

JONATHAN GOTTSCHALL

THE

# RAPE OF TROY

*Evolution, Violence, and the World of Homer*



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## THE RAPE OF TROY

Homer's epics reflect an eighth-century BC world of warrior tribes that were fractured by constant strife; aside from its fantastic scale, nothing is exceptional about Troy's conquest by the Greeks. Using a fascinating and innovative approach, Professor Gottschall analyzes Homeric conflict from the perspective of modern evolutionary biology, attributing its intensity to a shortage of available young women. The warrior practice of taking enemy women as slaves and concubines meant that women were concentrated in the households of powerful men. In turn, this shortage drove men to compete fiercely over women: almost all the main conflicts of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* can be traced back to disputes over women. *The Rape of Troy* integrates biological and humanistic understanding – biological theory is used to explore the ultimate sources of pitched Homeric conflict, and Homeric society is the subject of a bio-anthropological case study of why men fight.

JONATHAN GOTTSCHALL is Adjunct Assistant Professor of English at Washington and Jefferson College. He co-edited (with David Sloan Wilson) *The Literary Animal: Evolution and the Nature of Narrative* (2005) and has published numerous articles seeking to bridge the humanities-sciences divide.



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*Evolution, Violence, and the World of Homer*

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“[We are men] to whom Zeus has given the fate of winding  
down our lives in painful wars, from youth until we perish,  
each of us.”

Odysseus, *Iliad* 14.85–87





*For Tiffani, Abigail, Annabel*



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## *Acknowledgments (or, the fate of Thersites)*

A new participant in Homeric debates risks the fate of Thersites. Thersites is scrawny and scraggly, he has no strong allies, and he lacks pedigree and heroic credentials, yet he has the temerity to stand up amidst all the Greeks assembled on the Trojan beach and rail against great Agamemnon for his pride and greed. He can call on a measureless trove of words, and his abuse of Agamemnon is on the mark even if his speech is sometimes shrill and disorderly. Thersites is a churl who dares strive with heroes and, for this, Odysseus shames him with insults and threats, before clubbing him between his bony shoulders with a heavy staff:

Thersites of reckless speech, clear flowing speaker though you are, curb yourself, and do not try to strive by yourself against chiefs. For I say there is no mortal man who is worse than you among all those who came with the sons of Atreus beneath Ilium . . . But I say to you straight out, and it will be a thing accomplished, if I find you again playing the fool, even as you are now, then may the head of Odysseus rest no more on his shoulders, and let me no longer be called the father of Telemachus, if I do not seize you and strip off your clothes, your cloak and tunic that hide your nakedness, and send you wailing to the swift ships, driven out of the assembly with shameful blows. (2.246–64).

In our last glimpse of Thersites he is dissolving in tears of impotent shame, smarting from his bleeding welt and the ostracism of all the assembled Greeks, who applaud Odysseus' attack with laughter and cheers.

When entering into discussion of "Homeric questions," one finds oneself among 2,500 years' worth of scholarly heroes, and one is exposed to the very real possibility of being – metaphorically speaking – stripped naked, flogged brutally, and reduced to an object

of derision: the bolder the argument the greater the risk. The dangers are enhanced in my case by the massively interdisciplinary nature of my undertaking, which has obliged me to attempt to master not only relevant aspects of the truly vast corpus of Homeric scholarship, but also daunting literatures in comparative anthropology and evolutionary biology. Time will tell whether I will suffer the fate of Thersites and be whipped from the assembly of scholars, or whether I will be offered a seat there. But before I take up my scepter and begin to make my case, I'd like to thank those who did what they could to shield me from the fate of Thersites.

