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978-0-521-87038-2 - The Rape of Troy: Evolution, Violence, and the World of Homer

Jonathan Gottschall

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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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“[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

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*For Tiffani, Abigail, Annabel*

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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

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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



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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.