



Victim Soldier Duality in Female Characters in the Trojan War

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Abstract

The complexities of womanhood in Homer and other Greek poets' depictions of the Trojan War may be best understood by viewing female characters as both victims and soldiers simultaneously. By viewing them through this lens, we can better account for the perversion of traditional gender roles, and of femininity in particular, in times of war. Victim status is held implicitly by women of the Trojan War, because of the direct violence and lack of agency they experience. However, through their recurring victimization, female characters take on the status and roles traditionally delegated to male soldiers. These soldier-like traits include: devotion to a cause, loyalty to a comrade or savior, personal vengeance in battle, acceptance of death, and perceived wrongdoing as a motivator. This paper will examine this phenomenon in not just Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, but also in Euripides' *Trojan Women* and *Hecuba*, and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. These works present a variety of female characters, and a careful analysis of them will argue that each embodies a soldier-like trait. Victim-soldier duality is demonstrated by defining the traits of male soldiers and then drawing comparisons between said traits and the actions of female characters. Viewing characters through the dual lens of victim and soldier increases our understanding of female characters through the expansion of the one-dimensional characterization that they often receive. Therefore, to imagine a fuller and more accurate characterization of femininity in war, women must be realized as victims stepping into the role of soldiers.

There is no lack of intricate and complex characters in the story of the Trojan War, but it must be acknowledged that a large majority of such characters are men. Consequently, when reading *The Iliad* or other ancient Trojan War narratives such as Euripides' *Trojan Women* and *Hecuba*, and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the characterization we are left with is primarily male. The scope of female characterization, by contrast, is often limited and one dimensional. For example, in Homer's *Iliad*, Briseis is taken as a prisoner of war by the Greeks. She is a captive of the Greek hero Achilles, and therefore explicitly a victim, and it is easy to simply characterize her as such. However, during the mourning of Patroclus, she expresses steadfast grief for him as one of her captors. She shows a clear loyalty to Patroclus because he treated her kindly and seems to hold a savior-like role in her life. This loyalty to a savior and ally is not unlike that of men on the battlefield, who fight for those who have saved their lives in return. I argue that the complexities of womanhood in Homer and other Greek poets' depictions of the Trojan War may be best understood by viewing female characters like Briseis as both victims and soldiers simultaneously.

It is without a doubt true that the women of the Trojan War are all victims in some form and therefore must be considered as such. However, through their victimization, female characters in these stories take on the status and traits traditionally associated with

and delegated to male soldiers. These soldier-like traits include: devotion to a cause, loyalty to a comrade or savior, personal vengeance in battle, acceptance of death, and perceived wrongdoing as a motivator. By drawing a comparison between the 'typical' characteristics of male soldiers and the overlooked characteristics of female victims, we can better account for the perversion of traditional gender roles, and of femininity in particular, in times of war.

This idea of victim soldier duality is underscored by the horrors the women in the Trojan War suffer from. In fact, there are countless examples of cruel and tragic actions taken against women in the traditional literature. So, the understanding of women as soldiers is not an argument that these women are no longer victims. Instead, it is an expansion of the one dimensional characterization that is often received by women who are viewed singularly as victims.

The first step to understanding the victim soldier characterization is to take note of occurrences of victimization. Violence directed towards women takes on many forms in the Trojan War. Some of this violence is more situational than premeditated, but none of it is by any means subtle. Briseis, for example, is never shown suffering at the hands of her captors. In fact, she barely exists as a fully developed character for much of *The Iliad*. Yet, what little we do know about her is precisely what makes her a victim in the first place.



Briseis is first introduced as a bargaining chip between Achilles and Agamemnon. Her only illustrated piece of identity is that she is a war prize of the Greeks. She thus has no identity outside of her status as a prisoner. Briseis inarguably exists as a victim, but she is a less fully fleshed out character, than a character like Hecuba or Cassandra.

It is important to discuss the other part of the victim soldier duality, which is the choice of the word soldier. The literature of the Trojan War mostly follows traditional Greek heroes, meaning men who have accomplished something extraordinary by Greek standards (Lefkowitz, 1987). However, focusing only on heroic characters provides a limited scope for the total effects of the war for all those involved in it. As a narrative of war, the male characters (including those heroes), are defined by their role as fighters and warriors, or more specifically soldiers. As such, there is a deliberate choice to utilize the word soldiers when identifying this characterization of women in the Trojan War.