Thanks are owed to my interdisciplinary dissertation committee at the State University of New York, Binghamton, who oversaw the completion of a first version of this book: Haim Ofek (Economics), Marilyn Gaddis-Rose (Comparative Literature), David Sloan Wilson (Biology), and Zola Pavloskis-Petit (Classics). I am especially grateful to Zola, and another distinguished classical scholar from Binghamton – Saul Levin – for patiently answering many questions as I worked to improve my Greek. I am deeply obliged to Barry Powell, who generously agreed to read and comment on my manuscript when it showed up – out of the blue – in his email inbox. Marcus Nordlund and Ineke Sluiter offered advice on the manuscript, and Kurt Raaflaub provided a second opinion on technical questions under tight time pressure. My father (Jon), my brother (Richard), and my wife (Tiffani) all commented on the manuscript, and my little girls (Abigail and Annabel) helped me keep my work in perspective. My editor at Cambridge, Michael Sharp, commissioned two fair, thorough, and sometimes bruising peer reviews. The readers (Hans van Wees and an anonymous reviewer) provided expert advice and criticism, and the final version of this book is greatly improved because of their challenges.

Finally, four people must be singled out for truly indispensable contributions. My mother, Marcia Gottschall, a teacher of literature and writing, read different versions of this book almost half-a-dozen times over as many years. Its style and substance owe much to my ability, and ruthless willingness, to exploit this source of cheap, skilled labor. David Sloan Wilson was the first to express confidence in my approach and helped nurture this project through its early phases. Brian Boyd and Joseph Carroll meticulously read and

commented on different versions of the book as well as on related scholarly articles. They have also been absolutely dependable sources of moral support, mentorship, and good cheer.

At this point a writer customarily absolves his benefactors for the failings of his work. However, while I accept final responsibility for the shortfalls of *The Rape of Troy*, disapproving readers are also encouraged to blame the persons mentioned above. For without their support there would be no book.

## *Introduction*

The Trojan War finally ends in the Rape of Troy: in the black of night thousands of men and boys are butchered in city streets and homes, and the women and girls are led out across the plain to the sea. They are stowed in the bellies of ships and sped across the Aegean to lives of slavery and concubinage in the Greek homelands. The climax of the war – as foreshadowed in the *Iliad* and described in the *Odyssey* – is a terrifying orgy of sexual and violent passions that serves as the symbolic heart of both poems.

However, aside from the fantastic scale of the Trojan War, little is exceptional in the Rape of Troy. The world of Homer's poems is a mosaic of tribes and chiefdoms, fractured by constant strife. Most Homeric conflicts are nothing like the Trojan War in duration or scope. The typical conflict is closer to a Viking raid: fast ships with shallow drafts are rowed onto beaches and seaside communities are sacked before neighbors can lend defensive support. The men are usually killed, livestock and other portable wealth are plundered, and women are carried off to live among the victors and perform sexual and menial labors. Homeric men live with the possibility of sudden, violent death, and the women live in fear for their men and children, and of sails on the horizon that may harbinger new lives of rape and slavery.

When Homeric men are not fighting neighbors, they are usually competing among themselves. Men vie compulsively and intensely, formally and informally, in dancing and storytelling, games, public debate, martial skill and courage, speed of foot and strength of arm, proficiency in sailing and horsemanship, skill in mowing grain and plowing straight furrows, physical carriage and dress, costly armor and good looks, the size and fierceness of killed foes, the heroic feats

of their forebears, the ranks of the gods in their family trees, and their ability to give costly gifts and lavish feasts. In other words, almost any occasion serves for Homeric men to measure themselves against one another. Constant brinkmanship frequently escalated to violence. While most conflicts are defused before lives are lost, Homer suggests a world where small provocations could lead to hot-blooded murders, cool-headed assassinations, and reciprocal killings by vengeful kinsmen.

The Homer scholar John Myres wrote, savoring his understatement, "It is not easy to say anything new about Homer."<sup>1</sup> After more than 2,500 years in which the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have been the most popular, esteemed, frequently translated, and exhaustively analyzed works of fiction in the world, what is left to discover? The truth of Myres' axiom is epitomized in my opening paragraphs: the pervasiveness and ferocity of Homeric conflict have been a subject of constant, if frequently informal, commentary.

