan women as a result of their traumas, all of which are common, documented modern-day responses to rape, including amongst the Rwandan and

107 Select scholarship on modern cases of war/genocide and gender-based sexual violence which discuss the prevalence and/or impact of hegemonic/toxic masculinity and rape culture: Rittner/Roth (eds.) (2012); Blyth/Colgan/Edwards (eds.) (2018); Anderson/Anderson (2020); Loucks/Holt/Adler (eds.) (2020); Schotanus (ed.) (2022); Jones (2022). See also Neilsen (2015) 86–87.

108 On the Russia-Ukraine War: UN Press Report (June 2022); UN News Report (Sept. 2023); Méheut (2023); Keaton (2023); Shapiro (2023). On the Hamas attacks: UN News Report (Dec. 2023); Williamson (2023); Wright (2023); McKernan (2024); Gettleman/Schwartz/Sella (2024).

109 Other examples of modern wartime rape worth noting include the previously mentioned Višegrad massacres in the Bosnian War (cf. Graham-Harrison (2018)) and the use of mass rape in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo in the midst of the region's resource wars in the aftermath of the 1994 Rwandan genocide (cf. Swanson (2019)).

Yazidi genocide rape victims.¹¹⁰ However, the Rwandan women who testified at the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in 1997 broke through societally-imposed silence and their fears of retribution and further victim-shaming to describe their experiences and to wrest their stories from those who would deny it; they were critical in bringing about “the world’s first conviction of rape as a crime of genocide.”¹¹¹ Similarly, the Yazidi women who have come forth with their experiences being sold as slaves in the sex markets and then repeatedly raped by fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL) in the military bases have forced a new global awareness of the atrocities committed against the Yazidi.¹¹² While the Yazidis have “suffered massacres and oppression for generations,” the attacks in 2014 gained far greater media notice in large part due to the graphic reports of the sexual violence committed against the Yazidi women.¹¹³ Testimonies from the Yazidi victims have shed new light on the sexual crimes committed against them in fulfillment of ISIS ideologies used to justify sexual enslavement and rape as necessary tools for conversion to (their interpretation of) Islam.¹¹⁴ Barker and Haynes have helped to give voice to ancient women who were victims of wartime rape, enabling previously silenced women, even mythological ones, to speak on behalf of real ancient women whose emotional and physical traumas as a result of wartime rape culture were considered inevitable consequences and thus not worthy of note beyond proof of victory.¹¹⁵ In a modern parallel, the Rwandan and Yazidi women who have testified also give voice to the countless other female victims of sexual violence during the respective genocides, helping to ensure that the atrocities they and other women endure(d) are known globally, such that future such atrocities may be prevented.

110 Bijleveld/Morssinkhof/Smeulders (2009) 215; Fallon (2018); Swanson (2019); Kizilhan/Steger/Noll-Hussong (2020).

111 Swanson (2019) 1620. See also Rettig (2008) and De Brouwer/Chu/de Volder/Muscatti (eds.) (2019).

112 Otten (2017); Castellano San José (2020).

113 Otten (2017).

114 Otten (2017); Masmoudi (2018); Castellano San José (2020); Jaffal (2020); Vale (2020).

115 In *TSG*, Priam echoes this sentiment to Briseis; Barker (2018) 255. In the *Iliad*, Greek victory is officially marked by the capture and enslavement of the Trojan women (2.354–356).

Toxic masculinity is also discussed in relation to the Rwandan genocide. Mullins writes that sexual violence “was just one more way for Hutu men to dominate and destroy the Tutsi population.”¹¹⁶ Poverty and social inequity commonly produce a “crisis within masculinity” which has been interpreted as a key component of mass rapes in other genocides, particularly in the former Yugoslavia and in other African countries as well.¹¹⁷ Mullins notes that while this crisis within masculinity has not been discussed specifically in relation to the Hutu men, they did experience “as much deprivation of gender capital as men in those societies where research has established strong masculinity crises. Through murder, rape and the framing of these actions as an enactment of ethnic superiority, Hutu men denied access to typical masculinity capitals could use the genocide itself as a fulcrum for the reclamation of their masculinity.”¹¹⁸ The rape of the Tutsi (and Hutu) women enabled the Hutu men to “reclaim masculine dominance and empowerment” which had been lost to social forces beyond their control.¹¹⁹ The belief in sexual entitlement as well as the belief in one’s right to dominate are, as previously discussed, pillars of toxic masculinity whereby men take hegemonic masculinity to an extreme in response to a lack of hegemonic power in other areas of life which are critical to the masculine ideal.