Additionally, it is important to emphasize that male soldiers are identified by playing an active role in a war, and having a cause and engaging in battle in order to achieve said cause. An underlying connection exists then in that each female character is just as affected and engaged in the war as their male counterparts. This engagement is a different form, as we see no mortal women on the battlefield. Instead of fighting, women are often seen praying for their cities, lamenting deaths, caring and comforting the wounded, and offering sacrifice. In Homer's works there is a deliberate choice to write female characters as capable of still feeling the same intense emotions as men (Farron, 1979) in tragic situations. It is this deep engagement that war stimulates for everyone involved which allows women to step into the role of soldiers. Through victimization, which ties women into the war, they take on the roles and traits traditionally delegated to male soldiers. This in turn allows for a dual/two-sided victim soldier characterization to exist. Ultimately, the Trojan War creates a world of totality and fighting, which cannot be escaped. This perversion of the world through fighting is why we must also consider the perversion of femininity and womanhood in times of war.

One of the most famous women in the

works of the Trojan War is Cassandra. She is also a compelling example of the victim soldier duality of female characters. As the daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba, Cassandra at no point is depicted as a fighter. She never picks up a sword or shield, and due to her 'gift' of prophecy, she is believed to be crazy. At first, she seems to have no similarities to a male soldier. However, it must be argued that Cassandra's character is shown behaving exactly like a soldier would. In Euripides's play *Trojan Women*, we see the final fates of many of the women of Troy depicted. Cassandra is one of these women, along with her mother Hecuba and sister-in-law Andromache. All of them will suffer tragic endings. All of them are explicit victims. Cassandra herself will suffer from the moment we see her in *Trojan Women* until her death which is depicted in the *Agamemnon*.

Unlike her counterparts, Cassandra has the gift of prophecy and is able to foresee her future death. She knows she will be married to the Greek king Agamemnon: "How blessed the bride/ Blessed by a royal wedding, soon," (Euripides, 2010, p. 194). She also knows that this marriage will be the cause of her death. She is fully aware that Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, will kill her in a plot of revenge. However, Cassandra also knows that her presence in Agamemnon's return home will help lead to his death as well. She views her capture as a war prize as the beginning of suffering for the same Greeks that have brought suffering to her home. In a famous monologue Cassandra even says as such:

Agamemnon, marrying me, will make
A marriage more disastrous than Helen's.
Our wedding night will be a night of death
And devastation for his house; I'll kill him, I'll
Avenge my father and my brothers' blood.
But let all that go! Enough! Why should I
Sing about the blade that's soon to slash
My Throat, and the throat of others, or how my
marriage
Will set the plot in motion to butcher a mother
And bring down the house of Atreus? (Euripides, 2010,
p. 196)

She knows that her death is inevitable if she continues



with Agamemnon, and yet she accepts this in the face of a higher cause. Being married off as a prisoner of war, the same act that is victimizing her also grants her agency in the face of defeat. Cassandra is thus stepping into the role of the soldier, as she chooses to accept death in the face of future success. Despite never wielding a weapon, Cassandra has a clear cause and is comfortable participating in the violence needed to pursue it. It is almost as though she herself becomes a weapon. This is clearly the same form of action seen from the soldiers in the Trojan War, who know they are going to die, but accept that fate for the purpose of their cause. On some level it is even comparable to Achilles, who is fated to die, and yet continues to fight for his personal reasons of revenge and glory. At one point Achilles says:

My mother Thetis, a moving silver grace,
Tells me two fates sweep me on to my death.
If I stay here and fight, I'll never return home,
But my glory will be undying forever. (Homer, 1997, 9.423-9.426)

Both Achilles' and Cassandra's speech hold themes of acceptance of death for the sacrifice of a great purpose. Cassandra therefore takes on a trait of a typically male soldier in her depiction in *Trojan Women*. Just considering her to be a victim in this tragedy is an underestimation of her character. We are unable to get a full understanding of her without a two dimensional consideration.