In all that has been written, however, remarkably few different explanations have been advanced for the special fury of Homeric conflict.<sup>2</sup> By far the best treatment of Homeric war and conflict to date is Hans van Wees' *Status warriors* (1992), and his review of the important literature covers just a few scholars and needs just seven pages.<sup>3</sup>

There are relatively few competing perspectives on Homeric conflict because the poems themselves tightly constrain interpretation. Many of Homer's men are as keen as philosophers as they are fearsome as warriors; they cudgel their brains to understand why they so often find themselves far from home, courting death among hostile men, despite the manifest desirability of peace. Most commentators have trusted the words of the warriors themselves, arguing that pitched Homeric conflict is an end product of their hatred of mortality, their desire to attain immortality of reputation through heroic deeds.<sup>4</sup> The bedrock of heroic life is this premise: life is ephemeral, but memory is deathless. The true hero etches his name big, deep, and indelible in the cultural memory banks. If he dares greatly and performs gloriously, his words and deeds will reverberate in immortal song – with his name and accomplishments preserved in the amber of poetic meter, he will never perish. However, other scholars have argued that the quest for poetic immortality provides



only a partial explanation, and partially obscures that Homeric men fight for resources, social status and power.

*The Rape of Troy* does not reject these claims. It analyzes Homeric conflict from the perspective of modern anthropology and evolutionary biology; it is best described as an evolutionary anthropology of conflict in Homeric society. It is based on research showing that the Homeric epics are not only precious as literary art; they are also our most important artifacts of life on island outcroppings and threads of coastal land in and surrounding the Aegean sea almost three thousand years ago. As will be explained later, reconstructing this prehistoric society on the basis of the epics and other patchy evidence is rife with complications. For now it is only necessary to say that when I generalize about “Homeric society,” I refer not so much to Homer’s fictional *construction* as to a specific scholarly *reconstruction* of the real world from which the epics emerged. This reconstruction is based not only on careful analysis of Homer, but also on study of Hesiod’s roughly contemporaneous *Works and Days* and *Theogony*, preserved summaries of lost epics, comparative anthropology, the study of non-Greek oral traditions, linguistics, archaeology, and more.

I have three main arguments. First, I argue that patterns of conflict in Homeric society converge beautifully with those described by anthropologists and ethnographers across a strikingly diverse spectrum of non-state societies. Others have offered that Homeric men compete primarily over one or another scarce social or material resource: subsistence goods, prestige wealth, social status, or immortal fame. My goal is not so much to correct or supplant these arguments as to provide a broader view capable of placing all elements of Homeric conflict within a single explanatory context. I suggest that none of these sources of Homeric conflict – and I would also add fierce and ubiquitous competition over women to the list – can be singled out as *the* root cause. Rather, all forms of Homeric conflict result from direct attempts, as in fights over women, or indirect attempts, as in fights for social status and wealth, to enhance Darwinian fitness in a physically and socially exacting ecological niche. While the sources of Homeric conflict often appear ludicrously trivial – vast wars and homicides over pretty women, a murder over a game of dice, biting insults and dangerous brinkmanship over which man has sharper eyesight – they

are not treated as such because what is truly at stake is access to the scarce, precious things required to sustain and reproduce life.

But none of these pressures are unique to Homeric society. Competition for resources, social status, and mates is common to all societies. So the big question is still unanswered: Why was Homeric society *particularly* prone to intense conflict within and between groups? The scenario I propose in answer is my second main argument, and it is likely to be the most controversial aspect of this book. I argue that patterns of violence in Homeric society are tantalizingly consistent with the hypothesis that Homeric society suffered from acute shortages of available young women relative to young men. The institution of slave-concubinage meant that women were not equitably distributed across the circum-Aegean world; they were concentrated in certain communities and, within those communities, in the households of powerful men. While Homeric men could have only one legitimate wife, the society was in fact polygynous, with high-status men monopolizing the reproductive capacities of multiple women and low-status men comparatively deprived. This uneven distribution of women across and within communities may have been exacerbated by excess mortality of juvenile females, either through disproportionate exposure of female infants or differential parental care (i.e., weaning girls at an earlier age, providing insufficient nutrition in times of hardship, etc.). This shortage of women, whether it was brought about solely through polygyny or also through differential mortality, created strong incentives for men to compete, as individuals and in groups, not only for direct access to women, but also for the limited funds of social and material resources needed to attract and retain them.