The Trojan War was fought to reclaim the honor of the house of Atreus after Paris abducted Helen, and the Greeks’ success against the Trojans was dependent on their ability to eradicate the Trojan men from the city and, most importantly, to rape and enslave their women, rendering Troy barren. At the heart of this war was an attack against one man’s hegemonic masculinity, conveying real values of the ancient Greek hegemonic masculinity which were inextricably tied to a man’s ability to control his house and the women within it.¹²⁰ As Evans notes, “War incentivized bold action, creating opportunities for men to

116 Mullins (2009) 732.

117 Mullins (2009) 732.

118 Mullins (2009) 732.

119 Mullins (2009) 732.

120 Paris’s actions are also in direct violation of his oath of *xenia* to Menelaus, the concept of “guest-friendship” by which hospitality between two parties extended to material and non-material reciprocity and included due respect shown to one another’s properties (including wives).

express their masculinity.”¹²¹ We see this in *TWT*: Pyrrhus displays a clear pattern of what modern readers would interpret as toxic masculinity due in large part to the respect he feels is owed to him as the son of Achilles. That Pyrrhus is likely doomed to live in his father’s shadow goads him into acting out violently in order to assert his masculinity, even murdering the slave girl Amina who had witnessed his botched slaying of Priam and therefore posed a threat to his heroic masculinity (and reputation). Also in *TWT*, after Helen is returned to the Greek camp, Menelaus punishes her for what he considers her role in the deaths of countless Greek soldiers, choking, beating, and raping her; he asserts violent and sexual physical dominance over her for threatening his own masculinity as both a king and a husband. In both *TSG* and *ATS*, Achilles sulks whenever the respect he feels is his due is not met, exemplified most dramatically by his refusal to fight when Agamemnon takes Briseis. The heroes’ actions are largely in response to “crises in masculinity.” War as the means through which ancient Greek men reclaimed and reasserted their masculinity through ultimately toxic and sexually violent behaviors targeted against women is thus echoed in the ways in which the Hutu men expressed and/or reclaimed their masculinity during the Rwandan genocide.

Finally, a still-harrowing but perhaps hopeful comparison. As previously discussed, in *TWT*, Maire gives birth to a Trojan boy whilst living as a slave in the Greek camp. Maire’s son is a ray of light in an otherwise dark existence, and not just for Maire. The other slave women form a sort of “group motherhood,” helping to raise the boy and finding new purpose and resilience in this sign of renewal and hope. Similarly, research on maternal-resilience processes exhibited by Rwandan genocide-rape survivors finds that “motherhood assemblages can potentiate modes of resilience that empower women and open to expanded opportunities for life chances.”¹²² Many of these Rwandan women found new purposes and different paths toward the future through motherhood “that were not overdetermined by their personal biographies involving brutal violence, excruciating pain, myriad illnesses, and disease.”¹²³ A common thread amongst the Trojan women is their difficulty in accepting that many of them would inevitably bear the children of their enemies, a reality which real ancient women would have also faced. But, as Maire’s experience demonstrates, this forced mother-

121 Evans (2024) 48.

122 Zraly/Rubin/Mukamana (2013) 416.

123 Zraly/Rubin/Mukamana (2013) 430.

hood also fostered female community, as well as a resistance to their traumas determining how the women would be defined, not unlike the Rwandan women. Briseis, pregnant with Achilles's child, envisions a new future for herself in light of her impending motherhood, rewriting her own story outside that of Achilles's. Here, we see that motherhood as a result of wartime/genocide-rape is borne of insidious intentions, but, for some victims, can be their route to defiant and healing empowerment.

The previous observations are but a few of the many parallels between ancient warfare and modern, specifically in relation to gender-based sexual violence as a calculated strategy for achieving victory/success and the toxic masculine attitudes and behaviors at the heart of such strategies. Whether modernity would classify the Trojan War, albeit a mythological war, a "genocide" is unlikely. There are markers of genocide: the complete and utter eradication of a people, the rape and enslavement of women, the use of rape to force women to bear their enemy's children in order to devastate their former community,¹²⁴ and the slaughter of children. My intent has not been to compare the Trojan War to modern genocides and to classify the former as a pseudo-ancient example of genocide. Rather, my intent has been to highlight the ways in which gender-based sexual violence has been used in periods of war, then and now, and to draw attention to the precursors of modern toxic masculinity and rape culture as epitomized by the epic heroes and their treatment of the Trojan women. Additionally, I hope to have shown in even just a few examples the similarities in the ways in which female victims of wartime rape then and now not only manage to survive, but to overcome. Barker and Haynes draw these parallels more poetically, and, more pointedly, through the victims' voices.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this article has been to examine the use of ancient Greek (Homeric) myths as a vessel for two contemporary female authors to engage with classical reception with a distinctly feminist agenda in mind. Through these feminist retellings of mytho-historical narratives, modern readers become attuned to what we might consider ancient precursors to toxic masculinity and rape cul-

124 Cf. Fallon (2018) 72 on genocidal sexual violence.

ture, both of which find distinct manifestation in modern wartime conflicts. In *TSG*, *TWT*, and *ATS*, Barker and Haynes draw specific attention to the gender-based sexual violence women experienced as an important strategical component of, and result of ancient warfare through the eyes and voices of the Trojan women. Striking, however, are the similarities between the traumas experienced by the Trojan women and those experienced by female victims of modern wartime rape, similarities which Barker and Haynes are unapologetic in emphasizing due to what is an apparently undisrupted history of gender-based sexual violence in periods of conflict. At the root of this sexual violence are pillars of what modern society would identify as toxic masculinity which forces women into the role of rape victim in order for men to feel successful in asserting control. In un-silencing the Trojan women, Barker and Haynes have not only given voice to previously unheard ancient female figures, but they also speak on behalf of the women forced to endure modern wartime rape and enslavement, compelling us as readers to question the systems in place today which make it possible that they hear themselves with startling and painful clarity in the voices of ancient women.

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