In an interesting connection, the eventual murderer of Cassandra, Clytemnestra, is another female character which can be viewed through the same victim soldier lens. Clytemnestra is the wife of Agamemnon, who has waited at home while he has been away for at least 10 years fighting the Trojan War. Aeschylus's tragedy *Agamemnon* follows the return of its title character, but centers around the revenge plot of Clytemnestra. We know Agamemnon sacrificed their daughter to please the gods in his initial journey to Troy, "In short, he brought himself to become/ the sacrificer of his daughter, to further/ a war of revenge over a woman" (Aeschylus, 2009, p. 27). While the complexities and symbolism of Clytemnestra's revenge is enough for an entire analysis alone, for the purpose

of this argument it is imperative to focus on the motivating force for Clytemnestra.

If a woman sets out to murder her husband and his new bride (Cassandra), there must surely be a compelling reason. For Clytemnestra her motivating force seems to be a perceived wrongdoing, in this case, the murder of her child. Within the text (Aeschylus, 2009, p. 169) Clytemnestra even says, "This showdown was something that had long/ been in my thoughts, arising from a long-standing grievance; now/ it has come—at long last." The sacrifice of her daughter makes Clytemnestra a victim of the war around her, but it is also what causes her to become more soldier-like.

Throughout the Trojan War, we see many men fighting because of what they perceive to be a great personal slight or wrongdoing. In fact, this violent crime on the basis of a grievance is comparable to the murder of Palamedes by Odysseus. In Greek myth, Palamedes forces Odysseus to set sail for the war in Troy, despite Odysseus's initial refusal to do so. Palamedes manipulates Odysseus by exploiting his relationship with his son. This manipulation is seen as a great wrongdoing by Odysseus. As a result, when the opportunity arises, Odysseus deceitfully manufactures a plot to paint Palamedes as a traitor to the Greeks. The cunning plot works, and Palamedes is ultimately branded and killed as a traitor. Odysseus in this story resents and kills a man because of a personal slight, and his action rings similar to that of Clytemnestra. There is an additional thread connecting the two, as they both achieve their goals through willful deceit.

Clytemnestra's characterization takes into consideration the idea of the inescapable nature and cyclical violence of the war. The stories of the Trojan War represent a perversion of the world through societal collapse and with it, a decay of a moral community. (Nussbaum, 2001). She is a woman miles away and separated from the violence for over a decade, and yet she is still a victim and perpetrator of it. Her actions still qualify her as a soldier, despite her never stepping foot into battle. The Trojan War is its own world that has an expanding totality in the lives of the people it affects. *Trojan Women* even depicts the end of the Trojan War as not just the end of fighting, but the end of the world itself (Poole, 1976, p. 258).





The Trojan War acts as an isolated bubble of a decaying world. An example of its encapsulating nature can be seen when examining the character of Hecuba. She is a character that is often remembered as succumbing to the cruelty of the world around her. In the face of unimaginable tragedy, she both accepts her knowledge of the corrosion of the world and cannot escape it (Nusbaum 409). In his play aptly titled *Hecuba*, Euripides explores the final world of the women of Troy, as the Trojans have been defeated, and these women are the prisoners of the Greeks. They know their lives going forward will be that of captives, subjected to the horrors that come with being the prizes of men. The play shows truths of a harsh reality created by the Trojan War. Hecuba especially suffers from immense tragedy. She first watches as her daughter Polyxena gets sacrificed by the Greeks and later discovers that her son Polydorus has been murdered by Polymestor, the man who she paid and trusted to protect and hide him away from the war. The death of both of her children, along with the preceding death of her other family members, drives Hecuba to madness. She takes revenge for the death of her family in the form of tricking and killing Polymestor and his two sons. Hecuba's revenge represents her renewed understanding of the world order following the collapse of moral convention during the Trojan War (Nussbaum, 2001).