Thirdly, and finally, I claim that this model helps to illuminate the origins of specific features of Homeric philosophy. An oppressive miasma of fatalism and pessimism pervades the *Iliad* and, to a lesser but still palpable extent, the *Odyssey*. While the desirability of peace is obvious, Homeric men – like their fathers and grandfathers before them – feel that they are doomed to perpetual conflict. The blame for this is placed at the feet of awesome supernatural forces – of cruel and capricious gods and uncaring fate. In the [final chapter](#) of the book, I argue that incessant Greek conflict can be explained without recourse to the supernatural. A shortage of young women helps to explain

more about Homeric society than its relentless violence; it also sheds light on the origins of a tragic and pessimistic worldview, a pantheon of gods deranged by petty vanities, and a people's resignation to the pitiless dictates of fate.

For readers who hold to stereotypes of classics as stodgy and dry (and for those classicists who *are*, in fact, stodgy and dry), my approach may seem odd. However, while many of the details of my perspective are novel in Homeric studies, my approach is far more traditional than it may first appear. In fact, the promiscuous interdisciplinarity of this study places it in an old and illustrious tradition of Homeric scholarship. In the final years of the eighteenth century, when German scholars in particular were laying foundations for the modern study of Homer and all the rest of Greek and Roman antiquity, the goal was to create an *Altertumswissenschaft* – a science of antiquity.<sup>5</sup> As the great nineteenth-century classicist Ullrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff explained, the object of this science was to use the power of systematic inquiry to resurrect the dead societies of antiquity in all of their aspects:

[The subject matter of classical scholarship is] Graeco-Roman civilization in its essence and *in every facet* . . . The task of scholarship is to bring that dead world to life by the power of science – to re-create the poet's song, the thought of the philosopher and the lawgiver, the sanctity of the temple and the feelings of the believers and the unbelievers, the bustling life of market and port, the physical appearance of land and sea, mankind at work and play.<sup>6</sup>

Given that the goal was to revivify and reconstruct *every facet* of classical civilization, this science encouraged – no, demanded – unfettered disciplinary miscegenation.

For Wilamowitz and the architects of *Altertumswissenschaft* this meant drawing on literary scholarship, linguistic study, history, and the study of art, inscriptions, coins, papyrus fragments, and more. But from the beginning of the modern era of Homeric scholarship up to the present moment, insights that were anthropological in fact, if not in name, fueled great advances in the understanding of the epics and the society that engendered them. This tradition stretches back at least as far as Robert Wood's seminal *Essay on the original genius of Homer* (1769),<sup>7</sup> which based sharp observations about Homeric

poetry and society on comparisons of modes of life described in Homer with those of Bedouin Arabs in Northern Africa. Similarly, the radical research programs of nineteenth-century Homerists were inspired, in no small part, by cross-cultural studies of oral traditions in Gaelic Scotland, England, Germany, and Finland. Through the course of the nineteenth century Homerists increasingly drew, however haphazardly, on cross-cultural information. Many of these studies bore vitally on one of the biggest and oldest Homeric questions, one that will be taken up yet again in the present study: to what extent does the world portrayed in Homer reflect a real society?

The use of anthropology to illuminate aspects of Homeric society flourished in the twentieth century as anthropology established itself as an academic discipline.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the anthropological prowess of the early twentieth-century Homerist Milman Parry (1902–35) enabled what is arguably the most important advance in the long history of Homeric scholarship. Parry confirmed a radical thesis about the composition of the Homeric poems through extensive fieldwork collecting and analyzing the traditional oral epics of Yugoslavia (see Chapter One). While Parry had no formal training, in a real sense he *was* an anthropologist, and a particularly able one at that. As Parry's son Adam, himself an important Homerist, wrote of his father: "If he had not been able to learn the language as well as he did, and to drink with the singers and their audiences in coffee-house and tavern, if he had not been able to take part in this society and win the respect of its members, he could not have carried on the work itself."<sup>9</sup>

While the anthropological component of this study thus places it in the best scholarly company, its reliance on theory derived from evolutionary biology is unorthodox.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, scholars who have exerted substantial formative influence on my views are on record as considering biology all but irrelevant to warfare in general (e.g., Lawrence Keeley) and Homeric warfare in particular (e.g., Hans van Wees).<sup>11</sup> One burden of this book is to overcome these widespread feelings and convince a skeptical audience that the evolutionary perspective on human conflict generally, and Homeric conflict specifically, is both valuable and neglected.

In the process I hope to bring Homeric studies into contact and conversation with large and vibrant areas of intellectual ferment from which they have been isolated. For all the bold interdisciplinary

history of Homeric scholarship, many Homerists, and classicists generally, have been justly accused of failing to make their studies relevant to the interests of outsiders.<sup>12</sup> This is symbolized, above all, in the fact that readers lacking knowledge of Greek and Latin, as well as the main European languages, are effectively barred from a huge proportion of the total scholarly literature because scholars do not bother to translate for non-specialists. Further, going back as far as Aristotle, Homeric commentators have tended to get bogged down in petty wars over small, often linguistic, disagreements, and to neglect the big picture.<sup>13</sup> This “isolationist” streak led Milman Parry to warn, “I have seen myself, only too often and too clearly, how, because those who teach and study Greek and Latin literature have lost the sense of its importance for humanity, the study of those disciplines has declined, and will decline until they quit their philological isolation and again join in the movement of current human thought.”<sup>14</sup>

Evolutionary studies of human behavior, psychology, and culture have influenced and invigorated all branches of the human and social sciences over the last several decades. By approaching Homeric questions from an evolutionary perspective, I hope to again demonstrate Homer’s perennial relevance to “the movement of current human thought.” Insofar as the spirit of *Altertumswissenschaft* still obtains, I am confident that my ideas will receive fair consideration from classical scholars. Insofar as I am able to explain the relevance of my study to the movement of current thought, I am confident of a fair hearing from the two other audiences I am most interested in reaching: general readers and the interdisciplinary community of scholars using evolutionary theory and research to explore and explain the human condition.

Trying to write a book like this – one that breaks new intellectual ground while still remaining accessible and invigorating for non-specialists – is like threading a fine needle with coarse thread. It can be done, but it takes unwavering hands. The most salient result of my attempt to reach diverse audiences is that I can only skim the surface of some deep controversies in Homer studies, evolutionary biology, and anthropology, and that I relegate specialist material to the notes. Arthur Adkins’ comment about making his study of Greek values both rigorous and accessible to non-specialists also applies to my effort: “The method adopted may occasionally give the impression that certain inconvenient questions are being quietly throttled in dark

corners; but a trial of alternatives has convinced me that it is the best available in the circumstances.”<sup>15</sup>

So what *is* the evolutionary perspective that I propose to bring to bear on Homeric conflict? It is studying the behavior of animals following Darwin’s powerfully simple rule: the bodies of animals, including human animals, have been shaped by their environments to maximize survival and reproduction, *and so have their psychologies and behaviors*. Darwin’s earliest notebooks on his “species theory,” started soon after the Beagle returned to England, and more than twenty years before the publication of *On the origin of species*, reveal unequivocally that the theory of natural selection was always as much about brain as body, as much about mind as morphology.<sup>16</sup> For Darwin, demonstrating the evolutionary origins of “the highest psychical faculties of man,” like the emotions or our sense of morality, was just as vital as demonstrating how “organs of extreme perfection,” like the human eye, were formed through slow gradation.<sup>17</sup> Darwin felt it would be necessary to jettison his whole theory if it failed to account for any aspect of human mental life. We are only now, after many years and many wrong turns, seeing the maturation of an evolutionary science of human behavior and psychology, a science with the potential to address some of the deepest and most persistent questions about why we are the way we are.<sup>18</sup>

But two concerns arise whenever the powerful mechanism of evolutionary explanation is brought to bear on human behavior. The first concern is that evolutionary thinking is insidiously deterministic – that it denies the capacity for change and suggests that we are stuck with the worst aspects of ourselves. But to argue that a biological perspective on human conflict, or on anything else, is valuable is not to suggest that war and other forms of violence are determined exclusively by biology or that we have “instructions” for violence inscribed in our genes. There is no such thing as a complex, biologically determined behavioral trait, and there is no reason to fear that identifying an evolutionary foundation for a behavioral or psychological pattern means we are helpless to change it.