Hecuba's actions of revenge are comparable to taking revenge for fallen allies in the middle of battle. As Euripides focuses on her shifting view of the world after tragedy, he also documents her transition to a soldier. She suffers an extreme loss and is irrevocably changed as a result, which only further solidifies her identity as a victim. However, as she becomes a victim, she also in that moment begins to plan personal vengeance in battle. Hecuba goes so far as to beg Agamemnon, leader of the Greeks and a large cause of grief for her family, for help in her plan for revenge. Her pleas are emotional and desperate:

If only Daedalus could work his wonders,
Or some god, to give my arms a voice,
My hands a voice, and my hair and feet,
Then all would clasp your knees in concert
Crying out my plea in all possible ways.

My master, most shining light among the Greeks,
Be moved. Lend your hand to an old woman, a hand
For vengeance, though it come to nothing. Be fair.
For the man born noble and good always serves justice
And finds fit consequences for a crime. (Euripides, 2010, p.120)

Even in her pleas she acknowledges her lack of power as a woman and yet shows evidence of her role and identity as a soldier. Agamemnon ultimately refuses to help her, but also says he will not interfere with her plans. This must be taken as further evidence that Hecuba begins to act as a soldier in the war which consumed her life. She is allowed to carry out her plans because Agamemnon recognizes the same personal vengeance in her that he has seen in soldiers before.

Still, her talk of duty and justice echoes those of the fighters of the Trojan War, who let similar virtues direct their blows. An interesting comparison can be made with a prayer to Zeus from Menelaus in Book 3 of *The Iliad*. Menelaus, the former husband of Helen, is preparing to duel Paris. He prays:

Lord Zeus, make Paris pay for the evil he's done to me,
Smite him down with my hands so that men for all time
Will fear to transgress against a host's offered friendship.
(Homer, 1997, 3.388-3.393)

Menelaus is in a similar position to Hecuba, pleading to a higher authority for assistance in carrying out their goals. Both seek the death of those who have wronged them, and both seek personal vengeance. Additionally, both speak of upholding justice and norms through the punishment of those who have committed wrongdoing.

There are many other women in the Trojan War who display similar transformations as the ones discussed above. The loyalty and devotion of soldiers can be seen in Penelope, who in *The Odyssey* waits decades for Odysseus and is set to marry a new suitor at his instruction. She is staunchly opposed to getting remarried and yet shows a devotion to her cause throughout the poem. Her victimization comes from the loss of her husband to a war she had no part in. Stranger, the gods destroyed my beauty





On the day when the Argives sailed for Ilion
And with them went my husband, Odysseus.
If he were to come back and be part of my life,
My fame would be greater and more resplendent so.
But now I ache, so many sorrows
Has some spirit showered upon me. (Homer, 2007,
19.135-19.141)

When we remember the Iliad starts in the 10th year of the war, a theme of waiting emerges that connects Penelope to the soldiers. Penelope's wait for Odysseus is comparable to the men of the Trojan War spending the better part of a decade waiting for a conclusion to the fight. These unnamed, unimportant men had no personal ties to Helen, and yet they forsook their lives and homes for the cause. This ultimate devotion to the higher cause in the face of reluctance is what causes Penelope to take on the role of a soldier.

It is not hard to see that the Trojan War tore apart lives and entire civilizations. It was inescapable and created a separate world for the people involved in it. This separate world was one where atrocities, violence, and cruelty were the norm. Ultimately, the Trojan War, due to its perversion of other norms, allows for the perversion of womanhood in war. A great many other women could be analyzed and compared to the male soldiers of the Trojan War. If granted similar analysis as the women discussed above, each comparison would convey the same facts argued in this paper: that female characters have been victimized by the war, bear a clear resemblance to male soldiers, and are just as invested in the outcome of the battle as their male counterparts. Whether it is through acceptance of death for a higher cause, revenge for either a perceived wrongdoing or for the death of a close ally, loyalty to a savior, or devotion, the female characters in the Trojan War all take on qualities commonly associated with soldiers. They must be considered as such to fully characterize them. Thus, viewing characters through the dual lens of victim and soldier increases our understanding of female characters through the expansion of the one-dimensional characterization that they often receive. Ultimately, to imagine a fuller and more accurate characterization of femininity in the Trojan war, women must be realized as victims stepping into the role of soldiers. Aeschylus. (2009).

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