The other main complaint leveled against evolutionary explanations of human behavior is that they are crudely reductive. Critics accuse evolutionists of aggressively conquering through the disciplines, seeking to place all aspects of human behavior and culture

within a biological framework. Indeed, they are not wrong. Placing all of human behavior and culture within the biological purview *is* the ambitious goal of the “adaptationist program.” But this does not mean that all other approaches are thus subsumed and rendered irrelevant. Nor does it mean renouncing or demoting “nurture.” An evolutionary biology that ignores or de-emphasizes the importance of physical and social environments is, in fact, profoundly *un*-biological. Environments – social and physical – shape, constrain, and elicit the behaviors of organisms. As Matt Ridley writes in *Nature via nurture*, “The more we lift the lid on the genome, the more vulnerable to experience genes appear to be . . . Genes are not puppet masters or blueprints. Nor are they just carriers of heredity. They are active during life; they switch each other on and off; they respond to the environment . . . They are both cause and consequence of our actions.”<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, evolutionists who study behavior and psychology, human or otherwise, must pay as much attention to environments as to genes. Accordingly, the present study does not portray Homeric peoples as genetic automatons blindly acting out imperatives coded in their DNA. On the contrary, this study is inclusively biosocial: it describes how a highly specific social and physical environment interacted with the raw material of evolved human nature to produce certain outcomes.

In short, to explain human conflict at the evolutionary level is not to reduce or slight its distinctively human grandeur, horror, or complexity; it is not to demote social and cultural influences that are equally important, and it is not to sanction a grim view of the human capacity for change.

Finally, my effort does not attempt – akin to some of the physicists – to derive a Homeric “theory of everything.” Evolution *is* the ultimate theory of everything biological, but of course I do not believe that it holds simple solutions to all of Homer’s literary and historical mysteries. At the same time, however, my approach has not exhausted the potential scope for an evolutionary analysis of Homer or other traditional humanities topics. The promise of a new research program is defined at least as much by its ability to inspire interesting questions as by its ability to answer them.<sup>20</sup> I address some of these questions in the [final chapter](#), but this still leaves a lot of ground unexplored. For example, this book is strictly about Homeric competition (what Adkins called the “competitive virtues”); but an equally interesting evolutionary

exploration could focus – contrary to Adkins – on the salience of cooperative virtues in Homer.

After 2,500 years of sifting the evidence, real advances in Homeric studies can come from only two places: discoveries of new evidence or applications of new perspectives that allow us to see existing evidence in a fresh way. Anthropological theory and data have provided just such a perspective, and evolutionary biology can too – it can bring previously fuzzy phenomena into sharper focus and provide more satisfying explanations for some important dynamics of the epics. John Myres was just off the mark when he said that it is not easy to say anything new about Homer. It is, in fact, easy to say things that are new about Homer; it is harder to say things that are both new *and true*.<sup>21</sup> Bringing the combined apparatuses of evolutionary biology and anthropology to bear on the question of Homeric conflict allows us to see some things that are new as well as true. These lenses reveal a powerful coherence in the society depicted in the poems and inexorable logic in patterns of conflict.

To be more specific, I believe that commentators have rarely appreciated the extent to which Homeric disputes trace back to conflicts over women. *Of course*, scholars have recognized that many conflicts touch on rights to desirable women. They have usually suggested, however, that winning women is merely a proximate goal masking more important motives: Greeks and Trojans fight not over Helen but over honor; Achilles and Agamemnon fight not over an alluring young woman but over prestige; Odysseus and the suitors fight not over his lovely wife but over wealth and political power. In short, critical explanations of violence in the epics strongly downplay Homer's incessant point: women are a major source of conflict among men.<sup>22</sup> *The Rape of Troy* does not deny that Homer's heroes compete obsessively over honor, power, status, and material goods. In fact, this competition is absolutely central to its case. Nonetheless, an evolutionary perspective suggests that commentators have typically had things backwards. For Homer's heroes, as for ordinary men, women are not a proximate route to the ultimate goals of honor, political power, and social dominance. On the contrary, honor, political power, and social dominance are proximate routes to the ultimate goal of women.